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The Power of a Stereotype: American Depictions of the Black Woman in Film Media

Brittany Terry
Loyola University Chicago

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THE POWER OF A STEREOTYPE: AMERICAN DEPICTIONS OF BLACK WOMEN IN
FILM MEDIA

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BRITTANY ANN TERRY

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ABSTRACT

How are black women depicted in popular films? The significance of this study is that it sheds new light on the ways in which black women are depicted in film, and exemplifies some means to deconstruct dehumanizing representations of ourselves. This work advances the goal of institutionalizing more accurate visual accounts of black femaleness thereby exposing the inaccuracies of the dominant gaze. This study also transparently marks my intersectional positionality as a black feminist spectator-- simultaneously privileged and marginalized.   I identify as a heterosexual woman of color, raised in an upper-middle class American community. As such, I benefit from classism and able-ism in my perspectives. This analysis is, then, essentially a black woman's critique of black women's marginalization in American cinema. The study contributes to the sociology of race and media studies by critically analyzing what messages are conveyed to the masses regarding the place of black womanhood in American society. Moreover, it explores some specific ways that these cinematic representations of Black womanhood are socially and politically damaging.

INTRODUCTION

"When Black bodies are on the stage, Black perspectives must be reflected. This is not simply a matter of 'artistic interpretation'; race and sex play a pivotal role in determining who holds the power to shape representation." – Tonya Pinkins

Historically, black women have been treated as less-than-human in many contexts, including the sciences, popular culture, law, and everyday life. Moreover, black female marginality is produced and reproduced through invisibility: they are less likely to hold elected office positions, high-profile jobs, and are among the missing in many popular cultural images. As black feminist scholars have demonstrated, their marginality is underscored by a lack of presence in mass media. When black women's experiences are visible, they lack the full range of real world experiences that include normalized human emotions and educational achievement. Films are critical sites for examination of cultural images; for films are political undertakings that represent, produce and reproduce power relations. Cinemas not only provide entertainment, but also send messages to viewers, helping to shape our values and belief systems.

To add to the body of literature, such as the works of Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki that aims to understand how black people are depicted in American media, or bell hooks who focuses specifically on black women in such positions, I plan to study and analyze three films produced between 1997 and 2017 across varying genres that have been deemed popular amongst black audiences (*Ranker*, 2017). In this work I examine black women's roles in film and the ways in which they express power: through sexuality, formal authority, (i.e., holding a

powerful job, through kin relationships, or through sexuality). I also compare how often women are speaking in comparison to their male counterparts throughout the film and how language is utilized.   When media's image of the black woman is limited- both in her behavior, and the ways she carries herself, a message is sent to audiences regarding the standard for black women largely imposed and approved by the white male spectator.

<div align="center">HISTORICAL OVERVIEW</div>

Historically, black women have carried a double burden, fitting into two minority groups: people of color and women. This double burden is effective today and through various media forms given definition. In St. Jean and Feagin's *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism* (1998) the socially constructed image of black women is explained; "Given this relative neglect in social science scholarship, it is not surprising that contemporary black women are often misrepresented, mischaracterized, and misrecognized in public and private discourse" (5). The authors explain that because of lack in scientific social study, the constructed image of the black woman is inaccurate, and therefore misunderstood. St. Jean and Feagin go on to describe the characterization of black women,

> "*The negative depiction of black women as domineering matriarchs or exotic sexual objects was created, and still is perpetuated, by white (usually white male) social scientists, and even by a few black male social scientists trained by the ... images of hyper-sexuality and overbearingness often merge to symbolize the black woman*" (6-7).

This reading further clarified the historical context for how the image of the black women has been created in present day media, starting in Sixteenth -Century Spain and brought to the Americas by seafarers and colonists (Feagin, 8).

With the emergence of moving pictures in the 1890s, the enforcement of extant stereotypes of blacks and ideologies of racism were represented on the "big screen." In this period, white people through the incorporation of blackface played on stage and in film African Americans. Blackface Minstrelsy, developing in the early 19th century, consisted of skits, acts, dancing and musical performances that mocked people- specifically those of black decent. Usually, these shows portrayed black people as dim-witted, lazy, buffoonish, irrational and happy-go-lucky.

The Birth of a Nation by D.W. Griffith in 1915 showed the most disreputable of Black American stereotypes, displaying them as extremely inferior to whites (Chao, 69). Entering the 1930s and 1940s, images that originated during the enslavement of blacks, black women emerged in Hollywood films depicted as the "mammy", "jezebel" and "sapphire". In "Racism, Sexism and the Media" (Chao, et al, date) expansion of these characters is described:

> *"The new stereotype played to White perceptions of Black personalities who, in the vernacular of the era, 'knew their place' in American society. Blacks now appeared in movies for the purpose of entertaining White audiences within the context of social limitations… When in movie character, Blacks were subservient to Whites as maids, mammies, domestics, and sidekicks"* (73-74).

This inclusion of blacks for the white gaze was not created to humanize blacks; rather their depictions were shaped out of white hatred and fear. The black body was, and still is arguably today, oppressed in the form of mass media as a result of white mythology.

