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BLACK WOMEN IN FILM:

The Film Stereotypes, Cliches, and Tropes that Negatively Influence Perceptions of Black Women

By: Isatou K. Sey
Abstract

When film was first created in the late 1800s, Black actors would not be seen on the big screen until many years later. Black actresses, in particular, had an even harder time landing roles than their male counterparts. When finally allowed to become actresses around the mid 1900s, they were limited to subordinate roles that served the perceptions white people held of them and held true to their intersectional marginalization. Namely, Black women portrayed characters that were maids or servants to white families. As time goes on, the presence of Black women in film and television is certainly increasing, as filmmakers strive to reach diversity quotas. However, the portrayals of Black women have not changed very much due to cross-over appeal. This research paper will expand on the historical development of Black women’s presence in media briefly mentioned here, then discuss and examine these common portrayals and stereotypical roles or tropes, some including the mammy, jezebel, sapphire, and various forms of tokenism that are known to create single stories. Following specific examples of these tropes and types of tokenism, this paper will then describe the implications of these roles developed by media socialization and cultivation theory as explained in “That’s Not Me I See on TV . . . : African American Youth Interpret Media Images of Black Females.” What makes these stereotypes harmful? How do they impact racial representation, Black femininity, the interpersonal advancement of Black women in society, or the way Black women begin to perceive themselves in their day-to-day lives on an intrapersonal level? Lastly, various solutions will be proposed to restructure the film world to allow Black actresses, filmmakers, and writers to creatively tell their own stories, shed a positive light on their experiences, and remold the narratives working against them for far too long.
Since their beginnings in the early- and mid-twentieth century, Black women have suffered from harmful and stereotypical portrayals in film and television - like various forms of tokenism, and tropes like the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire - that work to create obstructive narratives against them, with even current diversity quotas adding to this painful legacy. Specifically, on an intrapersonal level, these portrayals are detrimental to their perceptions of self, leading to a depreciation of their own self-esteem through media socialization. Interpersonally, these cliches also further impact their advancement in society and how others regard them, by creating what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “single stories” (Adichie). Ultimately, film and television must work to destroy these long-lasting tropes and characterize Black women in favorable and uplifting manners by continuing to produce Black women-directed and -starred works such as 2018’s *A Wrinkle in Time* directed by Ava DuVernay, starring actress Storm Reid, and showcasing a leading Black actress in a positive light.

Perhaps some of the most prevalent cliches or stereotypes seen in films are related to the intersection between gender and race. As defined by activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality describes the magnified discrimination Black women face due to both their race and gender (Crenshaw qtd in Perlman). In film and TV, Black women are often seen in degrading roles that simultaneously portray their race and gender negatively. In an article analyzing “Black womanhood in Tyler Perry’s Films,” author Tamika L. Carey shows that even when films are created by Black men, Black women are still the victims of damaging stereotypes.
arising from sexism (Carey, 999). For example, in many Tyler Perry films, the leading Black woman is almost always a damsel in distress, who can only find resolve in a man or by becoming more family-oriented. Carey discusses the criticisms of others against Perry’s films, which argue that his films are potentially just as harmful, as they usually include gender stereotypes and patriarchal beliefs that confine Black women to certain unequal expectations (Carey, 999). Movies like these, which draw in millions of Black viewers due to the representation in casting, reduce Black women to nothing but the roles of women and mothers in distress. Perry’s films encourage that without family or a significant other, a Black woman is nothing, stumping their pursuits of independence. Carey’s work doesn't necessarily reflect intersectionality as it discusses the sexism Black women face from a Black man and, in such a case, racism is not involved – showing that Black women are still at risk of negative portrayal from sexism alone.

Recently, more people have started questioning why Black women are consistently portrayed in a stereotypical light. In the article “The Liberation of Black women Through Cinema,” author Kendra Brown argues that films tend to be structured around something called “crossover appeal,” in which filmmakers and writers want to appeal to as many audiences as possible for their films to be more successful. Brown explains that having Black characters in a film will obviously draw in a Black audience. However, Black characters ideally won’t catch the attention of a large white audience, and thus a solution is to incorporate stereotypes that are seen as more profitable (Brown). However, these cliches further fuel racism by showing non-Black audiences false narratives about Black women that they may carry with them for a long time, allowing them to dictate how they treat Black women in the real world.

