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Introduction: Media Studies has Ninety-Nine Problems…But Tyler Perry Ain't One of Them?

TreaAndrea Russworm
INTRODUCTION

Media Studies Has Ninety-Nine Problems . . .
But Tyler Perry Ain’t One of Them?

—TreaAndrea M. Russworm

My Problem(s) with Tyler Perry

I have complicated feelings about Tyler Perry. He makes me feel some kind of way, or as my students would say, I have “feels” on the matter. In fact, for a long while, whenever I mentioned to anyone (from colleagues to cab drivers to my mother) that I was working on this collection, I always found some way to distance my intellectual labor on the project from a positive endorsement of Perry’s films and television shows. I’d say: “Yes. Tyler Perry. We’re editing a book on him but that doesn’t mean I like his stuff. I am so not a fan. I don’t drink the Kool-Aid.” In casual social spaces, I have used much stronger language to frame my resistance to Perry’s oeuvre, and I’m not afraid to begin this collection of critical essays by repeating what I have so often said to others: I have hated every Tyler Perry movie I have ever seen (my personal viewing total is thirteen Perry-directed films and videos . . . and counting). I have stressed to anyone who broached the subject with me that every moment of watching these films has been masochistic, barely endurable. I have especially hated the fact that Tyler Perry keeps making films.

I can also say that while working on this project my personal wave of “feels,” that affective torrent of powerful emotions that Tyler Perry’s work seems to evoke in fans and critics alike, has shifted enough for me to now say this: I forgive Tyler Perry. I forgive him, Whoopi Goldberg, and Macy Gray for mangling Ntozake Shange’s For Colored Girls (2010). I forgive Perry for Madea’s Family Reunion (2006), Madea Goes to Jail
(2009), Madea’s Big Happy Family (2011), and really, because there are too many Madea films to list here, I forgive him for any feature or animated film where he dons a dress and fat suit and masquerades as his signature Black female matriarch, Madea. There is room enough in my heart to forgive Tyler Perry for those weekly email reflections that his avid fans never fail to forward to me—you know, the messages where he shares with his supporters lengthy reflections about what God has told him lately. Finally, even though I like his television shows significantly less than I like Madea, I also forgive Tyler Perry for creating each of those shows, particularly the dreadful neo-minstrel sitcom Meet the Browns (TBS, 2009–12). Mostly, though, I forgive Tyler Perry for not making Black popular culture for me.

Skeptics and critics like me are a perfect and necessary audience for From Madea to Media Mogul: Theorizing Tyler Perry. Simply put, this book is not about drinking—or drankin’—the Kool-Aid or about convincing anyone to appreciate and enjoy Perry’s stage plays, films, or television shows. This book does, however, aim to speak to a critical academic and wider audience that has failed to take this aspect of Black popular culture seriously, an audience that struggles to see beyond our own “feels” and blind spots, grievances and resistances, biases and problems with mainstream Black popular culture. To be clear, while there might be many “problems” when it comes to Perry’s work, like his oft-discussed problems representing Black women or the problems of identification he creates for viewers who wish to see more positive imagery, with this collection we contend that one of the main problems with Tyler Perry has less to do with Perry and more to do with the limited critical attention he has garnered.

On “Disreputable” Black Objects and the Burdens of Representation

With my personal confessions about Tyler Perry now out in the open, it bears sharing how, given my obvious problems with his work, I nonetheless came to coedit this book with Karen M. Bowdre and Samantha N. Sheppard. First, some context about Perry’s career is in order.

For over a decade, Tyler Perry, who is certainly best known for his drag performances as Madea, the self-proclaimed “mad Black woman”
who is not afraid to brandish a gun or a scalding pot of grits in defense of herself and others, has been a lightning rod for both criticism and praise. Since his meteoric rise to fame, just as many blogs and popular headlines have led with something akin to “In Defense of Tyler Perry,” “The Problem with Perry,” or “Why Tyler Perry Hates Black Women” (or “Black Men,” or “Black People” in general). Is this commercially successful African American actor, director, screenwriter, playwright, and producer “malt liquor for the masses,” the Devil, an embarrassment to the race, or a genius who has directed the most culturally significant American melodramas since Douglas Sirk? Are his films and television shows even melodramas, or are they conservative Christian diatribes, cheeky camp, or social satires? Do Perry’s flattened narratives and character tropes irresponsibly collapse important social discourses into one-dimensional tales that affirm the notion of a “post-racial” society, or is it, as a recent Esquire article touted, that Tyler Perry is better than the “new Obama” because his films give us one of the only occasions to talk openly about race and gender, class and stereotype, in a bipartisan, so-called “post-racial” American political climate?

