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The Lies You Tell: Disrupting the Dominant Depiction of Black Women in Film

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Abstract

Hollywood negatively depicts Black women, often minimizing or ignoring their character's developmental milestones or self-actualization. Using Black Feminist Thought, an oppositional gaze was used to analyze their development in film.

Keywords: Black women, American film, adult development

Our obsession with story and storytelling is accommodated by boundless sources of American film and television. In 2020, the American film and television industry generated nearly \$81 billion in domestic and global revenue (Motion Picture Association, 2021). Stories told across this media allow us a brief moment to live vicariously through the characters' pains and great comebacks. Film and television are two media that play a role in how people are defined and valued in society, specifically regarding Black women (McTaggart et al., 2021). The representation of Black women in American film has been non-existent at worst and highly questionable at best, including negative depictions and minimization of characters' developmental milestones or self-actualization. As a Black female and White male researchers, our purpose was to understand how the depiction and development of Black women in American film. The guided questions were: 1) In what ways are Black women depicted in the American film industry? and 2) In what ways did the sociocultural context of the Black woman's character influence her adult development?

Literature Review

As a social construct, the hegemonic depictions of Black characters in films often contribute to how Black folks are defined and how their identities are constructed. For example, Black women were and continue to be depicted as Mammies, Welfare Queens, and Jezebels (McTaggart et al., 2021; Morton, 2020). These and other controlling images are intended to "make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, 2001, p. 69). In family films, Black women were more sexualized than White women, 13.5% and 9%, respectively (McTaggart et al., 2021). In addition, Black women (41.4%) in family films were depicted as less attractive than White women (51.2%) and other women of color (56.9%). While these controlling images continue to be prevalent in the American film, Black women speaking roles remain sparse. A recent study revealed that Black women made up only 17% of woman characters with speaking roles in the top 100-domestic grossing films of 2020, whereas White women represented 71% of those same roles (Lauzen, 2021). Literature suggests that when stories of Black women's experiences are underrepresented and/or told from socio-historical stereotypes in American film, social disparities are normalized and perpetuated through systemic biases and practices (Morton, 2020).

Although society is beginning to see more quality and quantity of representation of Black women, particularly in lead roles, audience are encouraged to think critically and take an oppositional gaze to interrogate and analyze the complexity of what is occurring to minoritized groups across media text (hook, 1992/2014). The concept of *oppositional gaze* is a practice in which minoritized groups, such as Black women, employ critical standpoints to understand their

experiences across multiple disparities (hooks, 1992/2014). Due to the politics of American slavery, enslaved Black folks became to understand that looking or gazing at their White enslavers could be punishable (hooks, 1992/2014). With an oppositional gaze, enslaved Blacks *did* look and rebelliously declared, “Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality” (hooks, 2014, p. 116). In this study, the practice of oppositional gaze was a course of action to disrupt the domination of how Black women are represented in mass media. It also allowed for the critical interrogation of Black women’s developmental milestones or self-actualization in American film.

Black Feminist Thought

To critically gaze Black women’s representation and developmental milestones in American film, Black feminist thought (BFT) served as the blueprint. By nature, BFT acknowledges that Black women’s experiences do not reside at the *either-or* fallacy but intersect across multiple identities (Collins, 1991/2009; Dotson, 2016). In addition to its natural ability to explore multiple -isms, our rationale for using BFT included: it places Black women’s voice and experiences at the center of the analysis and empowers Black women to be oppositional, which entails calculated intellectual efforts that combat hegemonic ideologies. Furthermore, BFT recognizes that Black women share similarities of perception; but occupy a unique standpoint on their experiences. Finally, BFT creates a critical consciousness that empowers Black women to self-define and self-validate their Black womanhood.

Research Design

To understand Black women’s adult development experiences in American film, we set four parameters: 1) protagonist, 2) time frame, 3) adult development, and 4) film of choice. Table 1 shows the 12 American films that were analyzed. Table 1 provides data compiled from Internet Movie Date (IMDb) and illustrates a descriptive classification of our visual methodological analysis including the name of the film and its year of release, genre, and running time. From our analysis, IMDB categorized nearly 92% of the films as drama. The comedy and romance genres rounded out the top three with 41% and 33%, respectively. While the total running time was 1362 minutes, our oppositional gaze was at least 4100 minutes (68 hours). Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it would be remiss not to highlight the underrepresentation of Black women as directors and writers of these specific films. As directors, Black women represented only 25% compared to 67% of Black male directors. The representation of Black women writers was 30%, compared to Black male writers (35%) and White writers (35%).

Findings

Based on our visual methodological analysis, three primary themes emerged across the Black woman protagonists’ stories: #noblackgirlmagic, from object to subject, and the lies you tell.

