



Commentary

The Power of a Narrative: Black Sapphic Relationships in Mainstream Television and Film

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Abstract

The following essay explores the transformative power of Black sapphic narratives in mainstream television and film. These narratives, often marginalized or misrepresented, possess the unique ability to challenge societal norms, foster inclusive representations, and promote intersectional understanding. By centering the experiences of queer Black women, these stories disrupt dominant heteronormative and Eurocentric perspectives, redefining cultural narratives and empowering marginalized voices. This analysis presents ways that such representations serve as a catalyst for imagining new ways of being, both personally and politically, for challenging the status quo, and paving the way for more equitable and diverse storytelling. Ultimately, this work will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the potential of Black sapphic narratives in shaping societal perceptions and empowering marginalized communities within and beyond the media landscape to break free of

the limitations imposed on us by systems that were not designed to foster our success and joy.

Keywords

queer politics, Black sapphic, storytelling, Black feminism, tv and film

Introduction

Television and film have too few representations of Black women's queer relationships. Current broadcasts represent a noticeable shift towards more inclusive storytelling, which has introduced audiences to diverse queer experiences and identities. But, more can be done. This essay argues that Black sapphic¹ narratives in mainstream television and film are a powerful vehicle for challenging societal norms, fostering representations, and promoting intersectional understanding. These narratives can help us empower marginalized voices within and beyond the media landscape. To that end, this essay is also a call to action for storytellers, especially those with the power to produce stories that center queer Black women. We all we got, sistren! Let us create the Black sapphic stories we need, desire, and deserve.

I am an elder millennial raised on pop culture and '90s R&B. I went to bed every night wearing my Sony Walkman to listen to Quiet Storm radio. I watched Whitley and Dwayne fall in love on *A Different World*, and I wanted that. When I grew up, I hoped that my romances would look and feel like '90s R&B. I hoped that they would be reminiscent of *Beverly Hills, 90210*'s Brenda (or Kelly) and Dylan; *Martin*'s Gina and Martin; *Saved by the Bell*'s Kelly and Zack; and *Brown Sugar*'s Syd and Dre. I came of age as a Black queer woman in the late '90s and early 2000s and learned quickly that Black lesbians and Black queer women did not get *90210*-level exposure. I could not search any movie channel nor arrive, on a whim, at a movie theater to watch a thriller, rom-com, buddy-comedy, or drama where:

1. a Black lesbian was the lead;
2. a Black lesbian lead had a Black woman partner; or

3. the film's backbone was not a trauma trope.

Offerings were slim where all three of these elements were true.

The Apple TV+ documentary series, *Visible: Out on Television* (2020), addresses this phenomenon. In episode two, "Television as a Tool," veteran actor, Marsha Warfield, discusses the landscape for LGBTQ representation on television in the 1970s and notes, "It's hard to talk about this kind of stuff without stressing just how invisible gay people were. Invisibility led to homophobia being standard..." I would add to Warfield's observation that invisibility was also its own punishment. To be invisible is to be absent and insignificant. To be invisible is to be nothing; no one, ever, must grapple with nothingness, make space for it, or be changed by it. Temin and Dahl (2017) argue that "[w]ithout the agony of historical memory, liberal societies slide into a politics of national forgetting, where the innocence of the present is affirmed through a disavowal of the past." (p. 905) When a handful of queer characters appear on television, and disgruntled viewers respond claiming that *they* are shoving a gay agenda down *our* throats, and that *everything* is gay nowadays, those viewers exemplify this sentiment. They evince queer people's absence from mainstream memory.

Indeed, queer people and even Black lesbians are more visible today compared to half a century ago. Some intersections, however, still need to be examined in film. While the *Visible* docuseries does a fantastic job of tracing the chronology of queer and trans visibility on television, it does not grapple, much at all, with the underrepresentation of LGBTQ people of color. Thoughtful commentators from the docuseries make note of the absence of lesbians in LGBTQ television origins; commentators refer to White lesbians, however. For Black girls like me who were coming of age, queer in the Deep South, what representation of Black queerness was there to see?