Whether or not we personally love or hate his productions, one thing is clear: Tyler Perry is not going anywhere. He has developed lucrative film and television partnerships with Lionsgate, TBS, and Oprah, and his films have grossed far more than any other Black filmmaker in history, including more critically acclaimed Black directors like Spike Lee, Cheryl Dunye, Kasi Lemmons, and John Singleton. While some of his films have sparked public controversies about aesthetics and respectability (or what some have described as the retrogressive and embarrassing nature of his work), Perry’s influence in contemporary media culture is by now undeniable. For instance, prior to his film career, Perry generated an estimated $150 million a year by selling tickets, video recordings, and merchandise related to his popular stage performances. He has gone on to direct, produce, or star in at least one film a year since his theatre days, and his role in the television industry is increasing at a comparable rate, making him one of the most prolific television producers for Black audiences in television history. As a result of these efforts, Perry is now at the center of an influential media empire and production studio (Tyler Perry Studios) that has released over twenty commercially successful films and videos that all thematically pair representations of
Black identity with tales of betrayal, morality, incest, domestic violence, and trauma.

He has been a polarizing figure to say the least, and while there has been a lot of public rumination about the merits of his work, few opportunities have existed to examine his image and productions in scholarly venues. Before editing this collection, we were each curious about Perry's work and impact to varying degrees, but we soon discovered that it could be challenging to create a rich critical dialogue about his films, plays, and television shows in our professional spaces. For instance, in 2011, Samantha Sheppard presented a short paper, “She Ain't Heavy, She's Madea” on Perry's film *Madea's Family Reunion* on a panel about African American stars and auteurs at the Annual Society of Cinema and Media Studies conference in New Orleans. Sheppard's paper was extremely well received, and I remember many members of the audience lingering to talk to her and meandering into the crowded hallways to have impromptu conversations about either the audacious scenes in Perry's film or other aspects of his work. That year's conference buzz around Tyler Perry is something that other scholars of African American media and culture noted. For instance, in their introduction to the African American Caucus's In-Focus contribution to *Cinema Journal*, editors Berretta E. Smith-Shomade, Racquel Gates, and Miriam J. Petty noted: "Interestingly, no actual panels or workshops were dedicated to the study of Perry's works that year—all the discussions about this crucial piece of black popular culture, his industrial shape-shifting, his box-office successes, his runaway brand across all media platforms, were taking place quite literally at the margins of the conference." Karen Bowdre and I had a similar observation, and it was during this time that we decided to try to facilitate a larger discussion about the media mogul. We left the conference vowing to solicit papers and constitute a panel solely devoted to Perry's material for the next annual meeting.

Try as we might, however, we could never get that Tyler Perry panel accepted—not at the SCMS conferences in 2012 or 2013, nor at the annual American Studies conferences that took place during those same years. This is not to say that Tyler Perry did not come up in our papers and panels that we presented on other topics as we attended these conferences. Just as contemporary filmmakers almost obligatorily critique, parody, and otherwise acknowledge Perry's centrality in Black popular
culture in their work (recent independent Black films like *Dear White People* [Justin Simien, 2014] and *Top Five* [Chris Rock, 2014], as well as mainstream films like *Hot Tub Time Machine 2* [Steve Pink, 2015], all have their moment of Perry reflection), as scholars of African American representation in media and popular culture, many of us talked about Perry incessantly.

Yet, for reasons beyond our understanding, programming committees at the conferences in our major fields did not see the usefulness in convening a full panel on him. During this time we wondered: did an entire panel on Perry seem to others redundant (since his material seemed accessible and he was such a hot topic outside the academy), frivolous, or overly indulgent (his films and shows were, after all, decidedly “lowbrow”), or tangential (perhaps Madea and *Meet the Browns* did not seem pertinent to central questions in our interdisciplinary fields)? By this point, since I was still “so not a fan” of Perry’s work, it was actually the constant rejection of the Tyler Perry panel—which we believe evinced our collective desire to think about Perry beyond the isolated individual short paper—that became the more compelling point of interest for me.

While I was beginning to realize that I needed feedback from and collaboration with a community of junior and senior scholars in my fields to begin to think more dynamically about my numerous problems with Tyler Perry, the ways in which I thought about him became inseparable from the persistent problem of exclusion and marginality that Black cultural production has long occupied in media studies, the “historical and ongoing marginalization of black media studies” in general, as Smith-Shomade and others have argued.5

While our inability to get a panel accepted that featured four to five papers on Tyler Perry remains both motivation and backstory for bringing together the writers in this collection, my own turning point regarding Perry’s material happened because of two additional conversations: one professional, one personal. The first shift occurred in 2012 when I participated in a SCMS workshop called “Teaching the Negative Representation: Blackness and Disreputable Media.” The workshop, chaired by Racquel Gates, included all early career scholars of African American media—Jacqueline Smith, Samantha Sheppard, Kristen Warner, and myself. Since this was a workshop, instead of reading formal papers, we
each shared strategies for teaching material that others, especially stu-
dents and colleagues at our respective universities, might deem nega-
tive, stereotypical, or otherwise unsuitable for being taken seriously in
an academic context. For instance, Warner talked about Black female
spectatorial practices and the less-obvious pleasures of reality television
shows like Basketball Wives (2010–present). I introduced some ways to
theorize the reception of, and voyeuristic community around, YouTube
vlogs, including viral videos of Black people rapping about Kentucky
Fried Chicken and confessing to drunkenness and disorderly conduct.
And because Tyler Perry was still on our minds, Smith and Sheppard
both talked about Perry and affect, each arguing for a deeper under-
standing of how attraction and repulsion often converge in complicated
ways around his work.