#noBlackgirlmagic

In this study, we found that the majority of the Black woman protagonists were casted in quality roles, such as being intelligent, educated, hard-working, independent, financially stable, and working in male-dominated industries. In fact, each Black woman protagonist was seen as having magical powers or “strength” because they demonstrated resilience, grit, courage, and perseverance when confronted with personal, professional, and societal adversities. In this study, the concept of #Blackgirlmagic also encompassed the Strong Black Woman and Superwoman mentality. For example, Ali from “What Men Want” was portrayed as a superhuman character because she was able to thrive as the only Black woman sport agent in a predominately White male organization and handle the strain of invisibility and hypervisibility. In “Girls’ Trip,” Ryan

was depicted as being mythical because she was able to juggle a thriving partnership, marriage, touring, and friendships without being overwhelmed from stress or burnout. In “Widows,” Veronica’s mythical powers emerged because she was able to suppress the grief of her husband to orchestrate a multiple million-dollar heist. In “Ma Rainey Black Bottom,” Ma was represented as magical because she was unapologetic about her self-worth as it related to her sexuality and artistic abilities.

While the #Blackgirlmagic mentality is empowering, it is also problematic because it implies that Black women are required to manifest strength and suppress emotions in the face of adversities (Porter & Byrd, 2021). The Black male writer of “Girls’ Trip” perpetuated this myth by having Ryan constantly repeat the mantra, “I am strong. I am powerful. I am beautiful.” when faced with her husband’s infidelity and the possibility of losing her career. This mentality can also be problematic because it normalizes the stereotype that Black women have “thicker skin,” therefore, they are less prone to pain, mistreatment, and rejection than their counterparts (Sabin, 2020). In addition, the #Blackgirlmagic mentality contributes to Black women’s mental health and health disparities (Porter & Byrd, 2021).

From Object to Subject

The sense of self or centrality is often contingent upon the object-subject dichotomy (Morrison, 2017). Normalizing object or “Other” can be an instrument of exclusion that defines a person or group as *inferior* and *different* (Morrison, 2017). This analysis revealed that several Black woman protagonists were treated as an object or commodity. For example, Ali from “What Men What” was the token Black woman in a dominant White man workplace. In “The Forty-Year-Old Version,” Rhada became the “White gaze’s eroticism of Black pain” because of her fear of failure as a playwright. Most surprisingly, our analysis unveiled that several Black woman protagonists were treated as self-sacrificing objects within their dysfunctional families. In “Pariah,” Alika lived at the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation. She sacrificed expressing her lesbian identity at home in fear of disappointing and being ostracized by her mother, a domineering God-fearing woman. To move from object to subject, Alika defined and validated herself through education, poetry, and loving her parents from a distance. In the titled film “Sparkle”, Sparkle was a successful songwriter and vocalist; however, she minimized her self-worth for the love and acceptance of her conservative church-going mother. In their singing group, she often faded into the background to allow her older, sexier sister to shine on stage. Sparkle’s music, faith, external support system, and setting boundaries in her family dynamic helped her to assume subjectivity.

The Lies You Tell

Much of what we know about traditional adult developmental theories lies in White and male ethnocentrism that follow linear and/or individualized progressions. For example, in “What Men Want,” Ali’s development is portrayed through Erickson’s (1950) work in which she successfully engaged with and resolved crises. While this traditional theory highlights Ali’s psychological change in adulthood, it romanticized the notion that development is a clear-cut process, which minimized or completely ignored Ali’s development across her cultural and gendered racial identities. In “1982,” Shenae’s story focused on her battle with drug addiction. However, due to the lack of screen time her development was non-existent to the audience. Her experience was depicted as inferior to her husband’s struggle with her addiction and how he tried to shield his daughter from discovering that her mother was a crackhead. In comparison, several films did indirectly highlighted the Black woman protagonists’ developmental milestones as it related to social, cultural, personal, spiritual and psychological elements.

In “For Colored Girls,” a pivotal moment emerged when the women shared their hurt and pain ascribe to unhealthy relationships. This *sistahood* emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships and a source of strength as the women continued to develop and move forward with their lives. Unlike the mainstream individualized progression, this moment underscored that development is socially constructed through current life events and previously lived life (Wheeler et al., 2002). Throughout “Queen & Slim,” Queen’s identity and psychological development processes were also more than an individual progression, her developmental milestones were influenced by the struggles of cultural and political authority, family, connections with the Black community, and spirituality. Rhada, the leading character in “The-Forty-Year-Old Version” portrays a Black woman on the brink of a midlife crisis. In the face of feeling like a failure as a playwright, not reaching her students, and grieving the death of her mother, Radha embarked on a journey to reclaim her voice as an artist by rebranding herself as a rapper. Different from several traditional linear progression of development, Radha underwent self-actualization in her forties in which she re-defined her Blackness and womanhood as well as re-validate her voice through music and artwork.

