Racialized Representations of Black Actresses: Power, Position, and Politics of the Mediated Black Woman

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The release of *Black Panther* (2018) and *Girls Trip* (2017) highlighted the discrepancies between movies that feature primarily White versus Black actors and actresses, as well as the storylines and roles. These films also positioned Black actresses in powerful roles that visually communicated their preeminence to the movie-going audience and beyond. These roles are significant departures from the controlling images and stereotypes such as the historic Mammy character of Hattie McDaniel (for this role Hattie received an Academy Award in 1939) to the ultra-sexy, jezebel Foxy Brown portrayed by Pam Grier to the overbearing, Sapphire characters of Taraji P. Henson (Hill Collins 83; Harris-Perry 33). Historically, mediated representations of Black women in films intentionally worked to further marginalize and define the limited positions of women of color in Western society. Today, Black actresses are positioned to portray more than just limited character types, which is typified with their dress (both on and off screen). Accordingly, contemporary Black actresses such as Danai Gurira, Jada Pinkett Smith, Letitia Wright, and Queen Latifah defy confining stereotypes by portraying realistic, exciting, and inspiring characters rarely played by Black women in large budget films for international release. Likewise, these roles of contemporary Black actresses and their related dress redefines, expands, and reorients womanhood as a

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factor for better understanding the role of the concept of race and racial symbols within the film industry and, by extension, to moviegoers.

The persistent notion of race as a biological concept continues to dominate public and mediated discourses. However, the ways in which the concept of race is a constant cyclical process created and re-created through social interactions, intersections, and practices of performance and conspicuous visual displays is often neglected. Dress is a significant dimension of the social process by which notions of race are produced, established, and disseminated. Additionally, popular culture and the media establish and reinforce a hegemonic relationship for the creation and maintenance of the specific details that constitute "race" as a social category, which is not beneficial in advancing positions where films and women intersect.

Dress, which includes clothing, body modifications, makeup, and styling, functions as a mechanism to generate, challenge, and reinforce racialized understandings of Blackness in popular films. We explore the visual stylistic representations and controlling images of Black actresses and women in films that reinforce, challenge, and recreate the lived experience of being a Black woman. We reveal the ways racialized bodies are fashioned and dressed for Black actresses to construct and reinforce the social construction of race in the films *Girls Trip* and *Black Panther*. Finally, we discuss the socio-political positions, power, and status of Black actresses and their characters, who are redefining and challenging stereotypical roles communicated as examples of Black women with their aesthetic styles and costumes and dress.

Blackness in Popular Culture

Representations of Blackness in popular culture are often skewed to extremes, especially for women. The mediated portrayals of Black woman are regulated through hegemonic controlling images. Black women are wedged into stereotypical roles as well as costuming. These limited roles predictably restricted Black women for consideration in future films but also impacted their dress and appearances beyond the screen. Patricia Hill Collins notes four categories that dictate the roles available for Black women in popular culture: Mammy, Jezebel, Welfare Mother, and the Matriarch (Hill Collins 84). Contemporarily, Carolyn West argues that these categories can be readily identified in reality television series as the Strong Black Woman, the Angry Black Woman, and the Video Vixen (West).

Engaging in a similar exercise, Melissa Harris-Perry used the metaphor of a Crooked House to explain how Black women confront race and gender stereotypes. Harris-Perry states Black women are "standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion" (Harris-Perry 28). As a result, Harris-Perry asserts that women actively grapple with the stereotypes of the asexual Mammy, the hypersexual Jezebel, and the angry Sapphire as they traverse society. Here, our focus on film is particularly important as we seek to understand what happens when costumes are painstakingly crafted and actresses are carefully clothed for a specific visual message that contributes to character and storyline development.

Mediated Images of Black Women

We argue that the limited character roles available to Black women are reflected by the limited costumes and wardrobe used for actress' dress in films. Additionally, limited character roles impact more than just Black women's dress on screen as it impedes how the actress is interpreted off-screen which impacts her dress beyond the body of the film itself. We selected *Girls Trip* and *Black Panther* to examine the roles and dress of Black women because these two films succinctly represent contemporary perspectives on racial and gender ideas visually conveyed in the current media.