I recall a lively conversation with the audience during this workshop,
and comments and questions about Perry dominated the sixty-minute
question and answer session. How could we teach his films? Was there
really more than buffoonery there? Did students have a hard time tak-
ing the material seriously or seeing beyond his binaries of good and bad
Black objects? As women, racial minorities, and early career scholars,
did we feel particularly vulnerable centralizing the “disreputable” in our
scholarship and in the classrooms at our various (predominantly white)
campuses? There were, of course, no easy answers to these questions, but
the conversation was the first time I saw how my interests in new media,
video games, and other digital content (“disreputable” forms) had every-
thing to do with Tyler Perry, specifically with my distaste for his material
and reluctance to write about him or teach him in my film and media
classes. Seeing myself from the outside in, it occurred to me that by vir-
tue of studying Black popular culture at all, I was already “drinking the
Kool-Aid.” It seemed to be a significant “aha!” or “come to Jesus moment”
for others in the room too, including Eric Pierson (who contributed this
book’s Foreword) and Christine A. Becker (who wrote a summary blog
post about the panel). After our discussion on race and disreputablity,
Becker reflected: “It’s not easy to teach things that make us uncomfort-
able, right down to forgoing films we don’t personally admire over ones
we do in selecting course screenings, but we are likely short-changing
our students (and ourselves) if we opt only to teach in areas of comfort
and expertise.”
The second shift in my perception of Perry’s relevancy happened more decisively during a conversation with my mother. It was actually my mother who introduced me to Perry’s stage plays when he first came onto the cultural scene in the late 1990s. More recently, as I was doing research for this collection, my mother offered her pointed defense of Perry’s films and plays, as she and many of her friends are long-standing fans. Mainly as fans, they appreciate the ways in which Perry is capable of addressing serious topics (like addiction, sexual abuse, and domestic violence) while being outrageously ridiculous at the same time. To my long list of objections about the content and the quality of Perry’s productions (see the start of this introduction), she said simply: “Oh brother. We don’t have the same sense of humor.” My mother’s comment is supported, of course, by media studies critics such as Ellen Seiter, who argues that members of an audience who most despise a given form are “often simply lacking in the cultural capital required to read the text adequately.” At last, my mother sighed: “Not everyone makes movies for you, you know.” She was absolutely right, but therein lies the rub. Her observation that Tyler Perry simply did not make films or plays for me cut to the core of my personal dislike for Perry’s material; his works offended my ideological views and personal beliefs on so many fronts, and since there is such a paucity of Black cultural production in the mainstream, I felt, above all, deeply disappointed.

This type of disappointment reflects the chronic burdens of representation that have historically faced Black cultural producers, from Black popular writers as disparate as Frances Harper (*Iola Leroy* [1892]) and Nikki Turner (*Riding Dirty on I-95: A Novel* [2003]) to Black film and televisual creators as different as Oscar Micheaux (*Within Our Gates* [1920]) and Shonda Rhimes (*Scandal* [2012–present]). For me, the comment was ultimately freeing because it reminded me that blackness as a signifier is unreliable enough that in any given popular text it does not and should not, despite my longings, have to represent who I am or what I most want to see. If truly “free,” the sign of blackness might work like a soulful house music track: full of the unexpected, layered, contrapuntal. Yet the burden to produce the right type of Black popular culture in the right moment and have that work received respectfully in the right venues remains a true and steady cultural expectation—one that includes, but also extends beyond, Tyler Perry.
Introduction

#OscarsSoWhite: Black Popular Culture at the Intersection of Respectability and Recognition

The academic year of 2014–15 was the year of the hashtag—a succinct, often politicized form of expression in online spaces that condenses and codes as much as it conveys meaning. This was the year when we saw #YesAllWomen (arguing that all women are affected by harassment and violence against women), #WhyICame (used by victims of domestic violence to narrate their experiences), #BringBackOurGirls (referencing the mass-kidnappings of Nigerian school-age children), #StopGamerGate (an attempt to expose the misogyny and racism in video game communities), #BlackLivesMatter (used to protest the police killings of unarmed Black men and women), and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown (which criticized the media's character defamation of minority victims of violent crimes). Each of these taglines went viral or "trended," playing a role in social media and public sphere conversations that were at their core about identity and the recognition of equal humanity. In the company of these other hashtags, a hashtag like #OscarsSoWhite may seem rather inconsequential, but I want to discuss it briefly in order to demonstrate how Black popular culture, including "Oscar-worthy" but "snubbed" films like *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014) and apparently un-Oscar-worthy productions like Tyler Perry’s *Single Moms Club* (2014), belong in the same conversation, one that points always back to the burdens of representation as well as to the politics of recognition and respectability.