I choose to analyze film because it is one of the oldest forms of social media, and they are

most consistent with historical analysis of how people of color are portrayed. African Americans have a long and rather complex history in the American motion picture industry. Early depictions of African American men and women were confined to demeaning stereotypical images. During the first decades of the 20th century, many films illustrated a nostalgic and idealized vision of life in the American South. Memories of the Civil War were still fresh, and film served as a means to create some measure of reconciliation between the North and South by glorifying the image of the "Old South". African American characters, in keeping with the dominant stereotypes, were typically portrayed as incompetent, child-like, hyper-sexualized, and criminal.

Even the roles for African Americans that might be seen as more positive--such as loyal servants, mammies, and butlers--reinforced a belief that the proper social position for blacks was that of a servant who was unshakably devoted to his/her white masters and to upholding the current social order. From the mid-1910s to the 1930s a few film companies (some of them black-owned) were established with the sole intention of putting on "all-colored cast" productions that included positive and diverse roles for the actors and actresses. Historical events like the Great Migration (1910s-1940s), or the relocation of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West, and the first Civil Rights Movement (1950s- 1960s), in efforts to end discrimination, racism and violence against blacks (especially in the South), impacted a changing narrative in films, but stereotyping continued to uphold the "black image".

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2015, Viola Davis was quoted by "Entertainment Weekly" as saying, "Toni Morrison said that as soon as a character of color is introduced in a story imagination stops ... I mean, I'm a black woman from Central Falls, Rhode Island. I'm dark-skinned. I'm quirky. I'm shy. I'm strong. I'm guarded. I'm weak at times. I'm sensual. I'm not overtly sexual. I am so many things in so many ways, and I will never see myself on screen". It is beneath this very umbrella that hooks' concept of the *oppositional gaze* is present, as Davis, a decorated actress and producer, states the realities of what it means to be a black woman in film.

In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (1992) hooks explains how black woman are not only underrepresented in film, but additionally, their gaze is forbidden; they aren't allowed to 'look'. Looking indicates a sense of power with which the black female body is not sociologically endowed. The role of the black woman in American society and film is, to play the role of object in direct relation to white female existence (hooks, 1992). The term "oppositional gaze" was first mentioned in her book, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992). The concept, 'oppositional gaze' is essentially an act of political rebellion and resistance against the repression of the right of black people to the gaze. When most blacks in the U.S first had the opportunity to 'look' at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy (hooks. 117). hooks makes clear that there is in fact "power in looking" (117), as opposed to Michel Foucault (1992), who developed a contrasting theory around power relations (1992,115). Foucault believed in power in terms of domination, stating, "power is a system of domination which controls everything and leaves no room for freedom" (116). Claiming this

freedom is the foundation of independent black cinema development.

Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2000) dissected how images of black people are created within mainstream media sources. *The Black Image in the White Mind* examines magazines, news broadcasts, television shows, and movies from a critical perspective on the meaning of blackness by (mostly) white producers. This work gets at the core of my study, examining the process behind the production of the images viewed by spectators, and devoting a chapter to race at the movies. Entman and Rojecki (2000) argue that within American culture, black people hold "liminal status" (51). Liminal people are "by nature potentially polluting, disruptive, but not necessarily destructive of the natural order since they are no longer classified or not yet classified" (Entman and Rojecki, 51). According to their opinion Hollywood has arguably done "more to integrate black people into productions than any other mass medium" however, the exclusion of "minority actors from certain roles and actions persists" (Entman and Rojecki, 182).

While this study focuses on the niche market of movies that appeal to black audiences, mainstream Hollywood films involve primarily white actors and host the idea of "focalization", which concentrates the audience's attention and identification through close-up shots and scenes that provide a dynamic view of the characters (Entman and Rojecki, 185). White actors who star or co-star in films with black actors are also more likely to be at the center of focalization (Entman and Rojecki, 185-6). Additionally, blacks are depicted in more menial roles, such as cab drivers, cashiers, street vendors, etc. in many films, even those that had them at the center of the story line (Entman and Rojecki, 200).

In studying the behaviors of black actors versus those of their white counterparts, Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that black males and females were much more likely to have sex scenes, which suggests that Hollywood depicts blacks as more sexually driven on average than whites (199). Black females were marked as more violent than white actresses by about five times (Entman and Rojecki, 198). Even language used was different between black and white actors, as blacks would engage in significantly more profanity and non-grammatical speech than whites (Entman and Rojecki, 199). Conclusively, the cultural expressions about race obviously portrayed black actors as less desirable than their white counterparts. Crude language, over-sexualization (and therefore objectification) and violent characteristics are also common filmic markers for black actor roles in major films.

OPPOSING ARGUMENT- OPPOSITIONAL GAZE FILM WORK

Of course, there are films that display more "realistic" images of black womanhood, though these films are often independent, or never hit the "big screen". Two such films, *Girlhood* and *Daughters of the Dust*, both written and produced by women of color, challenge the narrative of negative stereotypes. *Girlhood*, though it takes place in a setting that may be considered "undesirable", places a black, sixteen year old, French girl at the center of its story. Marieme is the main character and joins an all-girl gang in the public housing community in which she lives. The film creates a full and extensive narrative around Marieme and her life as a poor, black teen in France. The expected outcome of the film is that "bad girls" will corrupt the "good girl", but the creator of *Girlhood*, Celine Sciamma, has a different conclusion.

