THE EVOLUTION OF BLACK WOMEN IN TELEVISION

Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses

Imani M. Cheers
This book seeks to interrogate the representation of Black women in television. Cheers explores how the increase of Black women in media ownership and creative executive roles (producers, showrunners, directors and writers) in the last 30 years affected the fundamental cultural shift in Black women’s representation on television, which in turn parallels the political, social, economic and cultural advancements of Black women in America from 1950 to 2016. She also examines Black women as a diverse television audience, discussing how they interact and respond to the constantly evolving television representation of their image and likeness, looking specifically at how social media is used as a tool of audience engagement.

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Imani M. Cheers
For my son, Isaiah Milton Cheers.
You are the best thing in my life, thank you for helping me reach my full potential.
I love you.

To George E. Curry and Gwen Ifill, I miss you both beyond words. I know you’re both watching over me and this wouldn’t be possible without your love and support. Thank you for shining your light on me, I hope you’re proud.
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This manuscript is close to a decade in the making. As a doctoral student at Howard University in Washington, DC, in 2007, I embarked on a quest to examine not only the representation of Black women in television but also how historical stereotypes (the mammy, jezebel, sapphire and tragic mulatto) could be altered, changed, rebuked and reimagined when Black women are in creative control of their own images and television representations. That work focused on the program *Living Single* (1993–1995) and the creator, executive producer Yvette Lee Bowser. Some of that text is reprinted in this introduction in the form of the literature reviews and historical background in which my arguments are situated.

This body of work continues to explore similar issues but goes further into the intersections of race, class, gender, representation, media ownership and audience engagement. My theory is the increase of Black women in media ownership and creative executive roles (producers, showrunners, directors and writers) in the last 35 years (1981–2016) affected the fundamental cultural shift in Black women’s representation on television, which in turn parallels the political, social, economic, and cultural advancements of Black women in America from 1950–2016. In this text, I also examine Black women as a diverse television audience, discussing how this niche group interacts and responds to the constantly evolving television representation of their own image and likeness, specifically exploring how social media is used as a tool of audience engagement and empowerment.

This introduction serves to provide a historical background of the representation of Black women in television and review the literature of prominent film, television and cultural scholars in this field of study.

**Representation of Black Women in Television**

The representation of African-Americans in mass media has been extensively explored by scholars such as Herman Gray (1995), Robin Means Coleman (2000), Kristal Brent Zook (1999), Donald Bogle (2001) and Beretta E.
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Smith-Shomade (2002, 2013), whose works have examined the production and consumption of representation of African-Americans in general and African-American women in particular on television. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2005) examined representation within a critical framework that considers race and gender relations in the production of those images but did not specifically explore aspects of production and consumption of these images in television sitcoms.

Until the 1980s, television shows with predominantly Black casts that focused on Black themes were under the creative control of White studio and network executives. Popular comedies such as Sanford & Son, The Jeffersons and Good Times were all created and produced by two White men, Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin. While these programs employed Black writers and actors, the ultimate creative control was in the hands of Lear and Yorkin. As cultural scholar Gray (1995) discovered, White producers of the aforementioned television programs, as well as other programs that catered to Black audiences, enforced strict creative control in order to “discipline, contain, and ultimately construct a point of view.”1 These White producers and executives depicted Black women through a prism that was rooted in the point of view of middle-class White Americans who primarily viewed and encountered African-American women as domestic servants and entertainers.2

Bill Cosby, creator and producer of The Cosby Show (1984–1992) and A Different World (1989–1993), was the first African-American to develop a program with a predominantly Black cast that portrayed Blacks as hardworking, educated, successful and family orientated.3 Both shows had successful runs on the NBC network. Cosby established unprecedented opportunities for African-Americans to become television writers, directors and producers. In a field dominated by White producers such as Norman Lear, Bud Yorkin (Sanford & Son, The Jeffersons, Good Times) and William Bickley (Family Matters, Hanging with Mr. Cooper), Cosby made very specific strategic decisions in the depiction of the characters on his television programs. Whether it was through certain storylines, guest appearances by prominent African-Americans, wardrobes or set design, Cosby established a standard of self-pride and pan-Africanism that laid the foundation for future generations of African-American writers, producers and directors. From the opening musical introduction (which changed each season), Cosby was always positioned as the patriarch of the family. He would introduce each cast member in an elaborate choreographed dance routine while contributing credits would roll. This is notable because Cosby was not only the star of the show, but he was also listed in a variety of creative roles including creator, producer and composer; after all, the show was titled The Cosby Show.
Media scholar Jannette Dates’s *Split Image: African Americans in the Media* (1990) discovered that African-American television producers and writers, including Stanley G. Robertson, the first African-American network television executive, aspired to “project new images of African Americans in order to introduce a different perspective, a framework for thinking about Black people that was based on their own African American inspired vision of Black reality” (p. 258).