The #OscarsSoWhite hashtag was started by "April," a lawyer and prolific blogger known on Twitter as @ReignOfApril, as a way to express her "frustration with the [2015] Oscar nominations." To recap, while Ava DuVernay’s civil rights-era drama, *Selma,* was nominated among nine other films for Best Picture, all of the Academy Award nominees for director, actor, actress, and screenwriter were white, making 2015 the year that many criticized as “the whitest Oscars in nineteen years.”

In reaction to this, #OscarsSoWhite went viral, almost immediately, as Twitter users expressed their outrage over Hollywood’s penchant for failing to recognize the achievement of Black media-makers. Some of the hashtagged tweets included: "#OscarsSoWhite they accurately represent Hollywood and its racial makeup," "#OscarsSoWhite the only time a Black person is nominated, let alone wins, is if they’re in a role
as a slave or the help,” and “#OscarsSoWhite Denzel was mistaken for a janitor.” While these tweets point obviously to critiques of industrial practices, the hashtags were also referentially loaded and (hyper)linked the lack of diversity at the Academy Awards to other social and political issues. In this vein, the hashtag also conveyed critiques of whiteness in general, like “#OscarsSoWhite it wears shorts in the winter time,” and racism, as indicated in “#OscarsSoWhite it was invited to a Clippers game by Donald Sterling.” Very quickly, the hashtag connected Black filmic representation and the failure to recognize Black achievement in visual culture to the larger problem of failing to recognize Black humanity in the social and political sphere. In this regard, there were other tweets including, “#OscarsSoWhite it thinks that George Zimmerman is just misunderstood” and “#OscarsSoWhite they let a grand jury decide the nominations.” As the tweets that reference George Zimmerman’s and Darren Wilson’s acquittal and non-indictment in the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, respectively, indicate, the hashtag connected the Hollywood awards show and Black filmic production to the systemic oppression of Black people and chronic failures of recognition on a mass scale.

Social media sites have become ready tools for fans and audiences to voice dissent or support a variety of cultural works and media personalities. As we can see with #OscarsSoWhite and the visibility of “Black Twitter” in general, such spaces have come to play a significant role in shaping the common-sense dialogue surrounding Black popular works. While Twitter and hashtag culture can be powerful platforms and tools used to express discontent, the fact that there could be such a quick slippage between emphasizing the film industry’s lack of acknowledgment of Black achievement and expressing disappointment with the lack of recognition of Black humanity requires more reflection than those platforms and tools—current dominant mechanisms for shaping contemporary public discourse on race—can sustain.

Here, an interdisciplinary approach to cinema and media studies might help us make more clear Black popular culture’s unique relationship to the deeply imbricated politics of respectability and recognition, on the one hand, and clarify how these things work together to inform the popular and critical reception of a Black cultural producer like Tyler Perry, on the other hand. For starters, what do the Oscars signify in the
first place? While an Oscar (or Emmy or Tony Award) may increase visibility for the winners and nominees and ostensibly increase their future financial gain, such accomplishments most signify a type of recognition that is rooted in *bourgeois* aesthetic judgments. As Davies et al. argue about taste and cultural value in television programming, “the preferences and judgments of those who have the power to ascribe cultural value become the apotheosis of ‘good taste’; and in this way the maintenance of aesthetic hierarchies becomes a means of perpetuating social inequities.”

As the judges, board, or Academy set the standards for what constitutes artistic merit, these types of distinctions may indeed heighten social differences because, as Pierre Bourdieu famously insisted, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.” Yet can the call to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the potential winners and losers at these events enable Black cultural works that win out signal that the right type of recognition has at last been achieved for Black folk? Does it matter that these spaces will never have a “taste” for popular works that are vulgar, disreputable, or what Kristen Warner creatively defines as “ratchetness”? If a film like *Selma*, which is a “respectable” and familiar drama about Black hardship, survival, hope, and American civil rights social transformations, cannot garner the type of recognition many believe it deserves at the Oscars, does it matter that a Madea film will be forever excluded from the cultural rituals that help standardize and signal inclusion?

To argue that blackness should be equally and fairly represented at award shows like the Oscars is to argue inherently that Black representation should be able to win at the game of respectability. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the phrase “politics of respectability” to describe some of the ways in which the Black Baptist women’s movement “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations.” Higginbotham identified the acceptance of and acquiescence to middle-class behavioral norms as a strategic organizing maneuver that both “reinforced the hegemonic values of white America” and combated accusations of Black idleness and unworthiness. In the current political climate, respectability politics has a slightly different indication. For instance, Fredrick C. Harris argues that respectability politics, one of the “hallmarks of black politics in the age of Obama,” have been used to steer “unrespectables’ away from making demands on the state
Similarly, about affect and respectability, Michelle Smith argues that in the context of a contemporary militarized police state and the continued oppression of Black people, respectability politics have the dangerous potential for silencing and subordinating would-be Black agents and protesters who do not fit the image of what Black political leaders should look like—that is, “looters,” “rioters,” and “thugs” need not apply.  