Daughters of the Dust may be the more unconventional of the two films. The story revolves around a family in the Gullah community, living in coastal South Carolina. The name *Gullah* has come to be the accepted name of the islanders in South Carolina. Many traditions of the Gullah culture were passed from one generation to the next through language, agriculture, and spirituality. The culture has been linked to specific West African ethnic groups who were enslaved on island plantations to grow rice, indigo, and cotton starting in 1750, when antislavery laws ended in the Georgia colony. The family finds themselves facing a generational split between traditions they keep alive from their Yoruba ancestors and the impact of modernity on familial relations. In *Daughters* Black womanhood is exemplified and embraced in ways that Hollywood does not typically portray. The matriarch of the family is put at the center of family decisions and holds power over both the women and men. The Gullah dialect used within the film is not language mainstream Americans are used to hearing; therefore it is easy for one to get lost following the story.

The importance of these films is extensive, but especially because they provide an opposing narrative to the popularized films about oppression. In providing roles to actresses that don't align with stereotypical categories, but provide dynamic character development, black women may see a reflection of themselves in a production, though it is harder to find. All of the films mentioned in the section are independent films- a feature film that is produced outside the major film studio system, in addition to being produced and distributed by independent entertainment companies.

FILM SELECTION OVERVIEW

For this project I have selected three films for review and analysis of the presence and power of black women. Each film was released between 1997 and 2017.   It should be noted that each of these cinematic productions has, or has had, significance to black spectators. The films that have been chosen have intentionally starred black actors, who portray a version of black life in America within their roles- niche market movies. *Soul Food* (1997), was widely acclaimed for presenting a more positive image of black people than is typically portrayed by Hollywood. Three actors in the film won lead actress, supporting actor/actress and outstanding youth actor for the NAACP Image Awards in 1998. *Precious* received six Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, and Mo'Nique won Best Supporting Actress and numerous other accolades for her role as an abusive mother.   Lastly, *Girls Trip* (2017) was the first film in history produced, written, directed by and starring black actors to cross the $100 million mark in gross income, and the only comedy to do so in 2017. The film achieved $137 million worldwide.

Each film selected for this study is not only successful in it's own right financially, but each also places representations of black life at the center of their storytelling. Recognition of these films by media outlets such as Black Entertainment Television (BET), Essence, Ebony Magazine, and the NAACP Image Awards hold the selected films to a standard of acceptance by the black community at large, as these media outlets are in place to cater to black audiences. What does this say about how black people view the women in their communities and how beneficial or harming are these acknowledgments?

METHODOLOGY

In this work I use Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) as research method because it provides the analytical tools with which to examine the relationship between the film as text and audience perceptions of meaning. QCA also recognizes that media texts are open to multiple meanings for different readers, and attempts to determine the likely meaning of texts to audiences (Macnamara, 2003). My data relies heavily on my own 'readings' and 'interpretations' of media as text. This research project investigates three films: *Soul Food* (1997), *Precious* (2009) and *Girls Trip* (2017).

Films for this study were observed from a neutral perspective, to the extent possible, although some researchers view qualitative methodology as unscientific and unreliable (Macnamara, 2003, 7). However, qualitative analysis is necessary to understand the deeper implications of film depictions of black women and likely interpretations by audiences. There are aspects to interpretation that quantitative research cannot capture- emotions, feelings and opinions are just a few qualities spectators have that can be expanded on using QCA. A main point in engaging QCA for this project is to describe substantive characteristics of message content and to predict the effects of content on spectators.

Content analysis is a research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within texts (Macnamara, 2003, 2). The interpretations made within this work are attempts at critical objectivity by which to identify the aspects contingent to black female roles in Hollywood films. In other words, the observations will uncover a pattern in the roles casted to black actresses. The most basic function in content analysis is the descriptive, which provides insights into the messages and images in discourse

and popular culture represented in mass media (Macnamara, 2003, 5). Macnamara (2003) looks

deeply into the meaning and uses of content analysis as a sociological process in his article

Media content analysis: Its uses; benefits and best practice methodology. He states, "the

inferential and predictive roles of content analysis, even though they are 'facilitating' rather than

conclusive, allow researchers to go further and explore what media content says about a society

and the potential effects mass media representations may have on audiences" (4). Though

complete and true objectivity may not be possible, this research strives toward consistency and

intersubjectivity.

It is important to note how I am defining the "black" actor. By using this race descriptor,

though not perfect, is an effective way to distinguish what specific female experience I will be

observing, not all are the same. Race may be explained, in most instances, as a visual

descriptive.   This study is built on the foundations of the gaze, and what is perceived when

"looking".