The discussion of representation of African-American women in television has focused on enduring stereotypes rooted in racism and sexism. For the purpose of this historical introduction, the four most popular stereotypes of Black women, which are rooted in racist and sexist ideology, are explored. Historian and cultural scholar Bogle (1992) identified two main stereotypes for African-American women in television, the *mammy* and *tragic mulatto*. The mammy, one of the oldest and widely recognized stereotypes for Black women, as Bogle states, “is usually big, fat and cantankerous,” and the tragic mulatto is a woman of both Black and White heritage who struggles with her identity.

According to the Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, the *jezebel* stereotype depicts African-American women not only as lascivious and lewd but also as predatorily promiscuous. Media scholar Carolyn M. West (2008) notes that the jezebel stereotype derived from a vast period in American history when African-American women were being sexually terrorized by slave owners, their family members, friends, slave overseers and vigilante mobs, namely the Ku Klux Klan, who “branded Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral” in order to justify “sexual atrocities” such as rape and sexual assault. The Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia defines the *sapphire* stereotype as one that portrays African-American women as the quintessential “Angry Black Woman” who is loud, stubborn and overbearing. West (2008) expands on this definition to note that the “Sapphire” character first appeared during the 1940s and 1950s on the *Amos ’n Andy* radio program, and contemporarily this image “implies that Black women’s anger, their justifiable response to societal injustice, is dangerous or funny.”

are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.”9 Collins (2005) emphasized the importance of creating and embracing new images to correct the problem.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins identified three contemporary alternative stereotypical representations of Black women, namely the *modern mammies*, *Black ladies* and *educated bitches*, characterizations that she claims are depicted in television series. Collins’s examples of modern mammies and Black ladies are selected from series of the 1980s and 1990s, including *The Cosby Show*, in which Phylicia Rashad’s character appeared as the matriarch, Claire Huxtable. Collins focused on several additional prominent African-American actresses and their roles on dramatic series during the late 1990s and early 2000s, including S. Epatha Merkerson who portrays Lt. Anita Van Buren on the long-running television police drama *Law and Order* and Sonja Sohn’s Shakima Greggs on the HBO smash hit *The Wire*. Collins was particularly concerned with the representation of middle-class working Black women and the role of Shakima Greggs, an openly confident lesbian character.

Collins (2005) argues that the representation of African-American women on television is actually a direct commentary on the social conditions in America. She states, “the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America.”10 In doing this, mass media constructs class-specific Blackness that includes the Black lady and modern mammy as roles for Black women and shapes the discourse about race and integration in America.

The modern mammy and Black lady characterizations on the surface provide an alternative view of middle-class African-American women but still restrict Black women to a subservient place in society. In addition to these characterizations, Collins introduced the *educated Black bitch* persona, which she described as “women [who] have money, power, and good jobs. But they are beautiful and, in some ways, they invoke Pam Grier’s persona as “Bad Bitches” that control their own bodies and sexuality.”11 Pam Grier is an African-American actress who rose to stardom in the 1970s and is known for her roles in several Blaxploitation films, including *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). Collins confines her exploration of this representation to films, particularly Eddie Murphy’s starring hit, *Boomerang* (1992), in which appeared Robin Givens’s character, Jacqueline. Collins’s (2005) critique of these three contemporary stereotypical representations of African-American women is specifically focused on the economic and social advancement of Black women from working poor to middle-class independence and how the media validates their lived experiences.12 It is
imperative to note that Black ladies, educated Black bitches and modern mammies are alternative stereotypes to the historical representation of the jezebel, mammy, sapphire and tragic mulatto.

The fourth alternative stereotype that I identified is the hip-hop feminist. This term was coined by journalist Joan Morgan (1999) and for the purposes of this study is defined as an African-American woman with deep-rooted connections to the hip-hop community who advocates for equality and promotes women’s rights. In general, hip-hop feminism is defined as an ideology that foregrounds and emphasizes the perspectives and experiences of underprivileged women in urban communities and cultures. Womanist Joan Morgan was heavily influenced by trailblazing feminists such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker. Morgan was specifically in search of a feminism that addressed issues pertinent to the hip-hop generation. In her groundbreaking memoir, When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down, Morgan (1999) desired a different type of feminism that could address some very contradictory questions:

I wanted a feminism that would allow me to explore who we are as women—not victims. One that claimed the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being Black girls now—sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post soul, hip-hop generation . . . In short, I needed a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays. And this was not my foremother’s feminism.13

Feminism in the hip-hop generation is complex and compounded and, as Morgan (1999) states, “rejecting the wildly popular notion that embracing the f-word entails nothing more than articulating victimization, for me, is a matter of personal and spiritual survival.”14 The “grays” exist at the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality that allows Black women as a collective to advocate for equality and fight against injustice and oppression.