In *Girls Trip*, Lisa, (Jada Pinkett-Smith), "the mom" character, is often conservatively dressed: Our visual introduction to her character's nature is communicated by an off-the-rack loose, knee-length dress from J. Crew and white sneakers by Keds. Lisa's clothing is often loose fitting and shows very little skin. Her natural hair is hidden by a long brown weave that has a blunt-cut fringe that she either wears in a low, tight, loose wave ponytail at the nap of her neck or simply straight down her back. The consistent elements in her styling are the steadfast symbols of social conservatism which she breaks only when badgered by her friends to dress in revealing outfits.

Sasha (Queen Latifah), "the gossip" character, is trendy, fashionable, and wears a variety of clothing and hairstyles from one scene to the next. Assistant costume designer for *Girls Trip* Provi Fulp states, "We wanted Sasha to be fashion forward, which a lot of times, for plus-size women, it's hard to pull off. Every trend is not for every body type, but it can be if it's done correctly, and Danielle [head costume

designer] really wanted to capture Sasha in that light" (Chan). In addition to conveying Sasha's commitment to fashion trends, her dress also suggests a level of confidence and defiance. Dina (Tiffany Haddish), the "wild one" character, is often dressed in symbols of ghetto-fabulousness as her dress often contains leather, embellishments of gold and silver, bright colors, and multiple patterns. Even when dressed in designer labels, Dina's clothing and styling conveys tackiness and a lower socioeconomic class, as is the case with her Moschino *Dollar Sign* mini Bodycon dress or Tamara Mellon Sleeveless *Fringe* Dress Sunset.

Given the title of "the boss," Ryan (Regina Hall) conveys the "strong black woman" and "superwoman complex" in her dress and actions. Ryan repudiates any display of weakness by refusing to ask for help or showing any inkling of sadness. If Ryan does show emotion, it is with anger and fierce attitude. Ryan's strength is in her enduring courage, which serves as a vessel for her friends' and family's hope. This strength is depicted in her clothing which is tailored to perfection in severe and unforgiving cuts. Costume designer Danielle Hollowell explains how they envisioned Ryan's aesthetic:

> We knew she was a business woman [sic] and she's very successful, so she has money. All her clothes reflect that. She's the kind of girl that's just a power woman and it reflects in the designers we chose for her, like some Stella McCartney, Victoria Beckham, the Misha Collection, Roland Mouret and Zhivago, who made the blush-colored dress she wore. Everything that we chose had to have some kind of power image behind it. (Chan)

This aesthetic is also reflected in Ryan's hairstyle which is often styled in a bone-straight shoulder-length weave with a middle part. Even when dressed for an evening out, Ryan is styled in a nude Zhivago Eye of Horus Dress with shoulder padding or wearing a cape, like a real-life superheroine. The exception is when Ryan is with her husband. During these times, she trades her symbols of power for those of overt femininity such as cleavage-baring necklines.

The styling of these main characters solidifies the film *Girls Trip* as a challenge to the one-dimensional portrayal of Black women in film. In fact, Will Packer, the film's producer, spoke directly about challenging the portrayal of Black women in *Girls Trip*: "What happens is if you don't have a lot of images, then the few that you have have to represent the whole of what black women are" (N'Duka). Packer adds: "[B]lack women, historically in media, have been either over-sexualized, hyper-angry, or super-saintly. Those aren't real people, those are caricatures. The

opportunity to show real people played brilliantly the cast was important" (N'Duka).

Despite using diverse styling to actively challenge the tropes about Black women (such as Mammy and Jezebel), the film falls into the familiar and dated politics, wherein if Black women act correctly and are proper enough or even respectable enough, they will be valued for their humanity.