Film Choice Process

In choosing films for this study I used the website *Ranker*, which is essentially a database

that lets website viewers vote on categories. This specific grouping from which films for this

study were selected is titled "List of Black Movies, Ranked Best to Worst" and contained a total

of 411,200 votes by 32,300 different voters (*Ranker*, 2017). The description of the survey states,

"movies must feature African-American and African culture and/or mostly above the line black

casts" (*Ranker*, 2017). The database is unable to control for the race of the voter, but provides a

diverse sample size that may be examined using filters. The filters can control for gender, age and region. Additionally, the data clearly marks how many approval and disapproval votes are implemented for each movie. Each film chosen for this study was rated above the 50tieth percentile out of 100 total movies.

Media Content Sample

Macnamara also breaks down the three steps that are necessary in conducting an accurate media content analysis. The first step is the selection of media form. For this project film is the chosen form. The next step is the selection of a specific time period. The time period for this study are movies released between the years 1997 – 2017, a twenty-year period. Lastly, the sampling of relevant content from within the selected media—that is, what form of sampling is utilized. Films for this project were collected in a systematically random form, choosing every third film on the *Ranker* voting data that fell between my time period (1997-2017). If the third film did not fall between the years 1997 and 2017, I counted from that film to the next third option.

Data Abstraction

When examining the films included in this project, I look at how black women are portrayed, their roles (supporting vs. main characters), how other characters in the film treat them, and how their presence bears upon the film. In performing this study, I utilize a method of comparative analysis- identifying how many speaking lines black women have in relation to their

(male) counterparts. These assessments will provide context on if black women are essentially 'silenced' in films in which they are perceived to lead. Are their voices the least important in relationship to their co-stars? What sort of language is utilized for women's dialogue in comparison to men's?

In addition to comparative analysis, personal analysis will play the largest role within this study. How do I, as a black woman, perceive black women in films? This determination will rely primarily on my knowledge of stereotypes, media studies, gender studies, race and ethnicity. I will take detailed notes during the viewing of each film—viewing each one of the three chosen for this study approximately 4 times.

Thematic Analysis

Notes on each film will be analyzed to uncover patterns within and across film.   Was there similar language used by or used in describing the film characters? What actions are directed at the actresses and how do they respond? Are these women presented as dynamic characters embodying the rounded complexity of an actual human, or do they appear less individuated and more homogenous, and therefore stereotypical? Additionally, uncovering echoing themes will be implemented in order to uncover patterns amongst all of the examined movies.

FILM ANALYSIS

As stand-alone films, this research incorporates a unique set of story lines and aligns them into three premises in which we may not think about on a surface level. Damaging depictions of black women are present within all of the films utilized in this study. In order to propose a concise analysis, I have selected three reoccurring themes appearing within these particular productions. The ideology of family, specifically motherhood and the position women hold in the larger family structure, stylizations and the interpretation of social class- through the lens of occupation and personal style, and heteronormativity, specifically gender roles and word count within the film in comparison to male counterparts, are all reproduced and shaped in methods meant not to mirror a reality, but reiterate a damaging perception and approach to black womanhood. Family, social class and sexuality are all categories used in shaping ones identity. By examining these specific aspects in films centered on black women, we may obtain a deeper understanding of the characteristics used to depict black women in Hollywood productions.

"Family Means Everything" The Creation of Family Dynamics in Black Film

The importance of family for the black community in America has been the bedrock of our culture dating back to times of slavery. In considering the effects slave trades had on family units, and the result often weakening and distorting such ties, it is important to mention it was through collectivism that enabled survival from slavery during widespread and historically ingrained white supremacy. Black place making, in events such as festivals and family reunions, are acts of resistance. By introducing this background in a contemporary context you will begin

to notice patterns in the ways in which black people navigate family life- including extended family. A specific emphasis on motherhood, or lack thereof, is necessary in examining the roles in which screenwriters deem appropriate for the black actor.

Soul Food

Motherhood *Soul Food* may be the most obvious in regards to the films emphasis on the family unit, as it is the basis of its storyline. From the very beginning of the film, it is made clear that Big Momma Jo, the grandmother of the narrator, is the matriarch of the family. Not only does she make the "final" call on decisions that effect the family, she is also the person everyone looks to in for advice on "doing the right thing". The message on the importance of family is reiterated throughout, especially during heightened scenes of betrayal, infidelity and financial hardship. In black families especially, there is large emphasis on motherhood and what the position of the mother is- single, married or widowed. In this film, Big Momma is a widow, and eventually dies from diabetes. It is her death that turns the family on it's head- signifying how imperative her role as the matriarch was. George Tillman Jr., the director of *Soul Food,* strategically places women at the center of his story telling.

Big Momma Jo fits the historical model of a mammy- she is large, older, black, and soft spoken- but wise. Her wisdom is perceived to come with her age and is described as being so nice that "she never made one enemy in her whole life" (Tillman, 1997). She fits the mold of being caring, motherly and gentle. It is no mistake that she is also a widow, as women often outlive their partners, and the mammy is almost always unmarried.