I filled my cup with Showtime's *The L Word* (2004), via Karen's fleeting bisexuality on *Will and Grace* (1998-2020), and by stumbling across under-the-radar gems like Patrik Ian-Polk's *Noah's Arc* (2005) and Cheryl Dunye's second film, *Stranger Inside* (2001). *Noah's Arc* was *Sex in the City* for gay Black men, and *Stranger Inside* was a mother-daughter drama set in a women's prison. The part of me that longed to see a women-loving-women (WLW) romance like Whitley and Dwayne's would not see

it in any of the television shows that aired at the time. Black lesbians were, at first, mostly absent from media representation. When they did show up on camera, depictions of Black lesbian love and sexuality were centered around coming out stories or narratives about queer trauma.

In 2017, I watched Lena Waithe’s Emmy-winning “Thanksgiving” episode of *Master of None* (2015) on Netflix, and something clicked into place for me. When Denise (played by Lena Waithe) comes out to her mother, Catherine (played by Angela Bassett), Catherine reminds Denise that life as a Black woman is hard enough. Being gay adds another layer of difficulty. What Catherine does not consider at that moment is that if she rejects Denise, *Catherine* will make it hard for Denise, exponentially more so. Catherine is not entirely comfortable with Denise’s queerness at the beginning, but the beauty in this episode is that Catherine softens in her own way. This episode is an important contribution to Black queer narratives; Lena Waithe was able to co-write a television episode where a Black mother evolves to embrace her masculine-presenting (or masc-presenting²) Black lesbian daughter, in a *comedy* series, at that.

As the *Visible* documentary noted, past filmmakers often portrayed lesbians, particularly masc-centered or butch³ lesbians, as tragic and dangerous, and frequently homicidal. For this reason, that message in “Thanksgiving” was a breath of fresh air. Waithe proved that it was possible to portray Black lesbian identity without using a liberating- but also devastating arc toward a happy(ish) ending. As *Master of None’s* audience, we did not have to watch Denise and Catherine be torn apart emotionally to appreciate their coming together by the end. Waithe became the first Black woman and first Black lesbian to win an Emmy for Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series. From the moment I watched that episode, I understood more deeply the power of Black queer women’s visibility.

Waithe’s work inspired me to expand my academic identity to include the titles of storyteller and filmmaker. Patricia Hill Collins’s chapter, “The Power of Self-Definition” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), is my lighthouse on this journey. This chapter guides my work and compels me to view the telling of Black women’s queer stories as a queer act and, therefore, an act of resistance and a tool for empowerment. I leaned into storytelling and including underrepresented narratives in my classrooms, too. The

“Thanksgiving” episode is a fixture in my Discovery Diversity: LGBTQ Representation in Media course. Because of Waithe’s narrative choices in “Thanksgiving” and later in *Master of None*’s third season (which was all about Denise’s marital challenges), my students consume a queer and sapphic narrative that allows them to see family, conflict, and acceptance differently from the more widespread media depictions of Black lesbian life. Exposure to this perspective is significant for my students.

Black Feminism and the Radical Potential of Consuming Black Women’s Queerness

In “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” (1997), Cathy J. Cohen argues that what is truly radical about queerness is its ability to challenge dominant norms. Delivering remarks on a Black Women Writers and Feminism panel at the Black Writers’ Conference, June Jordan (1978) declares, “[t]he love growing out of my quest for self-love, self-respect and self-determination must be something one can verify in the ways I present myself to others, the ways I approach people different from myself...” (p. 175) According to Nash (2011), Black Feminism’s love politics is not new. In its theoretical framing, social justice is a byproduct of self-love and love for Black communities.

Jordan’s remarks position love as more profound than a feeling; it is a duty that implores us to see others’ differences and love them all the same. Audre Lorde (1984) provides the language of *the erotic* to help us understand how knowing oneself, and seeking, feeling, and sharing personal joys are a superpower. Rounding out this Black feminist trifecta, bell hooks (1994) writes about love as a spiritual and political imperative. She notes, “Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political and radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination....” (p. 243) Black feminism’s theoretical grounding makes room to explore Black women’s love as a moral, spiritual, and political imperative. These Black Feminist writers provide scaffolding for queerness, as related to sexuality, and beyond, to inform how we can challenge dominant systems.