Even though the characters of Dina, Sasha, Lisa, and Ryan in *Girls Trip* are often presented as diverse and are pushing back against the controlling images through their actions, their dress behavior tends to fall into racist and sexist constructions of respectability. Tamara Winfrey Harris states that is common among the Black community, who still perceives "respectability politics as a form of resistance. And Black women carry a double burden as they are asked to uphold ideas of decency built on both racist and sexist foundations" (Harris 8). By backsliding into assessments of respectability, Black women reaffirm that those women who embody traits associated with controlling images are not fit to be respected. This view represents another way that controlling images limits Black women's social acceptability.

This is evident in *Girls Trip* when Dina, Sasha, Lisa, and Ryan engage in an impromptu dance competition instigated by a rival group of younger Black women. The degree to which each character's body is dressed is suggestive of two different notions of Black womanhood. The younger competitors are presented as quintessential Jezebels who openly display their sexuality on their bodies and one, of which an Instagram model, is having an adulterous affair with Ryan's husband. These Jezebels' tight-fitting mini-skirts, shorts, and crop tops reveal their bare skin and accentuate the feminine curves of their bodies. In contrast, Dina, Sasha, Ryan, and Lisa are upholding the politics of respectability in their looser fitting clothing that shows very little skin. Dina, Sasha, and Lisa wear baggy pants, while Ryan wears a flowing knee-length dress with a cape that covers her arms. The dress of these two different groups (including foundations, garments, makeup, hairstyles, and accessories) communicates two contrasting ideas of femininity: respectable mother and lewd harlot.

Even amid the escalation of the dance competition into a physical fight, the clothing and styling of Dina, Sasha, Ryan, and Lisa maintain an air of respectability, which gives them the edge in social standing against their youthful but scandalous competitors. The respectable and relatively conservative matronly clothing sets them as superiors to the scantily dressed women who seemingly embrace the

sexualized Jezebel stereotype. However, in this dance/fight scene, the costuming fails to challenge the limitations and fallacy of the controlling image of the Jezebel. In fact, the clothing styles used in this scene of *Girls Trip* reinforces the position that women's dress represents the quality of their character and further validates the Jezebel label as warranted if women choose to engage in particular types of dress behavior.

This contrast between respectability and non-respectability is a theme throughout *Girls Trip*. At one point, Sasha sarcastically comments on the unflattering and matronly manner in which Lisa is dressed: "She looks like someone's Puerto Rican grandmother. Now men will fuck almost anything but not you, in that outfit." Although Lisa seemingly challenges the expectation of Black women as hypersexual through her choice of a loose-fitting Dolce & Gabbana White Silk Chiffon blouse with Daisy Lace Trim paired with an equally loose fitting Alice + Olivia Kamryn embroidered tulle maxi skirt, Lisa acknowledges to her friends that she has not had a sexual encounter and is not desirous of it. Lisa's friends chastise her in that she cannot be both sexual and conservatively dressed. They pressure Lisa into wearing a revealing fishnet black dress to go out on the town thereby reinforcing Black women's sexuality Jezebel motifs.

This Jezebel stereotype reemerges in another scene when Lisa admonishes Dina for her skin-revealing dress and unrespectable behavior. Lisa tells Dina to "*put some clothes on*, stop getting trashed every night and fucking random dick every week." Here Lisa conflates Dina's sexuality with revealing clothing, falling back on the trope that if a woman is scantily clad, it means that she is likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, when in fact the two are unrelated. Rather than recognizing Dina's behavior as a nuanced choice, Lisa figuratively labels her a Jezebel, a categorization that characterizes Dina's portrayal throughout the film. Dina does not reveal her reasons for or ideas about her dress as well as her lifestyle choices. Instead, Lisa offers an apology and the matter is dropped. By not offering a counter-narrative to the connection between Dina's dress and her behavior, Lisa's assessment is presented as reasonable and accurate, even if unkind.

In one of the earlier scenes in the movie, Dina excitingly presents decorated vests she made for her friends—much to her friends' dismay. The vests' graffiti-style lettering on denim, personalized with nicknames, and torn sleeves epitomizes an aesthetic from the Black and Brown Bronx working class communities of New York in the 1980s revealing the origins of the friends. Their aesthetic association with lower-class Black culture causes the garments to be rejected and dismissed by

Dina's friends. In the final moments of the film, the four women don the vests as a symbolic gesture of returning to their roots of friendship but it remains clear that these vests are not garments that would be worn for any other occasion.