Taking a step away from the big screen and looking behind the scenes, Black actresses have not only had a hard time with the unfavorable roles they play, but also with obtaining acting
opportunities at all. Just less than a hundred years ago, before concepts like cross-over appeal existed, Black women weren’t even allowed on the big screen, with Josephine Baker being the first Black woman to appear in a major film, *ZouZou*, in 1934. When Black women were finally allowed in front of the camera, the most they were able to do was play the roles they lived in the real world. Black actresses were only allowed to be “relegated to uncredited roles as maids and servants,” and they had to fight to give their characters meaning or purpose when filmmakers failed to do so (Herrington). Still, Black actresses weren’t even allowed to celebrate their successes in the film industry. For example, Hattie McDaniel was the first Black actresses to win an Oscar for her role in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, in which she played a Mammy, similarly to many of her other roles playing a maid. Despite this feat, McDaniel wasn’t even allowed to attend the film’s premier and was separated from her cast at the Academy Awards due to segregation (Meares). Over the years, while the discrimination faced by actresses like Hattie McDaniel and others in her time has become less overt, it still exists.

Today, Black women are still fighting for equity in the film industry, both in front of and behind the cameras. Firstly, it is difficult for a Black actress to even find work as most films are only looking to cast a few Black roles - not wanting to include Black characters at all, but still needing enough to say that they do not partake in casting discrimination. Still, it is nearly impossible to find a Black actress playing a role with enough depth, outside of just being a character whose sole purpose is to support the main characters. Even in historical or biographical films,
influential Black women are often snubbed for their male counterparts. For example, in an article investigating the plight of African American women during the Civil Rights Movement, author Martha Lott explains that during the Civil Rights Movement, though Black women were at the forefront of the movement and faced double the discrimination, because of the intersectionality of racism and sexism, they were seldom recognized for their contributions, unlike Black men. Civil Rights films made today typically follow the journey of an influential Black man and how he shaped the movement. However, we rarely see the same movies with a leading Black, female figure (Lott, 336). The lack of representation of important Black women in media gives the impression that the efforts of Black women throughout the Civil Rights era were not as noteworthy or were as insubstantial as the supportive characters they play.

Behind the scenes, Black women also face hardships when it comes to makeup and hair services (Reign). Black women typically have afro-textured, tightly coiled hair that demands extra care and attention. Initially, Black women weren’t even allowed to wear their natural hair out while acting. We have since moved past this with the help of past Black actresses, like Cicely Tyson, protesting these limitations and wearing their natural hair anyway, as she did in the 1963 series Eastside/Westside (Alleyne). However, many Black actresses have recounted situations where their hairstylists had no idea how to manage their hair, and production would refuse to higher stylists who could, forcing many of these actresses to style their own hair before reporting to set. Others would opt for wearing wigs instead, just so they wouldn’t have to deal with hair discrimination. Acts like these and many others resulted in the CROWN act being passed, a law that protects against hair discrimination, albeit only in eighteen states so far.
As discrimination against Black actresses continues, it can be argued that perhaps the only reason why representation for Black women in film and television has increased recently is to fulfill diversity quotas, or a specific amount of people from marginalized and underrepresented groups. Usually, casting a couple Black women in films is meant to distract from a mostly white cast, while also being inclusive towards gender. While many may argue that these roles should be seen as opportunities for Black women, they are more damaging than beneficial because they spread the message that Black women are of minor importance, or that they lack the ability to be engrossing. As of late, these “diversity quotas” have become more normalized. In fact, even the Academy Awards are implementing diversity requirements for award nominations to begin in 2024 (Buchanan). For now, it is hard to tell whether demands like the Academy Awards’ will be good for the film industry. On one hand, they will surely lead to less all-white casts. On the other hand, however, they may also lead to even more shallow and tokenized Black characters and the continuous reappearance of tropes following token Black characters, the mammy, jezebel, or sapphire.