A queer politic would ask, then: How might life look if the experiences and perspectives of people with marginalized identities were centered? A sapphic politic

might take this query further – How would society function if we decentered maleness? How could we build coalitions around shared desires for partnership, family, community, and sex without patriarchy? Black women’s queer sexualities expand that conversation beyond the political component of queerness and into its human component, too. What would be the lessons for building coalitions that transform harmful systems into helpful ones? Our shared interests and the commonness of our lives, even among our infinitely diverse human identities, is a connective tissue that builds coalitions. In acknowledging differences, we can still share values. Lorde would remind us that, despite our differences, the coalitions we form are not coincidental. Following our erotic, our innate passions and gut instincts, like minds are drawn to each other.

The Queer Self, Visibility, and the Collective

According to David Coon (2011), storytelling not only helps us form communities, but it also makes queer and sapphic communities visible and accessible. Seeing queer Black women in the fullness of their existence is vital. And, since sapphic stories typically decenter men, this arena is new ground for mainstream cinematic storytelling. Sapphic narratives, created from the intersections of women’s outside-in identities, represent opportunities to portray new ways of being and understanding about what living in our world is like. Through them, we also can explore the extent to which racist, patriarchal, and heterosexist norms endure, even when whiteness, maleness, and straightness are not the central subject.

The ways that the visibility of Black sapphic relationships shapes cultural constructions of *how to be* is as important as how those relationships challenge political institutions. None of us, and none of our experiences, exist exclusively for advancing social justice and fighting oppressive systems. To be sure, justice is a noble and worthwhile pursuit. And, sometimes, queer sexuality is meant for joyfulness and vibrancy. It is indulgent and selfish. I crave more stories about sapphic Black women in love and lust, and anger on my television, because those experiences are an extension of our humanity, our relatability. In *Waiting to Exhale* (Whitaker, 1995), when Bernadine fills her husband’s fancy car with his fancy suits and shoes, douses it in lighter fluid, and flicks a lit cigarette to send it all up in flames, she united, in

shared fury, millions of women who had felt betrayed by their husbands. She likely empowered them, too.

Of Black feminist perspectives on intimacy, Audre Lorde (1984) starts with the self and asserts that erotic power is a bridge to more meaningful connections. Lorde challenges narratives that diminish the strength that emerges from this “deeply female and spiritual plane” (p. 87). She reminds us that there is power in our “unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (p. 87) and that “[i]n order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change” (pp. 87-88). Patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism do that in assigning social privilege to one of many human attributes. Black lesbian and Black queer women’s lives stand in opposition to these systems in their audacity to exist in public. Lorde (1984) writes:

...the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.... Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered. (p.88)

Investing in understanding the depth of one’s feelings empowers her to choose a life, to choose work, and to choose communities that feed her. Through that agency, anything—everything—is possible. Further, surely Black sapphics have a Bernadine story. Imagine if Bernadine’s vigilantism was sparked because she was spurned by a Black wife who had taken up with a White woman partner. I delight in the single-gender nature of it all, and am intrigued by how a switch in gender changes (or perhaps does not change) conversations about family, infidelity, and race politics.

Black feminist scholars acknowledge the power (and limits) of women’s sexuality. Some focus their work on the broader goals of dismantling the oppressive systems mentioned earlier. I understand that choice. And, I raise that Black sapphic stories create opportunities to reveal what we miss when we look to the margins but only see the political utility of queer lives. I am all in to examine, for example, what happens when we decenter maleness and heterosexuality in our Black politics, and probe through Black sapphic relationships, what else masculinity can look like.

Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Gladys Bentley were three blues singers during the Harlem Renaissance. Their music demonstrates how queer representations in art could wield culture as an economic and social power. Emma Chen's article, "Black Face, Queer Space: The Influence of Black Lesbian & Transgender Blues Women of the Harlem Renaissance on Emerging Queer Communities" (2016), quotes Angela Y. Davis, who argues in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998) that "[t]he blues woman openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love" (p. 22). Most of the queer blues women were femme-presenting, but Gladys Bentley was a singular edition, one of a kind. She was a plus-sized, dark-skinned stud⁴ who wore a top hat and tuxedo when she performed. And, for a time, she was a star. Bentley reportedly married a White woman in New Jersey in 1931 (Niven, 2015).

Bentley was born in 1907, and she came of age at a time fraught for people whose identities pushed outside the standard binaries; this period shaped Bentley's account of how she became queer and was cured of it. Unfortunately, she did not have a *Gladys Bentley* to help her understand that her sexuality could be fluid, but it was not an illness from which she needed to be cured. Black lesbian (and Black masculine-of-center lesbian) visibility grew, ironically, partly because of her. Fortunately, because of her, I had a Gladys Bentley to look to. Albeit late, but this was still progress.

As with all storytelling, anyone can contribute narratives that expand Black masculinities and highlight Black women's radical sapphic love. However, in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passion Politics* (2000), bell hooks acknowledges that "[e]ven if there were exceptional straight women who theoretically understood that one could be utterly fulfilled without the approval of men, without male erotic affirmation, they did not bring to the movement the lived experience of this belief." (p. 95). To be sure, some Black lesbians and queer women adopt heterosexist (and White supremacist) norms, perpetuating the same behaviors that marginalize them. hooks makes a distinction in this regard between *woman-identified* and *man-identified* women. Black lesbians and queer women are not theoreticians about those questions I posed previously. They live the answers. Their stories are ripe for the telling.

Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* is the Black Sapphic Cinematic Vanguard

Television and film are powerful socialization tools that can expand our imaginations about life's possibilities. They build communities around beloved characters who welcome audiences into their worlds. A character's journey in a movie, television season, or series, can challenge, even shift, perceptions about what we fear or that with which we are unfamiliar. It excites me to consider what I might see if broadcast media invested in more diverse content that does not center heteronormativity in familial relationships or portray Black queerness in a primarily femme male context.

When queer Black women are visible, the familiar characters are femmes, who are easily digestible for a male gaze, or they are mascs or studs in roles with limited emotional range. I do not know how much writers, directors, or producers influence final casting decisions. But, Black women partnered with non-Black female romantic interests are portrayed frequently and that just feels suspect. There are many nuances to Black women's queer sexuality and identity. I sometimes wonder, though, how these portrayals can overshadow the unique experiences and identities of Black lesbians. I worry about how the complexities of Black sapphic culture and identity are simplified, misrepresented, or erased.

Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) cleverly tackles queer Black women's cinematic visibility and representation. The film is the first feature film written and directed by a Black lesbian to tell the story of a Black lesbian. The protagonist, Cheryl, is a filmmaker working in a video store with her Black lesbian best friend, Tamara. After watching an old Hollywood movie that credits a Black actress only as "The Watermelon Woman," Cheryl resolves to make a documentary about old Hollywood's invisible Black actresses. Through her initial interviews, she discovers that the actress's name is Fae Richardson, a lesbian who performed in the local clubs back in the day. *The Watermelon Woman* succeeds in exploring two layers of Black women's queer visibility. Simultaneously, we become aware of their absence in cinematic history, while also witnessing in contemporary times, the complexities of a single Black lesbian life.

According to Matt Richardson (2011), who appreciates Dunye's documentary-style approach to Cheryl's story and to the project itself, the film "serves as an archive of black queer life, bring-ing attention to the documentary form

as a site of retelling the stories of black communities and historical events from a black lesbian perspective.” (p. 101). The rub is that Cheryl’s primary love interest in the film is Diana, a White woman. This relationship tests Cheryl and Tamara’s friendship. Cheryl and Dana’s relationship embodies the tension that comes with being the “first” Black lesbian lead in a film. Does a Black lesbian screenwriter, director, and filmmaker owe Black sapphic audiences romantic relationships between *Black* lesbians? Or, can artists just create?