When discussed in the context of identity politics, the annual awards circuit perpetuates hierarchies of taste through the pomp and circumstance of comparing this film to that film, this television show to that one, and thus always runs the risk of mistaking the symbolic, or simulacrum, for the real. Herman Gray, who is most often referenced in cinema and media studies for his landmark contribution, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, has argued more recently that this suture of Black representation to any aspect of the politics of recognition (to which the politics of respectability necessarily belong) may no longer serve us well in a post-civil rights and postmodern cultural and social milieu. Gray specifically rethinks the spectacle of taste-setting that televised award shows exhibit and argues that the events are neoliberal programming spectacles that “perform and sound out a normative ideal” as they instruct “viewers in the manners and morals required to belong to the nation.” While it may be tempting to want to play to win at the game of respectability politics that these spaces endorse, to do so also runs the risk of equating “spectacles of visibility and recognition” with political power.  

I have argued elsewhere that while the civil rights movement needed visual media to document and sear into cultural consciousness evidence of the violent failures to recognize Black humanity, we have since consistently and compulsively relied on Black popular culture to function similarly, so that such works might evoke the type of empathy that has historically spurred action and reform. Rather than create the kind of empathy and outrage that leads to systemic change, however, the ways in which our cultural works engage with the meta-project of recognition more often only compounds the problem and creates new ones. We are at a moment when we have to ask, in wedding Black popular works to the politics of respectability/recognition, to what extent are we now chasing a receding and unapproachable horizon? In this regard, Herman Gray challenges:
We presume that a corrective to the image would repair lost dignity, redress resources imbalances, and help generate recognition, empathy, and trust that might lead to more care and protection for all of us. However, getting the story straight in terms of authenticity, generating more and better facts, and telling better and more accurate representative stories seem no longer sufficient to redress injury or generate new practices of equality in the moment of racism after race.

Outside of cinema and media studies there have been similar destabilizations of recognition politics, from Charles Taylor’s influential inquiry to psychoanalytic theories that question whether or not individuals are even capable of “recognizing” distinct and equal others beyond brief and always fleeting moments of acknowledgment. As political philosopher Patchen Markell cautions, investments in spectacles that seem to facilitate recognition risk “drawing attention away from . . . some of the deeper relations of power and forms of subordination that underlie the very injustices they are meant to combat.”

The temptation to tie Black popular culture to the protocols of respectability (and, in turn, to recognition) may not only fail to facilitate political progress, but such associations may in fact impede it, functioning as what Lauren Berlant has purposefully defined as a cruel form of optimism.

The long-standing political strategy of representing in ways that are most communicable and presentable to mainstream America has without a doubt shaped how we study African American culture and media. As Kali N. Gross notes, a “strict adherence to what is socially deemed ‘respectable’ has resulted in African American scholars confining their scholarship on African Americans to often the most ‘heroic’ and the most successful attributes in African American culture; it has also resulted in the proliferation of analyses which can be characterized as culturally defensive, patriarchal, and heterosexist.” Respectability politics create the double standard that insists that only certain expressions of blackness deserve to elicit outrage over the practice of exclusions, and by turn, deserve our academic attention: *The Butler* (Lee Daniels, 2013) and *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013)—yes; *The Best Man Holiday* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2013) or *A Haunted House 2* (Michael Tiddes, 2014)—not so much. In raising questions about respectability and recognition to talk about media studies, I do not mean to insist that we now ought to
pay more attention to stereotypical performances or low cultural representations—say, for instance, *Flavor of Love* (VH1, 2006–08), as Racquel Gates has eloquently discussed—than we do to works that adhere more closely to dominant norms of respectable art, works that use tropes of Black suffering to evoke empathy and outrage, like *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), which won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Rather than invert or create new dichotomies of good/bad, I mean to suggest that whenever representations of blackness do not fit into the cultural logic of neoliberalism, we might flag such works for at the very least requiring further, thoughtful exploration.

What does all this have to do with Tyler Perry? Perry seems to at least in part understand that being excluded from a particular set of norms offers a unique vantage point for commentary, including parody. For example, in 2011 Perry satirically marked his exclusion from the Academy Awards by creating a hilarious series of Madea posters that spoofed several of the films nominated that year for Best Picture. Instead of the official poster for *True Grit* (the Coen Brothers, 2010), Perry issued a “True Grits” poster of Madea wearing a camo dress and holding a rifle; instead of *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010), Perry created “The Queen’s Speech,” a poster that featured a close-up of Madea’s face before a filtered microphone. Although Perry strategically mocked one system of evaluation, his works are hardly subversive when it comes to the politics of recognition and respectability. In fact, many of his narratives, characters, and public speeches ironically reinforce the same ideological views that others use to discount and discredit his work. My point here, though, is that in overlooking his cultural contributions altogether we might not realize or fully understand ironies like this or the myriad contractions that inform his media empire.

**Beyond Respectability and Recognition**

“Part of the problem is that we have forgotten what sort of space the space of popular culture is.”