One of the oldest and most common film tropes portrayed by Black women is the mammy character. Being one of the first few characters Black women were allowed to play, the mammy reflected Black women’s standing in society in the early to mid 1900s. The mammy is an older Black woman whose role is to be a servant to an aloof white family. This character is undyingly loyal the family she serves, even over their own race (Pilgrim). The most notable mammy role is the character, very creatively named Mammy, in *Gone with the Wind* (1939),
played by Hattie McDaniel. In this film, Mammy is “asked to push a side a group of free Black men on behalf of Scarlet… so that the white mistress does not have to walk around them” (McDole, 24). As we continue to see mammies in today’s films, some still serving white families, others simply being depicted as an older, fat, Black woman serving her own family instead, this trope continues to reinforce the ideal that Black women are only meant to be subservient to white people or constantly bend over backwards to serve their families.

More forms of token Black characters, characters existing purely for the benefit of the starring white characters or for diversity points, come in the form of the token Black best friend or the Magical Negro. This is seen in the popular 1999 film, *10 Things I Hate About You*, in which Gabrielle Union, the only Black woman within the whole film, plays the role of Chastity. Chastity is the best friend of white character Bianca, and although both start out exhibiting the common rich, mean-girl stereotype, Bianca is later seen having significant character development, while Chastity remains just as superficial. Young teenagers usually look to find similarities between themselves and the characters they see on their screens. This entire film, and others like it in which Black girls only have one or two characters to look up to, perpetuates to young Black women that their sole purpose in life is to lead their white counterparts on the path to their success, while staying in the background.

Furthermore, Magical Negro characters can be normal beings or possess supernatural abilities and, according to the scholarly journal titled, “The Power of Black Magic: The Magical
Negro and White Salvation in Film,” “generally focus their abilities toward assisting their white lead counterparts” (Cunningham & Glenn, 135). The Magical Negro holds the power to be the hero or savior of a plot’s conflict and can usually defeat the conflict on their own, but instead they simply guide the white main characters onto the right path, giving them guidance along the way, without much glory or appreciation. A clear example of a Magical negro, who is also a Black woman, is the character Bonnie Bennet, played by Kat Graham in the popular supernatural show, *The Vampire Diaries*. In this show, Bonnie Bennet is a witch and the best friend of main character Elena Gilbert, fulfilling both the roles of the token Black best friend and the Magical Negro. Time and time again, throughout the show’s eight seasons, Bonnie’s character was forced to come to the aid of the main characters with every problem they faced, and this seemed her only purpose. Eventually, Bonnie became less of Elena’s best friend and more of the witch who would save the day, even dying twice and losing multiple of her own loved ones to help her “friends.” The toxicity in this trope suggests to young Black women that it is okay for them to sacrifice the things they hold dear, lose themselves in their white counterparts, or limit their capabilities, so long as it benefits others.

Yet another dangerous trope is the over-sexualization of Black women, or the Jezebel. In this trope, Black women are seen as hypersexual beings, and they usually serve their purpose oppositely of white characters, who are typically viewed with an air of innocence and modesty. One of the oldest examples of the jezebel trope in film goes back to *The Birth of a Nation*, with the biracial character Lydia Brown characterized as “savage, corrupt, lascivious, and overtly sexual,” using, “her ‘feminine wiles’ to deceive the formerly good white man” (Pilgrim). Tropes such as this one can be regarded as one of the most detrimental to Black women. Painting Black women as jezebels has, since slavery times, been a tactic of the white man, used to defend their
heinous actions towards female slaves. Today, it is still used to justify cases of sexual assault against Black women (George-Ballard). As a result of this Jezebel stereotype, Black women are held accountable for the actions of their abusers, and even face difficulty being believed when they come forward after facing abuse. In everyday life, young Black girls are oversexualized by their own families, as they are not afforded the freedom to dress as they choose, instead being labeled as “grown” or “fast”. In turn, the implications of this result in the inability of Black women to express themselves as they feel, or step away from the shadow of over-sexuality they have been placed under, creating an unhealthy cycle that continues through generations.