The Larger Family Structure In addition to Momma Jo, the other focal women in the film (her three daughters) embody various aspects of black female stereotypes. Bird (Nia Long) is the youngest of the sisters. She is introduced as the bride at her wedding. Bird is petite with a medium brown complexion and shoulder length hair. She has opened a beauty shop with a loan from her oldest sister, Teri (Vanessa Williams). Her new husband, Lem (Mekhi Phifer), struggles to find work because of his incarceration and various run-ins with the law. Though married, she is portrayed as a seductress when "necessary" to improve her own home life, enticing an ex-boyfriend to offer her currently unemployed husband a job- without his knowledge. Maxine (Vivica Fox) is the middle daughter and mother to the narrator. She is married to Kenny (Jeffrey Sams), an ex- boyfriend of her older sister. It is never explained if she is employed or not. She is the only one of the sisters to have children and in a marriage that isn't perceivably problematic. Though she constantly "butts heads" with her oldest sister Teri, Maxine is portrayed as the most lovable and understanding of the sisters, fighting to keep the family together after the loss of their mother. Lastly, Teri, a successful attorney is most easily described as a workaholic sapphire. Though married to Miles (Michael Beach), also an attorney but wants to leave this career to work on his music full time, she manages their relationship as more of a business partnership. Teri is very independent and financially successful, yet portrayed as "bitchy" and short tempered as a result to these qualities. It isn't until Miles has an affair with Teri's younger cousin Faith (Gina Ravera) that Teri is portrayed as being capable of real emotion. The role of the "mother" in this film is only given to characters that fit "ideal standards"- lovable, patient, and nourishing. Women whom did not possess these characteristics

overtly did not have children. The patterns of unsuccessful black marriage, failed health at the fault of diabetes, and reiterated stereotypical images of black women create a negative narrative to a movie initially observed as a positive depiction of the strength of black lineage.

Precious Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire

Family dynamics in the film *Precious* are drastically different than that of *Soul Food.* Simply put, the dynamics may be described as extremely dysfunctional and dangerous. Under extremely violent abuse by both of her parents, Precious (Gaborey Sidibe) is a 16 year old girl, who's story revolves around persistence and survival. Her mother, Mary (Mo'Nique), perceives to be unaware about her own mental illness, a shadowing look into the unimportance of mental illness in the black community within our larger society.

Motherhood   Mary is extremely abusive toward her daughter- sexually, physically and verbally. She relies completely on welfare checks for survival and blames her daughter for the hardships they must face. This blame steams from her resentment toward Precious, who is carrying the child of her deceased husband. It is not uncommon for Mary to use negative and demeaning language toward Precious- often calling her stupid and worthless, yet Precious speaks only positive words to her mentally disabled child, "Mongo", and newborn baby.

Precious is also a mother of two children, both results of rape from her own father. She embodies a very different approach to mothering her babies- caring and providing for them as

much as her circumstances allow. In the beginning of the movie, we are introduced to her

character as pregnant and incurably ill, diagnosed with HIV AIDS, transmitted to her from her

father and ultimately the cause of his own death. Though the only "real-world" example she has

for a mother is undesirable and toxic, she chooses not to follow in her footsteps- looking to

movies and television shows for better examples of how to treat her children.

The Larger Family Structure   Extremely violent interactions and demoralizing abuse

encapsulates the household portrayed in the movie *Precious*. Understandably, the teenager

avoids exchanges with her mother whenever possible, but is frequently called to attention when

Mary wants to be served. The power relations between the main character and her mother are

obscure, while Mary degrades and mistreatments Precious at any time possible, Precious is still

relied upon to provide for the family- cooking, cleaning and obtaining social security benefits.

Precious feels powerless and out of control of her own life- often daydreaming what her life

could be as a celebrity. In these daydreams, she holds the power of her own reality. In actuality,

she has recently been diagnosed with HIV AIDS, which she contracted from her father and is the

same infection he lost his life from. As Precious has two children, both results of rape from her

father, she only takes care of one full time. Her grandmother, who only appears in the film

twice, takes care of Mongo.

Girl's Trip

Though their personal families make minimal appearance throughout the film, the family structure for members of the "Flossy Posse" is made clear as the storyline progresses. Lisa (Jada Pickett Smith) is the only woman with children in the friend group, her kids making limited appearances throughout the film, but they play a large role in how Lisa carries and describes herself to others. Both Sasha (Queen Latifah) and Dina (Tiffany Haddish) are single and childless. Ryan (Regina Hall) is married and also does not have children.

Motherhood   As the only member of the "Flossy Posse" with children, Lisa takes on a role of the overbearing, yet caring mom who keeps her kids on a strict routine and healthy diet. When preparing to leave for the weekend to embark on the trip to New Orleans, her children are left at the hands of her own mother, who is way more easygoing and relaxed. She mocks Lisa for her rules and diet plans in which she expects to be followed in her absence. Lisa's mother embodies an "old school" way of parenting, letting them watch television and eat "whatever she feels like cooking". When Lisa becomes hesitant about actually going on the trip, her mother reassures her that the kids will be just fine, and they are. Lisa's identity strongly revolves around her children, while on vacation she frequently calls to check on them and even hallucinates that her kids are watching her at the club (while high). Lisa's mother seems to be the polar opposite of her daughter, which portrays varying forms of black (middle class) motherhood. These are the only examples of such in the movie.

