Books

Turning the Tables: Black Women's Representation in Television

BY ALEXANDRIA CUNNINGHAM

Imani M. Cheers, *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses*. (Focus on Television Studies.) Routledge, 2017. 122 pp. notes. bibl. index. $70.00, ISBN 978-1138201644; ebook also available; paper edition forthcoming.

Imani M. Cheers, who in 2019 became the first African American woman to be promoted from assistant to associate professor at George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs, considers how historical stereotypes such as the mammy, jezebel, sapphire, and tragic mulatto can be altered and reimagined when Black women are in creative control of their own images and television representations.

Engaging such fields as communication studies, film and television studies, and Black feminist studies, Cheers emphasizes how Black women on both sides of the screen are breaking barriers by taking control of their image and voice (p. 6). Across four chapters, she tells a story behind the statistics about the complexity of inclusivity, representation, and the power of audience in driving content (p. 8). She prioritizes intersectional feminist analyses of race, class, gender, and lived experience, with Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) and *Black Sexual Politics* (2005) at this text's center. Cheers contends that an increase of Black women in media ownership and creative executive roles over 35 years (1981–2016) was a catalyst for shifts in Black women's television representations that paralleled social changes in Black American women's lives from 1950 to 2016.

In the first two chapters, Cheers points out that media ownership fails to wholly depict the relationship between Black female TV producers and writers, their programs (and characters), and diverse audience engagement (pp. 12–13). By introducing mass media conglomerates pioneered by Black women such as Catherine L. Hughes (Radio/TV One), Debra L. Lee (BET Networks), and Oprah Winfrey (OWN), Cheers unsettles an assumption of exclusive white-male media ownership and creative influence (p. 10). Beginning with largely Black-cast sitcoms in the 1970s, Cheers traces diverse representations of Black womanhood as intimately tied to Black women's access to creative control over imagery, language, and community (p. 17). Multidimensionality is necessary for both creatives and characters. Furthermore, intricate networks and relationships between Black female creatives facilitate unique opportunities across shows such as *A Different World*, *Living Single*, *Girlfriends*, and *Insecure* to begin to reimagine historical stereotypes in their respective eras. To quote Cheers,

> That type of bond between Black women creatives and artists has led to more collaborations in video, television and film…a concerted effort by Black women in creative control to employ other Black women in particular, and women of color in general, on their creative teams. (p. 20)

Cheers traces diverse representations of Black womanhood as intimately tied to Black women's access to creative control over imagery, language, and community.

In Chapter 3, Cheers explores the salient complexity of the jezebel and the mistress. Nonmarried Black women have been celebrated since the early 1970s on shows such as *Julia*, *Good Times*, and *227* (p. 50), where "mistress" evoked a confident woman with authority, ownership, and options, not compromised by lack of a husband (p. 51). By the 1980s, imagery of Black female sexuality shifted in ways that aligned with building network empires. By the mid-2000s, networks such as MTV and VH1 sidelined their music video roots and became venues for reality television, with several shows created by largely white creative teams (p. 58). Reality TV introduced an image of Black women as loud, aggressive, angry, ratchet mistresses (p. 50). For example, Mona Scott-Young's *Love & Hip Hop* franchise is continually glorifying violent, ratchet behavior (p. 60). Cheers reads Scott-Young and Mariah Huq's *Married to Medicine* as a site of a shifting visual

culture for Black women because of these women's limitless creative control and range of representation, both stereotypical and reality inspired.

Cheers concludes by considering Black women who made leaps of faith to become constantly evolving storytellers, creatives, and performers. Notably, she emphasizes that opportunity, often more than formal education and training, makes the difference in these women's lives and careers. Quite literally, Black female creatives bring other Black women and women of color through each generation within the industry writ large. "Skill, preparation, talent and integrity are critical," Cheers explains, "but without usually another Black woman in a position of hiring power, these women might have not been able to share their talent with the world" (p. 92).

Cheers indicates that a longstanding challenge for archives of Black cultural life is the lack of an exhaustive list of Black women in Hollywood. From the absence of a general database to a dearth of robust online encyclopedia pages, there is a void in institutional memory where this legacy should be gathered (p. 90). Her questions about audience, community, and memory leave a lasting impression. Compellingly, she positions social media — in the absence of mass recognition and institutional archives — as a repository for the lifework of these Black women.

As a resource for women and gender studies, this text will draw readers in with its accessible language and broad, patient review of mass media culture. Cheers employs Black television favorites as diverse examples of America's lexicon and imagery for Black female sexuality. She advances a feminist quest to consider how Black women are a force — an evolving, agential force — in their own media representations. Boldly, she centers a powerful influence radiating from everyday women desiring to see themselves.

[Alexandria Cunningham, M.A., is a doctoral student in African and African diaspora studies at the University of Texas at Austin and a John Money Fellow at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Her research explores Black women's sexual cultures through dance, including burlesque, striptease, and pole dance, in digital and material spaces.]

Miriam Greenwald