Throughout his career, Stuart Hall talked about Black popular culture in a way that offers some inspiration for distancing Black popular forms
from some of its unique burdens of representation. In the example of #OscarsSoWhite, we can see how art and cultural production can quickly become overlaid by the desire for the state and/or other cultural authorities, institutions, and agents to recognize Black humanity and rights. Additionally, the joining of representational culture with the politics of recognition unfortunately de-emphasizes the extent to which popular works are also so fascinatingly replete with wonky fantasies, tricky idealizations, and exhaustive contradictions. As famously theorized by Hall, these representations remain limitless and unstable iterations of a “theater of popular desires” and “popular fantasies.” It is no doubt easy to forget that blackness—Hall’s “Black” in popular culture—is always as fantastical as it is real. Above all, Stuart Hall and the other contributors to Gina Dent’s seminal 1992 anthology demonstrate that our analyses of Black popular culture are most productive when we remember to hold the many possibilities of interpretation in dialogic tension.

In taking these arguments as inspiration, From Madea to Media Mogul makes the explicit claim that Tyler Perry must be understood as a figure at the nexus of converging factors, cultural events, and historical traditions. In doing so, we demonstrate how a critical engagement with Perry’s work and media practices highlights a need for film and television criticism to grapple with developing theories and methods on disreputable media that challenge value judgment criticism and offer new insight on the industrial and formal qualities of such work. The book examines Perry’s unique role in contemporary media culture but unlike the discordant popular and limited range of academic responses to Perry’s work, the essays in From Madea to Media Mogul are engaged with neither simply celebrating nor condemning Tyler Perry. Against any temptation to displace, replace, or revere him, we situate Perry and his work at the epicenter of a rich and important interdisciplinary dialogue—one that is not happening at this moment. For example, in order to talk about Tyler Perry, to say things about the contested figure that are not apparent, we need to move beyond the singular focus on critical race studies or cinema studies or Black cultural traditions. Instead, as we demonstrate here, Perry gives us an occasion to consider how the popularity and pleasure of his texts generate discourses that are inherently political and demand an interdisciplinary attention, as I have tried to
demonstrate with my methodological approach to discussing respectability and recognition.

*From Madea to Media Mogul* charts new ground in this regard, namely, through emphasizing creativity, theoretical savviness, and by establishing a productive fluidity between divergent fields. Throughout these pages, Tyler Perry becomes an unlikely but timely figure around which to discuss the ways in which blackness in the twenty-first century functions as Hall's theatre of desires, or, as we like to think of it, as “dark matter,” a metaphor for identities that are more nebulous and shape-shifting than we often allow. This collection demonstrates that there is something inherently political about the intersection between understanding the pleasure as well as displeasure surrounding popular cultural expression. These types of intersectionalities are crucial not only to understanding Tyler Perry but also to how we think about race and identity in the twenty-first century.

As editors, we came together around our different but complementary multi- and trans-disciplinary interests. For instance, Karen Bowdre has brought to the project a background in race, genre, and performance studies that looks across multiple media platforms; several essays in the collection take into account Perry's divergent media productions. I have contributed my experience in interrogating Black popular culture's proximity to poststructuralist intellectual traditions, particularly to trauma studies and to psychoanalytic and postmodern theories. In this regard, many of the essays in the collection work with, around, and beyond familiar theories in unanticipated ways. Samantha Sheppard's training in cinema and media studies, gender studies, and Black cultural production brings an important critical focus to the politics and practices of African American representation. Accordingly, several essays in the collection critique the representational politics of Perry's work beyond the delimiting binaries of positive or negative images and provide new approaches to questions of race, gender, and representation.

**Theorizing Tyler Perry: Building a Necessary Critical Vocabulary**

If the hashtag represents a way of highlighting the terms of a conversation for a particular discourse community, with this collection we
contend that Tyler Perry's place in media history requires a rubric—a specific set of guiding terms to establish common ground among the various critics and skeptics, fans and detractors. So, although the chapters that follow are certainly more complicated and comprehensive than the terms we have selected for them, the identifying terms and concepts give us a shared common language upon which to build further and future reflection. Unlike the hashtag or our more casual engagements with Perry, the creation of a deliberate theoretical vocabulary also invites us to rethink and expand how we use familiar terms within our fields, disciplinary terms like cinephilia, mogul, niche, rebrand, and platforms in cinema and media studies. Other concepts, like affect, disguise, thirst, and exceptionalism, engage and reference theoretical discussions of auteurs, drag performativity, Black televisual history, and the emotional culture around Perry's works, while mobilizing terms such as chitlin and gospel broaden our grasp on thematic conceits from Black cultural traditions.

The collection begins with Samantha N. Sheppard's broad and establishing consideration of how Perry functions in and across different media industries. Sheppard analyzes Perry's different "practices," "partnerships," and "politics" as she explores some of the ways in which Perry maximizes his name recognition and brand across different platforms, like theatre, film, television, straight to DVD, and video on demand. While Perry's brand has been instrumental in marketing his high volume of creative projects, other directors and writers now also seek an association with him so that they might leverage their own works. In this way, Sheppard theorizes that Perry has become a media platform unto himself. In complicating and destabilizing the assumption that a partnership with Perry will naturally lead to success, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the production and marketing of one of Perry's affiliated projects, Tina Gordon Chism's 2013 comedy *Tyler Perry Presents Peeples*.