The Larger Family Structure   Ryan and husband Stewart (Mike Colter) are in a marriage that runs more like a business partnership. For the sake of the brand in which they built together, they agree to stay married to benefit their public perception. Ryan expresses how unhappy she is to her friends, but explains how important it is for the marriage to be portrayed as "perfect". The added controversy of infidelity on behalf of Stewart presents an element of "women hating women" in an ongoing battle with the mistress, despite the movie's published theme as "women supporting women". Ryan eventually escapes the unhappy marriage and realizes once she does, the public loves her more- finding her more "real" and "relatable".   This speaks to one narrative regarding how women in America navigate relationships, specifically marriage. As the majority of the Flossy Posse is childless in their mid-30's, the increasing trend of women "settling down" later in life and/or choosing not to have children is reflected in this narrative. These women are career focused, driven and successful- they don't have ample amounts of time. By putting themselves and their own happiness first, they are subliminally sending a message to women, especially black women, that marriage should not be a primary goal or aspiration.

The conclusive message of this film in regards to family is that it does not have to be blood; family can be whoever understands you the most. *Girl's Trip* attempts to demonstrate the beauty of unconditional friendship while being unapologetically black; the power of sisterhood. This may be the reason that follows the lack of story telling behind conventional family dynamics for the characters; subtly telling the viewer that such storyline isn't important or critical if you have a strong and supportive group of friends.

"Money, Money, Money, Money" **Stylizations and the Interpretation of Class**

The settings of a film often stem from the perceived socioeconomic status and social class of main characters in movies. Films portray black people in a number of ways- most importantly, to establishing a character's story is to clearly display their social position- occupation, material possessions and the setting in which the character exists. These clarifications help the audience to make sense of the character, activating their personal bias toward such positions and watching the film from such a lens.

Soul Food

"The (Black) Middle Class" The Joseph family seem to be what black America aspires. They have capital- both socially and economically, are successful by occupation and home ownership and are close knit. Their history of relocation from the South up to Chicago during the Great Migration gives the Joseph family Americanized roots that satisfy a white gaze. The choices of occupancy for the women within the film are indicators of their class. Bird owns a hair salon, one that is quite popular and employs a number of beauticians, Teri is a corporate lawyer and the most monetarily wealthy of her sisters, and Maxine's occupation is never identified. She is a mother of three young children so it is unclear if she is a stay at home mom, which gives indication that her spouse makes enough to support their family of five. Though hardship is present throughout the film, and especially after the death of Momma Jo, the Joseph family always has the safety net of their networks in prevailing.

Precious Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire

"Poor, Black, Urban"   Images of poverty are often depicted on a surface level stereotype.

Homelessness or extremely dismal housing conditions are usually the most common way

filmmakers portray an image of struggle within a film. Within *Precious* a distinctive image of

poor, urban America is represented. The Jones' family is not homeless; they live in a two

bedroom, two-story condo in 1987 Harlem.   Though it is no luxurious space, it is more than

what would be expected of a family completely dependent on welfare. Despite their housing,

other indicators reoccur to show how much the Precious, her mother and her two children are

struggling. The way in which the women carry themselves throughout the film are indicators of

their social class- second hand clothing, shoes that don't fit and a lack of weather appropriate

attire. Another telling factor is that Precious' grandmother is the primary caregiver of her son

Mongo in order to lessen the financial and psychological burden on Precious and her mother.

Girl's Trip

"Looking the Part"   From the very beginning of the film, it is clear that class is of privilege to

the Flossy Posse; their homes, cars, clothes, and first class flights are material possessions that

give context to the women's social class. The choice of style in *Girl's Trip* gained so much

attention after the film's release, there are now a number of websites serving as platforms that

specify the places you can find similar dress, have dialogue about the clothing in the movie and

get "behind the scenes" interviews on why the designers chose such looks. This is a further

example of place making.

Ryan, as a businesswoman, translates a message of power in the way she dresses, and successively, carries herself. Her fashion sense may be described as clean and purposeful. Sasha, the gossip columnist, was arguably the most fashion forward. This is hard for plus size women to do in American society with limited options available. Though she is always dressed in the least revealing clothing, Sasha is always portrayed to "dress how she feels"- which varies from scene to scene. Lisa, the nurse and mother, undergoes the most drastic change in dress throughout the film. Her style is at the butt of many jokes in the beginning of the film. She goes from most "conservatory" dressed, an exaggerated expression of her motherhood, to the most scandalous during the trip. It is made clear her transformation is not for herself- but to attract the attention of the male gaze. Lastly, Dina- the "wild one"- embodies New Orleans in her dress throughout the movie. She wears bold, bright colors and patterns, reflecting her personality. These clear distinctions of dress illustrate more than the character's intended personalities, it emphasizes the diversities of black style.