Overall, the actresses in *Girls Trip* are dressed in highly stylized garments, hairstyles, and accessories that accentuate the diversity among Black women rather than reducing their costuming to the Jezebel, Mammy, Welfare Queen, or Sapphire stereotypes. Despite this liberating leap forward in the portrayal of Black women, the conversations surrounding dress between characters reinforces the linkages between respectability and femininity. The women use Jezebel stereotypes and respectability politics to police each other's clothing. As a result, the transformative thrust is blunted by familiar dress politics that reinforce a link between dress behavior and respect. The dance competition scene also underscores this linkage. The relatively conservatively dressed protagonists are placed in opposition to the dark-skinned women who are wearing body-revealing clothing. Here the enemy is identified by her clothing and is reinforced by her behavior as a contemporary Jezebel or as an "Instagram hoe," a title the characters use to refer to one of their adversaries.

In stark contrast to *Girls Trip*, the main female characters are positioned in more strategically powerful roles in *Black Panther*. Not only does the *Black Panther* challenge the stereotypes in blockbuster movies and the superhero genre, *Black Panther* is the first Black superhero mainstream movie released since *Blade* (1998). Most importantly, *Black Panther* not only features primarily Black actors but also Black actresses in all but one of the significant roles. These representations display an array of Black identities not possible through the tokenized casting in *Blade* or even *Catwoman* (2004). Subsequently, the intersectionalities of these factors create a nexus for Black actresses and Black female moviegoers to see their own experiences and agency reflected back through a lens of fashion and agency.

Okoye (Danai Gurira) is the general of the *Dora Milaje* (the all-female royal guards) in King T'Challa's country of Wakanda. Okoye is King T'Challa's friend and personal guard and her dress creates a dynamic and powerful presence. Even with her small physical stature, her shaved head with ornate scalp tattoo creates a formidable presence. Okoye also wears handmade gold metal rings stacked around her neck with decorative extensions, metal shoulder plates and cuffs, and a leather and metal belt and harness (Kanter). As part of her Wakandan dress, Okoye wears a long red form-fitting dress that is pulled back at the waist to allow fuller

movement of her legs with a brown leather corset-styled harness over the dress and she wields a spear.

Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett) is the mother to King T'Challa and the royal matriarch. The queen's dress includes gray dreadlocks hidden under a large hat fashioned similarly to a fabric crown,[1] long dresses that sometimes reveals her shoulders and arms but disguise her body's natural shape. She carries herself with regal authority that is reinforced with the strong linear silhouette created with her dress but Queen Ramonda shows deference to King T'Challa. This is not surprising because the queen has little to no individual power. In fact, once the king is dethroned, Queen Ramonda is forced to flee the palace with her daughter Shuri.

Shuri (Letitia Wright) is a scientist, a Wakandan princess, and the sixteen-year-old sister to King T'Challa. As one of the more varied and dimensional characters in *Black Panther*, Shuri's dress mirrors her complexity. Typically, Shuri combines contemporary neoprene and knit fashions in bold colors that reflect global aesthetics in a Western silhouette. In addition, Shuri's confident and even brash and boastful personality is supported by her significant accomplishments as a doctor, scientist, and inventor. For example, she adorns fashionable white surgical garb when performing intricate technical and medical feats. Shuri's reluctance to wear the traditional Wakandan dress of white face makeup and extensive metal and bone jewelry combined with a leather belt, harness, and corset wear for Prince T'Challa's coronation further suggests that she does not fit into traditional expectations for women even in Wakanda. Her dress choices and preferences mirror the complexity of the character.

