African American women in the news: Gender, race and class in journalism

Marian Meyers
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The representations of African American women are scattered across the multimedia landscapes of news and journalism. In her book, *African American Women in the News: Gender, Race and Class in Journalism*, Marian Meyers argues that these subjects are mostly hidden or portrayed in largely unflattering ways. Overall, this is an ambitious work. However, Myers uses Black feminist theory, which explicates intersectionality as a conceptual foundation for her work.

Meyers lays the groundwork for her study in the first chapter, where she introduces the two broad research questions that animate her investigation: “…(1) how are African American women portrayed in the news; and (2) how does this coverage reflect intersectionality…” (p. 2). Meyers explores these questions in what she describes as “six discrete studies” (p. 10) focusing on the portrayals of African American women in varied news and information frameworks. These include evening newscasts from local network affiliated stations in Atlanta, evening newscasts from national entities CNN and Fox; YouTube videos featuring Michelle Obama, including ones provided by the White House about the First Lady’s activities; print news coverage about prominent African American evangelist Juanita Bynum; coverage about the violence toward women at an annual college-student-aged event, Freaknik; and a feature series about crack-addicted mothers in *The Atlantic Journal-Constitution*. The last chapter summarizes these analyses with a call-to-action to continue these explorations about race, gender, and class.

Each chapter reads like a separate study, connected by a shared topical focus on African American women and common methodological approaches. This construction has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, readers can immerse themselves in one of the chapters, ignore the rest, and still come away with an understanding of the author’s position on how the African American female subjects of her analyses are marginalized and misrepresented. At the same time, a reading of all the cases, due to their very broad shifts in topics and media, can present a disjointed argument for the same points.

The conceptual frameworks used to illuminate African American stereotypes owe much to the foundational work of Donald Bogle (*Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*, 2001) and Jacqueline Bobo (*Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, 2001). These scholars, although not directly cited nor referenced in Meyer’s work, identified categories of stereotyped media.
representations of African Americans in film, from which later theorists drew. Because of their work, such specific constructs identifying the hypersexualized Black female as a “Jezebel,” or the desexualized and over solicitous caretaker as a “Mammy,” had emerged as persistent themes in cinematic portrayals. Still, despite this omission, Meyers rightly credits Black feminist writers, such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Melissa Harris-Perry, for extending critical thought about the ways race, gender, class, and society intersect.

Barometers for measuring these portrayals exist within media representations across multiple genres, and readily serve as exemplars in such scholarly work. For instance, Collins references portrayals as divergent as the rap video lyrics and performances of Missy Elliott, to the soft comedic performance of Phylicia Rashad as Clair Huxtable in *The Cosby Show*, as images on the continuum of Black gender, sexuality, and class. From such well-known examples taken from popular culture, scholars have theorized how the entertainment realms have influenced real life. Here is where Meyers’ work can be particularly valuable, in that she develops a basis for interpreting the “real” events covered in newscasts as narratives perpetuating some of these same stereotypes. Meyers’ analyses consider these constructs, while extending their salience with a reflection of newer stereotypes of the “Powerful Black Bitch” and the “Black lady” (p. 142).

This is not necessarily an easy transition, nor an intuitive one, if we only consider journalism’s stories as discrete and unconnected narratives. Research about media stereotypes of African American women have been largely drawn from, and are the most developed, in the literature about film and television portrayals. Familiar archetypes that defined African American women’s roles and depictions in entertainment media emerged. In *African American Women in the News*, Meyers uses these categories as standards against which she measures how African American women are framed in television news reports. It may seem incongruous to make comparisons between the fictional characters actors have portrayed and the realistic events of everyday newscasts. But this is why the approach of narrative analysis can be illuminating by showing the preponderance of such storylines. For example, Meyers illustrates how news coverage of violence against African American women during the annual “Freaknik” event deflected focus on the activities to support a reading that the “…Jezebels’ lewd conduct links them to the bad behavior and moral lapses associated with Black women and poverty” (p. 114). Even when the facts reveal that some of these women are college students and from middle-class backgrounds, stories about them were framed to suggest to some viewers that race trumps all as a reductive stereotype. As Meyers suggests, these news stories, as a result of their framing and repetition, may convince some viewers that “…even a college education is not sufficient to dampen the unrestrained hypersexuality of Black women” (p. 115). In another example of her distinctive reading of news texts, Meyers analyzes how differently Bynum—the victim of domestic abuse—was covered by media targeting White audiences versus ethnic
media targeting Black audiences. Here, Meyers’ investigation suggests that the Black press undermined “… the seriousness of domestic violence, placing it on a voyeuristic par with details and criticisms of celebrities’ lives” (p. 96).

Scholarly work by Teun van Dijk (1988) and Stuart Hall (2003) linked ideologies with media texts, although few scholars have zoomed in with such specificity on a target population as does Meyers. In *African American Women in the News*, the author makes a compelling argument that *News as Discourse* deserves a separate and distinct context for examining the ways in which African American women are depicted. Her choice of qualitative methodologies supports this intent, as her interpretations lean heavily upon narrative analysis, sometimes with a nod toward discourse analyses. Meyers also acknowledges the use of a constant comparative method that emphasizes sifting through massive amounts of texts, images, and transcripts in order to identify recurring patterns. None of these cases delve deeply into a substantive structural analysis of how language is used to frame these subjects, in terms of specific words, terms, “memes,” and phrases. Still, the absence of these constructions makes the content more accessible to a broader array of readers.

While Meyers is careful not to invite, at least overtly, the generalization of her work to the broader newstream, the messages are mixed. One issue is that her case studies are all, save one, drawn from Atlanta-based events and media. Without any explicit mention of the particular demographics in this major city from which much of this book’s data is acquired (i.e., African Americans comprise 54% of Atlanta’s population, according to the 2010 census), the implicit suggestion is that these depictions are universal ones. Another issue is the slippery realm of media definition. For instance, one chapter analyzes YouTube videos about Michelle Obama, but when the content relies heavily upon clips produced by the White House, or taken during Mrs. Obama’s public speaking events, can this be considered “news” or should it be recognized as publicity?

Also, in the chapter about Juanita Bynum, the distinctions between local and national media seemed ill-defined in an age where technology has erased the geographic barriers that once seemed fundamental to these traditional distinctions between “national” and “local” audiences and topics.

But these are small concerns when placed against the significance of her conceptual contributions, ones that argue for more research on the place of intersectionality within the news. Meyers’ vision for *African American Women in the News* is ambitious, reflected in both the book’s title and stated agenda. And, as to the specific subjects of this book, African American women, Meyers has established in this slim volume a much-needed call to “… pull African American women from the margins to the center of study” (p. 145) when it comes to reading the discourse of news, journalism, and the reporting of our lives.

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References