Despite what Cheryl’s character represents, she has every right to date whoever she chooses. The truth is, though, she must also contend that what one has an individual right to sometimes conflicts with what a community expects of or wants from her. In this way, Cheryl’s personal sapphic journey eventually overlaps with her filmmaking one. The power of Whiteness had erased Fae from history. Cheryl’s documentary is about Black women because, she says, “our stories have never been told.” The film’s plot twist is that Fae Richardson was never real. Cheryl invented her to emphasize that, as an artist, you must sometimes create your own history. In the end, Cheryl comes to terms with the racialized dynamics of her relationship with Diana.

The Watermelon Woman is excellent at confronting the intersectional complexities of Black lesbian identity. While Cheryl’s romantic choices are personal, they are not exclusively personal because she is Black. To be Black in any context is to be political. This distinction matters for how she will use her power to tell a Black sapphic story. June Walker, fake-Fae’s longtime partner, issues the charge to Cheryl to be intentional as a storyteller because the “black queer family has a primary responsibility to each other, to represent, document, and remember our history” (p. 110). Both Dunye and Cheryl meet June’s charge.

The Liberatory Nature of Black Women Loving Black Women

Lena Waithe’s work with *The Chi* (2018), *Twenties* (2020), and *Master of None* (2017) holds space for the kind of free-wheeling representations of Black lesbian sexuality I love. *The Chi*’s Nina and Dre; *Twenties*’s Hattie, Idina, and Ida B.; and *Master of None*’s Denise treat audiences to nuanced and layered Black sapphic narratives. These characters have been messy and flawed, sometimes because of their own terrible choices. I find the regularity of their problems refreshing. In *The Watermelon Woman*,

Dunye uses her creative agency to tell a good story and interrogate questions of race, power, and sexuality. Waithe also uses her energy to tell those kinds of stories, and to put cinematic points on the board for Black lesbians.

I have contemplated what is empowering about seeing Black women loving each other romantically and attending to each other sexually on screen. In “Total Bliss: Lesbianism and Feminism,” chapter five of *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000), hooks writes that:

We will never know how many millions of women stay in relationships with dominating sexist males simply because they cannot imagine a life where they can be happy without men.... If any female feels she needs anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agency. Lesbian women inspired me ... to claim the space of my own self-definition. (p. 95)

This is it. Living and loving as a Black lesbian or queer woman is, well, can be, in direct contravention of systems meant to limit our choices and disempower us. More frequent visibility of Black sapphic relationships in television and film has the power to confront stereotypes about Black lesbians and queer women. It allows us to understand better how power sits at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality because Black lesbians and queer women operate outside of all three boxes.

Black sapphic visibility and storytelling have exciting potential to challenge rather than accede to heterosexist norms. Disruption is its Africana queer currency and its value to social justice. People who live with dominant identities (*e.g.*, male, White, cis, heterosexual) have gaps in their perceptions of social challenges and, thus, in their interventions for solutions. Television and film are ubiquitous mediums with access to billions of people, and Black sapphic stories give people something new to see. Watching Black sapphics navigate everyday experiences prompts critical discussions about race, gender, and sexuality and the power dynamics that exist within and outside Black communities. An end goal for increased visibility of Black sapphic identity is more inclusive, imaginative, and sustainable approaches to social justice.

Notes

¹ Broadly, “queer” is used to describe non-dominant identities and ideas. In this essay, both “queer” and “sapphic” are used to describe non-dominant romantic or sexual relationships, particularly relationships between women.

² The term “masc” refers to cis-gender lesbians who are masculine-presenting, or masculine-of-center in their gender expression. This term is *not* the same as “trans-masculine,” which refers to persons who are transgender and masculine-of-center.

³ “Butch” is a term commonly used to refer to White masc-centered lesbians.

⁴ “Stud” is a term used to describe Black masc-of-center lesbians. The DMV (DC, Maryland, and Virginia metropolitan area) added “dom,” and the Northeast (New York region) added “Aggressives” or “AGs” to the lexicon. These terms, and many others used in the LGBTQ community are region-specific continue to evolve.

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