The Wakandan people's costumes from the king to the people in the street are an amalgam of many African groups and non-African groups. Ruth E. Carter, *Black Panther* costume designer, states:

> Wakanda is rooted in Africa, and because the nation was never colonized, we imagined a world and how it would look if it remained unconquered. My first step was very similar to my approach to *Malcolm X*, *Amistad* and *Marshall*; to do the history, research, and gather the images from the different tribes, indigenous people, to look at Afro futurism, Afro punk, and to bring all of that together and use it for inspiration. (Adams)

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[1] *Black Panther*'s Queen Ramonda's headdress/crown was most likely inspired by Zulu hats; *Isicholos* are worn by married women.

Accordingly, Okoye's neck rings, for example, are inspired from those of the southern African Ndebele people (Adams). Also, the dark black makeup around her eyes reflect the use of kohl by ancient Egyptians and modern North African groups.

The costumes of the female characters also change to reflect the intricacies of the storyline. For example, after T'Challa is dethroned, Queen Ramonda and Shuri's dress changes significantly. In exile, Queen Ramonda and Shuri are wrapped in blankets and knit scarves to protect them from the cold. This type of body-encompassing and soft (tactile) textiles and garments not only establish the vulnerable position of the female family members but also reflects basic human nature to comfort one's self by wrapping supple and forgiving fabrics around one's unprotected body (Black et al. 60). These new more vulnerable appearances for the female royalty visually communicate their impotent position which is highly reflective and dependent on the positions of the familial male characters.

Furthermore, the role of hair (or the lack thereof) for the women in *Black Panther* communicates the importance of Black women's hair and hairstyles. In one powerful scene, Okoye, to disguise herself, dons a red floor-length gown, gold flats, and a bobbed wig. Okoye expresses her dislike for wearing the wig, calling it "disgraceful" and later during a physical altercation violently throws off her wig to distract and disarm her opponent.[2] While women's hairstyles in *Black Panther* range from shaved heads to dreadlocks to braids and plaits, these looks are often achieved through wigs and hair extensions. Black hair in its natural state as it grows from the head, is rarely seen for any of the characters. Returning to the example of exile during King T'Challa's disposement, Queen Ramonda's hair is finally visible showing her age with gray hair hanging down freely, unrestrained without her crown/hat. The shift from highly stylized and coifed to hanging loosely reveals her vulnerability in the moment. The hair styling of the queen and Okoye suggests the importance of hairstyles in establishing each of the character's perceived power and potency.

The actresses in *Black Panther* portray powerful dynamic characters who challenge the stereotypical roles for women, especially Black women. Still, the women are socially and politically positioned as subordinates to their male counterparts.   Although   Shuri   displays   exceptional   intelligence   and

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[2] The scene where Okoye dramatically rips off and throws her wig is reminiscent of a famous moment in fashion when model Alek Wek threw off her blond wig in 1998 while walking the Betsey Johnson runway show (McDonald).

accomplishments and Okoye is a proven strategist, fighter, and loyal confidant, neither Shuri nor Okoye are in positions of power. Despite the significance of *Black Panther* and noteworthy roles for the Black actresses, the film only moves the needle forward slightly for women of color.

Empowering Stylistic Choices

Dress is a non-verbal and visual language that often reinforces controlling images but can also be a means through which women challenge dominant narratives and tropes. Despite the constraints of controlling images, there are overt and covert challenges to this imagery in film. *Black Panther* successfully subverts controlling images by presenting dress infused with complex narratives of Black womanhood. Typically Black women's costume reflects a one-dimensional model of Black femininity defined by controlling images. By adorning Black women in a mixture of dress styles and symbols, at times contradictory, this act represents an important divergence in the representation and racialization of Black women. The symbolic complexity embedded in the clothing helps to convey the nuances of Black women's femininity. By using each garment to communicate competing discourses, such as culture, strength, and, femininity, *Black Panther* challenges one-dimensional stereotypes of Black women. The costuming in *Black Panther* depicts Black women as complex subjects without demonizing other women. This is markedly different in comparison to *Girls Trip*, wherein clothing conveys respectable Black femininity and is presented in contrast to fashion that depicts non-respectable controlling images.