For far too long, researchers and scholars have focused almost exclusively on the negative stereotypes of African-American women in mass media, specifically television. The majority of this research has addressed the stereotypes of the mammy, tragic mulatto, sapphire and jezebel in films, advertising and television. Scholars Donald Bogle (2001), Herman Gray (1995), Kristal Brent Zook (1999), Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 2005), and Clint Wilson II et al. (2013) have all explored these stereotypes and the detrimental effects these labels have on society at large and the Black community in particular. A small amount of research has been conducted that explores whether the race/ethnicity and gender of a writer and producer has
any impact on the preferred meanings of the television program (Hall 1980, 1997). However, for the purpose of this study, I am not using the encoding/decoding model of communication to determine the media messages of the creative teams or how those messages are decoded by a specific audience.

Cultural scholar Jacqueline Bobo’s *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) examines Black women as an interpretive community watching the films *Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust*. This body of work is critical, as Bobo was one of the first scholars to examine Black women as visual consumers. Her edited volume, *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism* (2001), continues the aforementioned exploration and expands her research to include music, art and material culture.

While all of this research is valid and important to mass communication studies, the research needs to be updated to include the contemporary resurgence of Black women on television and behind the scenes from 2000 to 2017. Plus, with the constantly evolving digital landscape and use of social media, Black women and Black millennials have emerged as a powerful demographic using these platforms as tools of engagement, evoking social and political change. *Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses* thus seeks to contribute to this scholarly field by situating Black women, on both sides of the screen in complementary positions, who are thriving, breaking barriers and taking control of their image and voice.

Herman Gray’s *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (1995) centers on the main argument that “commercial culture operates as both a site of and a resource for Black cultural politics.”

Gray’s analysis also addresses aspects of “Blackness” and representation on television, about which he states, “it is not just about how television represents Blackness or how Blacks use television; rather, it is about the complex play between the sites of mass commercial media and black cultural politics.” It is at this intersection of race, class and gender as represented in the media (specifically, television) that Gray examined the roles and responsibilities that African-American writers, producers, directors and actors experience in network television.

Gray (1995) made the critical distinction between television programs concerned with Black themes and cultural representations and that are produced, written and starred in by Black actors versus those with similar content but which are produced, written and created by Whites. With respect to the latter, Gray (1995) examines the successful comedies of *Sanford & Son*, *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times* from the Norman Lear and Bud Yor-kin catalog, as well as the 1980s hits *Amen* and *227*, which were under the creative control of Ed. Weinberger. It is important to note that the Carsey-Werner Company and Ed. Weinberger were behind Bill Cosby’s groundbreaking shows *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*. Gray
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(1995) noted, “although these programs were shows about Blacks (rather than Black shows), there were clearly boundaries concerning cultural representations, social themes, and professional conventions that they dared not transgress.”

In interviews with Black writers from the 1980s’ television sitcom 227 from 1990, Gray (1995) found there were times when White head writers and producers would eliminate specific “nuances and sensibilities of African American culture” that were introduced into scripts because the producers and writers disagreed with the Black writers. Gray found that the point of view of television episodes and series are oftentimes based on the lived experiences and creativity of the executive producers. In other words (and of particular relevance to this proposed research), the content of programs is influenced by facts and storylines associated with the producers’ frameworks of knowledge. Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses aims to bring contemporary insight into Gray’s work and continue research that examines if gender/race/ethnicity/socio-economic status affects the inspired television content that is geared toward a specific audience and their unique lived experiences.

As the director for the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University, Martha Lauzen’s most recent study, “Boxed In 2015–16: Women On Screen and Behind the Scenes in Television” stated, “the employment of women working in key behind-the-scenes positions on broadcast network programs has stalled with no meaningful progress over the last decade.” The study revealed that “women comprised 27% of all individuals working as creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography on broadcast network programs,” which is a 1% increase from the 2006–07 study.

“Boxed In” (2016) also reported a small yet steady increase in the percentage of Black women on television. In the 2010–11 season, there was 12% representation of Black women in comparison to 76% White women and 5% for both Latina and Asian women. The report also explored the roles of women and men in behind-the-scenes roles on cable/streaming programs but didn’t break those findings down racially.

Gray (1995) and Lauzen (2016) have demonstrated a connection between the race and ethnicity of television producers and writers and the content of a particular television program. Using the example of NBC television series 227 and statistics from the 2003–04 prime-time television season, respectively, both scholars present compelling information that this text examines further and will contribute to scholarly literature by examining how African-American female showrunners, directors, producers and writers impact television content and creation. Focusing on Lauzen’s 2016 study, Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses intends to further explore the
stories behind the statistics and determine whether a diverse and inclusive television creative team mirrors the programs’ intended television audience.

Notes

20 Martha Lauzen, “Boxed In 2015–16: Women On Screen and Behind the Scenes in Television”, *Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film*, accessed


Micha, Anjali. "Study: Exposure to TV Tweets Drives Consumers to Take Action."