Lydia Brown – *The Birth of a Nation*

Additionally, the angry Black woman, also called the Sapphire Caricature in film, is constantly defined by her attitude and rudeness, popularized by modern media and television. This character is usually a nagging mother, significant other to a Black man, or a loud and nosey neighbor. Her character’s backstory is simply limited to her bitterness, usually stemming from traumatizing experiences in her past, like a villain origin story, but never explained enough (Pilgrim). In the popular TV series, *Everybody Hates Chris*, the main character and narrator’s mother, Rochelle, played by Tichina Arnold, exhibits every characteristic of the angry Black woman. In almost every episode, her children are truly afraid of any little inconvenience setting her off and sending her on a tirade of scolding, with little consideration to how ridiculous their behavior is at times, always defaulting to paint their mother as an irrational woman. The angry
Black woman trope is dehumanizing because it communicates to audiences, and the world, that Black women are always angry but can never take accountability for the actions stemming from their anger. This trope gaslights the experiences of Black women and makes them feel like they must repress and conceal their true emotions for fear of being labeled, stereotyped, and undervalued.

Though the implications are not clear to many without explanation, these tropes are truly damaging to Black women in more ways than one. In an article titled “That’s Not Me I See on TV…: African American Youth Interpret Images of Black Females,” authors Valerie N. Adams-Bass, Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards, and Howard C. Stevenson conducted a study to question how Black youth interpret portrayals of Black women, and especially those most associated with negative stereotypes. To do so, they utilized focus groups of Black male and female high-schoolers and college students who overwhelmingly identified many portrayals as “negative,” “inaccurate,” or “offensive” (Adams-Bass, Valerie N., et al., 79). They found that with technological advancements and increased access to media and the internet, this generation of youth is more exposed to Black actors and musical artists than any other. Still, stereotypical portrayals of Black people and women have not been done away with and these characters usually lack any depth (Adams-Bass, Valerie N., et al., 80).

With greater exposure to these long-lasting stereotypical portrayals, comes the increased possibility for implications like assimilation or diminished self-esteem. The authors introduce the term media socialization, which is defined as “the exposure to mass communication messages
such as television, radio, the internet, and newspapers that teach people socially accepted behaviors” (Adams-Bass, Valerie N., et al., 81). Media socialization can also impact body image, gender and sexuality, self-esteem, and violence and violent behavior, explaining that the more youth see and engage with an image on TV, the more they associate it with “real-world” representations or perceptions, even of themselves (Adams-Bass, Valerie N., et al., 81). Thus, young Black girls watching films and TV shows in which characters who look like them are exhibiting stereotypical behaviors, are more likely to adopt such behaviors themselves. Another condition that is caused by stereotypical tropes and negatively impacts young Black girls is cultivation theory. Cultivation theory investigates the impact of media and television (Adams-Bass, Valerie N., et al., 82) and suggests that Black children will likely accept the portrayals they see of Black characters as accurate representations or acceptable behavior for their race. With young Black girls constantly being exposed to stereotypical tropes which negatively impact their perceptions of self, their self-esteem is sure to follow.

As writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie once said in a TED Talk, “... the problem with stereotypes is not that they aren’t true, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 13:08-13:17). Cliches and stereotypes have the power to spread false notions and negative perceptions about certain groups and cultures, usually within marginalized communities, creating “single stories,” or superficial and incorrect perceptions about a people. In an article analyzing Black women’s roles in film, author Kellie Carter Jackson builds upon Adichie’s expressions, arguing that single stories create one general, “incomplete” image for the portrayals of Black women that will always keep them subservient to their male or white counterparts in the eyes of viewers (Jackson, 175). Expanding on the definition of a single story, Jackson also introduces the concept of a “single actor,” who we automatically think of as they
are frequently in the same type of stereotypical roles, no matter how great an actor, which further diminishes the impact of Black actresses (Jackson, 175). A most obvious example takes us back to Oscar-winning actress Hattie McDaniel, who held so many roles as a mammy or maid, quickly becoming the staple image for mammies in film and TV. The millions of people watching these films and TV shows depicting single stories, or including single actors, can be swayed by what they see on their screens, especially if they are isolated from diverse cultures. The most impressionable audiences are, arguably, children, who usually have limited knowledge on other cultures and can only learn through what they see in film and TV. Young children watching such films can easily form negative perceptions about people from other groups and cultures, or even about themselves, if the negative depictions are of their community.