One example of the complexity that is embedded in the costuming of *Black Panther* is the wardrobe of Princess Shuri. Her clothing suggests an alternative identity for Black women as smart and funny and not at all sexualized. Instead of portraying a Jezebel, Sapphire, Welfare Mother, or Mammy controlling image, Shuri's garb conveys other messages as well such as cultural intelligence, strength, and femininity. In one scene, Shuri wears a silver pleated skirt and wide tan belt in combination with a cowrie shell choker necklace and baseball t-shirt that displays an Adinkra symbol known as the seed of the wawa tree. The skirt and belt suggest femininity, while the cowrie shell and Adinkra symbol suggest an Africa-centric aesthetic. In particular, the wawa seed, known for having an extremely hard shell, symbolizes strength and toughness. The symbol of the wawa seed is meant to inspire an individual to persevere through hardship. Costume designer Ruth E.

Carter says this symbol was chosen to communicate Shuri's purpose and importance to the nation of Wakanda (Adams). Shuri's shirt, coupled with her skirt and cinched waist, simultaneously convey strength, femininity, and knowledge. The multilayered costuming communicates that Shuri is an intelligent woman with a high historical and cultural quotient who is at once feminine and strong.

When the Dora Milaje were introduced in the original *Black Panther* comic book, they were portrayed with long flowing hair and mini-skirts and had a much more subservient role to the king. The film, however, opted for a different aesthetic (Broadnax). By changing the dress of the Dora Milaje to include shaven heads, pants, and armor for the *Black Panther* film, the Black women were depicted as powerful. At the same time, their costuming also presents key symbols of femininity through the outline of their breasts under the armor and smoky eye makeup, long eyelashes, and red lipstick. Gurira, who portrays Okoye, states: "The ferocity is not compromised for femininity. They're both allowed to coexist and we don't see that enough and we don't know that enough societally as little girls growing up. You can be both. You can combine those two things and how fun is that?" (Toby).

In reference to the wig-throwing scene, Gurira states, "It's almost like a removal of a shackle and breaking free of a certain type of bondage about what it means to fit into a convention" (Toby). The convention to which she is referring is the social unacceptability of Black women's natural hair, which has been penalized in workplaces and cause for expulsion in schools (Morris). As a result, historically and contemporary Black women have used wigs, extensions, straightened hair, and weaves to achieve a socially accepted aesthetic (Ford). Knowing it serves a purpose, Okoye wears the wig, albeit begrudgingly, when it serves her cause and rejects the wig when it is no longer useful. Wearing a wig and subsequently throwing it off signals the strategic styling and physical malleability Black women are required to engage in to achieve their goals. Often body modifications are hidden and passed off as normal to achieve social acceptability, but in this scene Okoye's modifications are revealed as socially savvy and strategic (Blum). By seamlessly navigating through multiple social expectations, Okoye makes intelligent decisions about her dress behavior.

Presenting dress that reveals the process undertaken to decide what to wear then challenges the notion that women are what they wear or, at least, what they are wearing at any given moment. Also, by revealing the decision-making process that is a part of dress, the myth of clothing as a natural extension of an individual's

essence, identity, or personality falls apart. The linear relationship between physical appearance and character is challenged. By displaying a wide range of dress choices among characters as well as multiple and contradictory layers of symbols within each character's dress, it becomes increasingly difficult to distill each of the women into one-dimensional stereotypes. This is particularly important because the typical representations of Black women in film tend to be limited to controlling images which serve to reinforce oversimplified versions of Black femininity. Furthermore, within the context of film, revealing how decisions are made about dress, plants a seed in the audience about how the other characters arrived at their dress decisions. As a consequence, the film audience is challenged to pay attention to the context and social situations that produce each decision about what to wear, rather than reducing the character's subjectivity to a controlling image.