If Perry now functions as a platform unto himself, his career began with seemingly much less broad, but no less significant, aspirations. In her analysis of taste, class, and the popular in Chapter Two, Rashida Z. Shaw places Tyler Perry's career within the context of a Black performance and theatre history that extends back to the nineteenth century as she centralizes the history of the "Chitlin Circuit" or "Urban Theatre." After establishing a literary cultural history that frames and restages the popularity, appeal, and reception of Perry's plays, Shaw's analysis more
closely explores the ramifications of Perry's behind-the-scenes role and on-stage presence at the 2012 Tony Awards during a year that resulted in numerous historic successes for not only African American theatre-makers, but also for African American-centric productions in general. Since Perry's plays share with his film production a similar thematic focus on Christian morality, Keith Corson's contribution to this collection charts the rise of regional theatre and the translation of the financial, aesthetic, and political model of "gospel theatre's" urban circuit to the multiplex. In the process of identifying the evangelical influences of some contemporary African American films, which Corson calls "gospel cinema," the chapter compares Perry's films with televangelist T.D. Jakes's in arguing that their films have helped reshape notions of a Black film audience. Gospel cinema narratives often function as morality tales that align closely with the rise of the Black megachurch as they express a middle-class idealism that is rooted in a doctrine of prosperity, self-help, and individualism. Yet, as Corson defines it, gospel cinema also features a unique blend of melodrama, folk humor, and camp aesthetics that complicates a simple faith-based reading.

While Shaw's and Corson's analyses of chitlin and gospel are concerned predominantly with form and genre, in "Worship at the Altar of Perry: Spectatorship and the Aesthetics of Testimony," Brandeise Monk-Payton encourages us to think more richly about the relationship between affect and testimony that is available to fans of Perry's content. Calling Perry's affective effect on his audiences a "cinematic ministry" that is replete with scenes of pulpit-like testimony, Monk-Payton examines faith-based affect as a type of responsiveness that characterizes intimate encounters with Perry's films. In her reading of Perry's 2012 film, Good Deeds, Monk-Payton theorizes that Perry, as title character Wesley Deeds, "testifies" for his fans using a mode of "cinematic address" that is predicated on the affective desire for the audience to engage in a version of African American expressivity.

In a chapter that invites us to continue thinking about Perry and affect, Ben Raphael Sher reminds us that Tyler Perry is the most prominent media personality to make a career out of representing African American women's experiences with abuse and trauma. With this fact as a starting place, Sher closely investigates Perry's cinematic representations, while simultaneously theorizing Perry's cinephilia, or passionate
love of cinema. In making clear the relationship between domestic trauma and cinephilia in the play *Madea's Class Reunion* (2003), the film *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006), and in Perry's introduction to *The 2006 Black Movie Awards*, Sher addresses the widely held suspicion that Perry's work capitalizes on the traumas of Black women—the specific complaint being that Perry rehashes his traumatic past by mapping it onto the Black female characters in his scripts. This chapter complicates these criticisms by suggesting that Perry's representations of suffering Black women have less to do with a pathological desire to punish Black women and more to do with Perry's complex fantastical and personal identification with them as a trauma survivor himself. To this extent, Sher uses Perry's trauma narratives to articulate a critique of the larger cultural lack of representations of male survivors of abuse.

There is, of course, no getting around Madea—no doubt Perry's biggest signifier. In Chapter Six, Rachel Jessica Daniel commences a critical investigation of Madea by analyzing how Perry's particular style of drag performance, his use of false disguise enables his predominantly Christian and Black female audiences to form an intimate public around him despite the fact his performances might contradict or subvert their own personal and spiritual beliefs. In Daniel's theorization, Perry's fan base around Madea represents a powerful, critical, and vocal discourse community that has supported the media mogul and his contested character despite rampant critiques of the character's flawed presentation and of Perry's motives in constructing her.

Turning to Tyler Perry's impact on the television industry, Aymar Christian and Khadijah Costley White in "One Man Hollywood: The Decline of Black Creative Production in Post-Network Television" theorize Perry's place in the television history, explicitly in the context of his niche production system and industrial marketing practices. Christian and Costley White critique Perry's dominance in the televisual landscape and the numerous ways in which his direct control over his media entities has compromised not only his content but also his company's ethics and labor practices. Given that Perry's television successes occurred concomitant with the fragmentation of key media marketplaces and given the lack of structural changes surrounding his productions, Christian and Costley White's chapter ultimately questions (and redefines) the extent to which Perry has truly been a game changer in the television industry.
Continuing a television studies analysis of Perry, Artel Great argues in Chapter Eight that from both a critical and an industrial perspective the sitcom *Tyler Perry’s House of Payne* (TBS, 2006–12) represents a complex but no less problematic contribution to the history of Black televisual authorship. Precisely because there has been a pronounced dearth of Black representation on television, Great demonstrates that a politics of *thirst* best characterizes how Black audiences engage the few existing images of televisual blackness. Despite several unprecedented industrial achievements (such as surpassing *The Jeffersons* [CBS, 1975–85] as the longest running Black sitcom), when considered within the context of the history and formal structure of the Black sitcom, *House of Payne* digresses as it rejuvenates the narrative conventions and visual cues of uncritical Black minstrelsy. Rife with missed opportunities for teaching complex lessons about Black subjectivity, esteem, and interiority, Perry’s sitcom succeeded, then, mostly because of the continued omission of blackness on television.