Implications for Adult Education Practice

This section centers on the so, what? So, what are some of the practical implications for the adult educators? Adult development focuses on growth and the complexity of meaning making and reasoning (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). While it requires the use of multiple explanations and perspectives, various adult developmental stages of adulthood (e.g., Erickson) do not fully recognize psychological development and life transitions across sociocultural factors (Williams & Lewis, 2021). First, consider designing instructional content, conducting group activities/projects that intentional focus on diverse developmental theories that incorporate interlocking nature of social identities and non-Western perspectives. Watching TED Talks and inviting an expert scholar to engage adult learners on the diverse developmental theories could also be beneficial.

The second implication is the practice of oppositional knowledge. Oppositional knowledge is a self-defined standpoint that was developed by, for, and in support of minoritized groups’ identity and resistance (Collins, 2016). Oppositional knowledge can be used to counter hegemonic concepts and offer alternative viewpoints in ways of knowing, doing, and acting. Oppositional pedagogies may include vignettes/case studies, jigsaw group discussions, role-playing activities, and critical reflection activities. While this practice was designed to contribute to minoritized group-centered inquiry, these pedagogies can be intentional designed for anyone who wants to improve their cultural competence by acknowledging their own social identities, unpacking biases and assumptions, and seeking opportunities to learning in the midst of difficult dialogues regarding disenfranchised groups.

Last, this study is an example of how the use of diverse films can become a pedagogical teaching strategy to help adult learners better understand learning and development in adulthood (McClain, 2019). As a pedagogical tool, these films provide a strategy for telling diverse stories that offer opportunities to engage in further reflections, insights, and emotional reactions (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). “The use of film opens learners to seeing the multiple layers and intersections within the film’s story lines...and analyze film with a parallel perspective to their own experiences in life” (McClain, 2019, p. 151). Film can be used to help learners better understand narratives outside of their own, develop alternative interpretations, and observe social phenomena in a noninvasive way (Wright & Sandlin, 2009).

Conclusion

Film and television are media that entertain us through story and storytelling. While these images are projected across our home and mobile devices, we are subjected to how representation can be utilized to construct and advertise the value and ideologies of the dominant culture while simultaneously depicting tropes or controlling images of the oppressed, such as Black women. Oftentimes, these tropes and controlling images minimize or completely ignore the character's developmental milestones or self-actualization. In this study, we analyzed 12 American movies in which Black women were casted as protagonists to understand the depiction and development of Black women in American film. Our oppositional gaze revealed three theme: #noBlackgirlmagic, from object to subject, and the lies you tell. Each theme was discussed, with examples from the films, in the relationship to literature. Finally, we offered adult educators three implications for practice: use adult development theories that encompass interlocking nature of social identities and non-Western perspectives, design learning for oppositional knowledge, and take advantage of films as pedagogical learning tools. While society is seeing more quality and quantity of representation of Black women, particularly as protagonists, there is not time to be a passive consumer. hooks (1992/2014) reminds us that cultural criticism is always mandatory for film and television media to interrogate and analyze the complexity of what is occurring to minoritized groups across media text.

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Table 1*12 American Films: Black Women and Adult Development*

Film (Release Year)	Genre (IMDb)	Time (mins)	Director (race/gender)	Writer (race/gender)
For Colored Girls (2010)	Drama	134	Tyler Perry (BM)	Tyler Perry (BM) Ntozake Shange (BW)
Pariah (2011)	Drama	86	Dee Rees (BW)	Dee Rees (BW)
Sparkle (2012)	Drama/Music	116	Samil Akil (BM)	Mara Brock Akil (BW) Joel Schumacher (WM) Howard Roseman (WM)
1982 (2013)	Drama	90	Tommy Oliver (BM)	Tommy Oliver (BM)
Dear White People (2014)	Comedy/Drama/Romance	108	Justin Simien (BM)	Justin Simien (BM)
Almost Christmas (2016)	Comedy/Drama/Romance	111	David E. Talbert (BM)	David E. Talbert (BM)
Girls' Trip (2017)	Adventure/Comedy/Drama	122	Malcolm D. Lee (BM)	Erica Rivinoja (WW) Kenya Barris (BM) Tracy Oliver (BF)
Widows (2018)	Crime/Drama/Thriller	129	Steve McQueen (BM)	Gillian Flynn (WW) Steve McQueen (BM) Lynda La Plante (WW)
Queen & Slim (2019)	Crime/Drama/Romance	132	Melina Matsoukas (BW)	Lena Waithe (BW) James Frey (WM)
What Men Want (2019)	Comedy/Fantasy/Romance	117	Adam Shankman (WM)	Tina Gordon (BW) Peter Huyck (WM) Alex Gregory (WM)
The Forty-Year-Old Version (2020)	Comedy/Drama	123	Radha Blank (BW)	Radha Blank (BW)
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (2020)	Drama/Music	94	George C. Wolfe (BM)	Ruben Santiago-Hudson (BM) August Wilson (BM)
		1,362		