Black women's hair is and historically has been a political statement. Women use their hair to ascertain group identity and as a form of everyday resistance from social norms established by dominate culture. The hair presentations within Girls Trip embrace distinctive forms of hairstyle and color, however for Sasha, the use of hair extensions, clip-ins and headscarves to match the outfit she wears embody the individuality and assortment black women create with their bodies through hair. I found it symbolic and important that the women were represented with their hair wrapped while in their pajamas- something many black women do before bed, but a practice that is rarely illustrated in mainstream media- even sources catering to black audiences.

***"Why do we need men?"* The invisibility of sex outside of heteronormativity and gendered power dynamics**

In reflecting on today's media, queerness is typically expressed by two white men in efforts to normalize it's presence. This should not come as a surprise, as the identity that holds the most power in our society exercises such. When using the term 'queer', I am referring to the contemporary description of members of the LGBTQI community. The term queer(ness) may also suggest an identity used because some individuals whose gender or sex is non-conforming may not have an easy way to culturally identify their sexual orientation.

Black Hollywood films often ignore the existence of any sexual distinctiveness outside of those categorized as heteronormative. Queerness is not centered in black mainstream film unless specifically acknowledged, examined and picked apart. Casual mentioning of queerness is concealed. Queer romances are invisible unless forcibly fixated on. With heteronormativity comes the performance of power relations between men and women in film work, usually reiterating male domination.

Soul Food

Historically food has been at the center of the black community in celebration, play and mourning. Soul food, a type of cooking that derives from the south involving recipes dating back to slavery, is especially important to traditional black family life. Food brings and keeps family together and in naming the film *Soul Food*, director George Tillman Jr. purposefully

considered such histories. In the conclusion of the movie, Ahmad explains his new understanding behind family tradition:

> *"Now I understand what soul food was all about. During slavery, black folks didn't have a lot to celebrate. Cooking was how we expressed love for each other. That's what those Sunday dinners meant. More than just eating. It was a time for sharing our joys and sorrows. Something old folks say is missing in today's families."* (Tillman, 1997).

The women of the Joseph family are strikingly heteronormative, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics within their own relationships. In one scene specifically, Bird looks to her older sister for guidance on how to help her unemployed husband find a job. Maxine's advises, "You have to let him feel powerful" and goes on to explain he's already fragile because he isn't the breadwinner. Scenes like this one, which reinforce toxic masculinity, send a message to the audience that men should be the ones who hold power in their heterosexual relationships. Additionally, the women of the family are the only ones expected (and allowed) in the kitchen to cook Sunday dinners. For Bird, the youngest of the sisters and worst cook in comparison to her mother and sisters, an expectation of "learning for her new husband" is reiterated and joked about. Male domination is strongly visible, while womenhood is at the center of family successes. There is absolutely no mentioning or visual representation of relationships that exist outside of male/ female dynamics. Hetero-relations that enforce male domination seem to be the only present dynamic in the world Tillman created for the Joseph's throughout this film.

Precious Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire

Unlike the other two films in this study, Lee Daniels creates complex imagery and storylines to present realistic elements into this movie.   There is an inclusion of one queer partnership; it happens to be the only example Precious has of how a healthy, loving relationship should operate. Her teacher, Ms. Blu Rain, is in a committed relationship with another women. Because it is 1987 and same sex marriage is still illegal, the trials and tribulations Ms. Rain faces with her partner are briefly spoken about. Right after Precious gives birth to her second incestual child, she is kicked out of her mothers home and her teacher offers to take her and the baby in until she can get on her feet. The scene in which Precious meets Ms. Rain's partner for the first time gives insight on her personal views toward same sex couples. Precious states (in her narration, but not to the characters), "they straight up lesbians" but follows this with "they still nice enough to let us stay in their home 'til I get situated… they so nice to me and Abdul" (Daniels, 2009). Precious sees the clear display of love these women have for each other, describing a brief interaction they share with "I guess this is how the peoples on TV feel at Christmas time" in an effort to relate to their happiness (Daniels, 2009).

Girl's Trip

Ryan and Lisa had both experienced marriage at some point in the storyline of the movie, Lisa recently divorced and Ryan assumingly to undergo a divorce by the conclusion of the story. Both Dina and Sasha have the least back-story regarding their romantic interests and relationships; it is made clear that both women are single and open in regards to sex with men.

Ultimately, each member of the Flossy Posse is presumably heterosexual, with no mention of any varying sexual identities. All of the women speak about their fantasies, desires and sexual involvements with men, but never speak on homosexual, bisexual or asexual experiences. Similar to *Soul Food*, the portrayals of romantic relationships are overwhelmingly heterosexual. Power and dominance, though a female centered movie, is often carried out by the men present, men are the reasoning behind the actions taken by the women- through a comical lens and at the expense of their humility.

Where are their Voices? **: Comparative Analysis Surrounding Speaking Roles**

As multiple surveys have concluded- white men dominate Hollywood movie roles. They also dominate the dialogue. In April of 2016, Hanah Anderson and Matt Daniels conducted a dialogue analysis that compares the frequency of speaking roles for men and women in Hollywood productions. Anderson and Daniels even considered age, finding that the amount of dialogue, by age-range, is completely opposite for women in relation to male counterparts. Dialogue available to women who are over 40 years old decrease substantially. For men, it's the exact opposite: there are *more roles* available to older actors. This interactive data breaks down all films' dialogue by cast member and gender- organized by the year in which the film premiered. When analyzing black films, specifically those present within my own research, I found an interesting pattern.