People perceiving Black women negatively because of stereotypes they’ve built up has been known to have adverse effects. These ideals keep sexism and racism alive and working against Black women. One prevalent example of the discrimination Black women face in everyday life is pay inequality. As an article from The Washington Center for Equitable Growth states, “Black women workers earn the least in wages on average, compared to their working counterparts among White men, White women, and Black men” in what they describe as a “double gap,” resulting from both racial and sexist wage gaps (Holder). These wage inequalities and other forms of discrimination like it all work to disenfranchise and marginalize Black women, keeping them societally and financially subservient to their white or male counterparts.

Undoubtedly, only those within a marginalized group can understand and convey the adversities, setbacks, and issues that they face in their own lives. Many may attempt to impart those experiences on the behalf of the marginalized individuals, but they will find themselves
unsuccessful in such a task, as they must live it before they can tell it. Today’s society is filled with misconceptions and false narratives about Black women because for far too long others were responsible for communicating their stories. In this, they have allowed their own beliefs to cloud their work. For example, it is clear to interpret through Tyler Perry’s films that he has a concrete view on the role that women should hold within society, and this is often seen in his work.

The foremost way in which society can begin to work against the fallacies many hold against Black women is to start telling the story properly, which can only be done with the involvement of Black women themselves. The film industry desperately needs more Black women to be directors, producers, writers, filmmakers, and actresses. A scholarly research essay from NYU titled, “The Liberation of Black Women through Cinema,” argues that the reason why so many films and TV series implement negative stereotypes about Black women is simply for profit, and not because they have any real interest in creating stories revolving around Black women. The author of this article elaborates on how including more Black women in film spaces has the potential to change a lot as, “independent filmmakers, specifically Black women directors have been actively working to liberate Black women from these stereotypes. The absence of the studio creates the opportunity for stories to be nuanced and reach beyond the confines of a capitalistic industry” (Brown). Films and TV shows in which Black women have held more creative license have painted Black women in a much better light, sometimes even literally. These pieces of media have focused more on developing the characters of Black women, giving them depth, and portraying them in the best lighting and more flattering characterizations or representations. Thus, for any real change to happen, Black women must be at the forefront of said change and the creators of their own narratives.
All in all, the harmful stereotypes and tropes seen in films and TV shows since Black women have been integrated in the film industry – like the mammy, tokenism, the jezebel, and the sapphire – have worked to create single stories and inaccurate narratives that diminish Black women’s perception of self, their self-esteem, and the way those of other races perceive them – to the detriment of their position in society. Tropes such as the Black best friend or the mammy have held Black women in inferior roles for far too long by depicting them in service to their white counterparts. In recent years, film and TV industries have slowly started to move away from the discrimination and harmful stereotypes Black women have faced for years. With diversity quotas taking charge, more and more Black women have been given opportunities to become actresses. And though diversity quotas still result in more stereotypical, shallow roles sometimes, with the involvement of Black creators, change is slowly ensuing. For example, films such as *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) or *The Photograph* (2020), and the television series *Scandal* (2012-2018), all created or directed by and starring Black women, have been able to showcase Black women in favorable fashions. In these pieces, the characters of the Black women were not weighed down by the stereotypes that follow their community, but instead led lives apart from them and were fully developed, deep characters. Having a film and television industry with devoted Black women in positions of power can make a world of difference. By reintroducing Black women to big screens in a whole new light, society can begin to eliminate the conventional beliefs they hold and exchange them for those more constructive.

Mae Morton – *The Photograph*
Olivia Pope – *Scandal*
Bibliography