Moving the conversation about Perry to a more meta-discursive level, Karen M. Bowdre’s chapter features an examination of the careers of Spike Lee and Tyler Perry. The way we discuss Black Hollywood and independent directors, argues Bowdre, reinforces a (Black) American *exceptionalism* that materializes as a flawed tendency to evaluate and elevate one Black director at a time. Bowdre demonstrates that while at the onset Perry and Lee may seem worlds apart both artistically and ideologically, both directors have benefited from a similar system of exclusion.

In also comparing and contrasting Perry’s media influence with that of another famous director, Paul Reinsch reframes the media discourse around Tyler Perry’s work and career to consider him alongside a comparable media mogul: George Lucas. What might the creator of *Star Wars* and the creator of Madea possibly have in common (aside from a possible penchant for high fantasy)? In closely analyzing the critical reception, aesthetics, and ideologies of Perry’s *For Colored Girls* (2010) and Lucas’s *Red Tails* (2012), Reinsch exposes how each filmmaker ultimately negotiates a particular nostalgia for classical Hollywood cinema while also maintaining a particularly intrusive relationship to their creative entities and to the media complexes that pertain to them.

If Eric Pierson argues in this book’s Foreword that Perry’s relationship to media studies in this moment might well be thought of as a
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If Eric Pierson argues in this book’s Foreword that Perry’s relationship to media studies in this moment might well be thought of as a
centrality, Leah Aldridge wonders in Chapter Eleven where things might go from here. Can we expect to see Perry rebrand in order to broaden his appeal to more mainstream or international markets? What might such changes mean for both his representations of blackness and for his domestic media empire?

Miriam J. Petty concludes the collection with a return to Madea by offering a brief meditation on her personal and professional engagement with Perry’s controversial character. Petty’s account demonstrates how, in moving forward, we might continue to deconstruct and investigate but also play with Perry’s performances.

Although I have yet to come around to a personal embrace of Tyler Perry’s works, as a direct result of reading, editing, and learning from this collection, I am now committed to thinking about him, to writing about his relationship to other Black cultural works, to teaching his films in my classes, and to presenting on his works at conferences (we shall not give up on this). We think this book will be valuable to media scholars and to the many different fields represented by the editors and contributors. Perhaps too it will appeal to Perry’s fans and dissenters outside the academy because, as one fan wrote in a self-published guide on Tyler Perry’s films: “Only after sixteen minutes of Diary of a Mad Black Woman does it fully sink in that you’re not just watching some unsuccessful narrative. . . . You have to think in terms of the fourth dimension and parallel universes to properly label the quality of [Perry’s] films.”

Fourth dimensions and parallel universes notwithstanding, the chapters and grounding terms that follow remain productively and excitingly “dislocating in relation to one another” in ways that are more invested in keepin’ it dialogic than in keepin’ it real. This means that chapters are free to contradict each other, including what I have said here, as they offer up examinations of the kind of polemics and problems that compel us to think more richly about how blackness travels, unravels, delights, heals, binds, and unnerves in a given moment.

Notes

1. Social commentator Toure called Perry “cinematic malt liquor for the masses” during an interview on CNN’s Newsroom in September 2011.
3. We are pleased to note that the paper is now on its way to print. See Samantha N. Sheppard, "She Ain't Heavy, She's Madea: The Tyler Perry Discourse and the Politics of Contemporary Black Cultural Production," forthcoming in Black Cinema Aesthetics Revisited, eds. Michael Gillespie and Aki! Houston.

4. Beretta E Smith-Shomade, Racquel Gates, and Miriam J. Perry, "Introduction: When and Where We Enter," Cinema Journal 53, no. 4 (2014): 126. We are also pleased to note here that two collections on Perry have been recently published. This recent scholarly attention only further demonstrates how much of a significant figure he has become. See Jamel Santa Cruz Bell and Ronald L. Jackson II, eds., Interpreting Tyler Perry: Perspectives on Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality (New York and London: Routledge, 2013); LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, Tamura A. Lomax, and Carol B. Duncan, eds., Womanist and Black Feminist Responses to Tyler Perry's Productions (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

5. Smith-Shomade et al., 126.


14. Ibid.


18. Ibid., 787.


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27. Ibid., 31.

28. See Gina Dent, Black Popular Culture.

29. Evan Saathoff, Madea Lives!: A Film-By-Film Guide To Loving Tyler Perry, ed. Meredith Borders (Badass Digest, 2014).

30. Hall, 32.