Soul Food had the most equal presence of both men and women in comparison to the other films within this study. I downloaded and examined the script of the film and compared

the amount of speaking roles by gender. What I found was that men had a total of 6,973 words spoken and women totaled 4,102 words. Though women received more screen time throughout the film, their lines were usually shorter than the men. Women totaled only a little more than 50% of their male counterparts. The abundance of screen time may be related back to the gaze and how the black female body is gazed upon- to fetishize, objectify and critically judge.

In the movie *Precious Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire* it was found that Precious herself, as the main character and who narrates the story, spoke 9,518 words; this is almost triple the amount any other character spoke (Anderson & Daniels, 2016). A vast majority of the characters in *Precious* are women; in fact, there are only two men with speaking roles out of the eleven characters. Jermaine, a man who Precious thinks she is in love with and often fantasizes about, only speaks 708 words totally (Anderson & Daniels, 2016). That is only approximately 13% of the words in which Precious herself speaks.

Shortly after the release of *Girl's Trip* in 2017, Johanna Barr of the New York Times published a piece that spoke to the disproportionate amount of dialogue given to white men in comparison to their counterparts. Barr points out that of 2016's top 100 films, 47 had no black female characters at all. She states:

> *"With "Wonder Woman" and "Girls Trip" riding a wave of critical and commercial success at the box office this summer, it can be tempting to think that diversity in Hollywood is on an upswing. But these high-profile examples are not a sign of greater representation in films over all. A new study from the University of Southern California's Viterbi School of Engineering found that films were likely to contain fewer women and minority characters than white men, and when they did appear, these characters were portrayed in ways that reinforced stereotypes. And female characters, in particular, were generally less central to the plot… They found that the language used by female characters tended to be more positive, emotional and related to family values, while the language used by male characters was more closely linked to achievement. African-American characters were more likely to use swear words"* (Barr, 2017).

As a film that revolves around the beauty of black womanhood, the use of language in *Girl's Trip* supports the claims in which Barr expands upon. Dialogue and the black actress is a study in and of itself, however the use of dialectal within this film stood out to me. Language plays a telling role in the distinguishing of characters within *Girl's Trip*. In comparing Ryan and Lisa's tone, lines and use of language with Sasha and Dina's- a clear variance can be drawn. Ryan, a successful entrepreneur, and Lisa, a nurse, are portrayed as the more "professional" women in the group. They are depicted as most financially responsible, most romantically desirable and, coincidentally, most connected to the norms of white America. Lisa and Ryan display these characteristics by caring themselves differently than the other two members of the Flossy Posse. Sasha and Dina tend to embody a different perception of black womanhood. Recalling the storyline created by the writers that both women are facing hardships in their careers and subsequently, their financial states, it is interesting to observe the similarities in their personalities in addition. By taking more space when talking (use of hand gestures, voice projection), carrying themselves more flamboyantly, never shying away from confrontation, and being less apologetic in general than Ryan and Lisa, Dina and Sasha embrace their strengths as black women with rights to be angry at corporate white America- resisting in the ways in which they carry themselves. While Dina and Sasha utilize Black Vernacular, Lisa and Ryan speak in American English. This utility of Black English Vernacular, commonly referred to as Ebonics, and American English bring black audiences watching the movie together in a sense- despite background and demographics, by acknowledging that black people in society do not all speak one way or the other- there are diverse dialectics within the community; one is no better or worse than the other.

CONCLUSION

Blackface Minstrelsy is no longer required to reiterate destructive images of black people. Each film examined in this study was directed and/ or produced by black people- all of the directors happen to be men. As black filmmakers reiterate a damaging narrative about black women, how should we expect white Hollywood to create progressive commentaries? These two-dimensional views of black women on screen are a disservice to black women in the real world. Images that have been repeated are derogatory and directly affect how society views, values, and ultimately treat, black woman and their livelihood.

In the portrayal of family life, black actresses likely carry the burden of "keeping everyone together"- be it the role of the matriarch, the "problem solver" or "decision maker". Contrastingly, they may also represent the problem itself. In social class, black women use dress and hair as tools to display their money, or lack thereof. This principle of consumerism sends a message that material items play an important role in how black women care for themselves, a surface level ideal that ignores the significance of real self-worth and self-acceptance. The constant presentation of heteronormative roles in black film show the viewer two things- straight women "need" men in order to find romantic successes and anything outside of being attracted to the opposite sex is insignificant, goes unnoticed and is virtually invisible.

The observations surrounding speaking roles and the use of language further supports my hypothesis- women's voices are proven less important to story lines unless a majority of the cast is female. When equally split, such as the cast of *Soul Food*, male performers hold a majority of the speaking roles. The use of language to reiterate stereotypes is very clear in *Girl's Trip*.

There is no one-way to embody black womanhood, however when damning language is used for comical purpose, the black woman is viewed as only a spectacle for amusement.

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