Power, Position, and Politics of the Mediated Black Woman Discussion

Regarding her role as Okoye in *Black Panther*, Gurira states:

> I loved how subversive [that moment] was, and how it's [playing with] conventional norms around feminine beauty. [Okoye] is just being who she is. You know, being proud of her bald head and her tats. And how her femininity—all of the women [in the film]—their femininity coincides so seamlessly with their ferocity. And how those two things do not have to compromise themselves for the other thing. I thought that one moment kind of encapsulated all of that. (Warner)

Despite the empowering roles and associated costumes for women in *Girls Trip* and *Black Panther*, these Black women's characters are still relegated to the margins of the storylines in favor of heterosexual relationship issues or support for male characters' storylines.

The media claims that both *Black Panther* and *Girls Trip* "pass" the Bechdel Test,[3] but we argue against this claim. The Bechdel Test evaluates how women are portrayed in relationship to male characters. Even in films where the primary characters are women, the female characters' storylines revolve around the male

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[3] The Bechdel Test originated from a comic strip. Over time, the test was named for the comic's creator and included three criteria: (1) fiction work that includes two or more women; (2) at least two of the women engage with one another; and (3) the discussions between women exclude discussions of a man or men (O'Meara). According to our research, both *Black Panther* and *Girls Trip* fail the Bechdel Test.

characters. In *Girls Trip*, the female characters continuously return to topics that are heterogeneous to the male characters such as securing sexual partners, a cheating husband, divorce, and male betrayal. Still, there are scenes from both films that demonstrate real progress regarding the changing roles for Black actresses, where the female characters are not stereotypes and own their agency. The roles of women in these two films are significant and resonated with female audiences even if the films did not pass the Bechdel Test. For example, 45 percent of moviegoers to *Black Panther* were women which is not the typical audience of a superhero film (Coleman) and *Girls Trip*'s primary audience were women which of that number included 14 percent infrequent moviegoers (Kelley).

Though in many ways the women's style disrupts controlling images, they cannot escape the popular symbolism of these visual types. As the Black women attempt to liberate themselves from stereotypical and patriarchal frameworks, they are often forced back into familiar positions with popularized interpretations of their dress and stylized appearances confronting them in contemporary movie portrayals of Black women. For *Black Panther*, it means casting women in supportive roles. For *Girls Trip*, it means only narrowly sideswiping casting women as stereotypes. This is most clear in Dina's costuming which resembles the "welfare queen" who dresses in symbolic displays of wealth that tend to look more tacky than chic. Or, in the case of the man-stealing Instagram villain who is cast as the "jezebel" leading with her sexuality in revealing clothing (Hill Collins 84). And, yet, the other three central female characters, Lisa, Sasha, and Ryan are not as easily cast as controlling images though they often deal in the politics of respectability. This positions *Girls Trip* as well as *Black Panther* as important steps forward in the portrayal of Black women in film while at the same time leaving room for improvement.

Both *Girls Trip* and *Black Panther* offer highly constructed stylizations of the Black female characters. In both films, the primary female characters do not wear or style their hair in natural styles; instead, they have shaved heads, wear wigs and extensions, or display straightened hair or highly stylized hair. Still, all of the images are sexualized even if the actresses do not readily see it as such. In *Girls Trip*, Dina is continually dressed in a sexy ghetto-fabulous aesthetic and all of the women verbally harass Lisa to dress more sensually in order to secure a man for sex. While the women in *Black Panther* are not in constant pursuit of men, they are always sexualized in their dress. Okoye's military dress while formal and imposing is also form-fitting to reveal her feminine form. Prior to exile, even Queen

Ramonda's dress was sculpted to structure her aging body into a younger hourglass silhouette.

Relationships between characters drive storylines and develop dimensional characters with relatable narratives. The women in *Black Panther* are not the central characters to the storyline, unlike *Girls Trip* that primarily focuses on the relationships between four Black women. In *Black Panther*, the evolution of the romantic relationships and friendships revolve around and stem from the battles for power in Wakanda, while in *Girls Trip*, the friendships are more organic with complex hierarchies and involvements. The relationships examined in these two distinct films establish the diversity of characters.

Regardless of their role, these Black female characters represent new and redefined images for Black women. Accordingly, Gurira states:

It's [Okoye's costume] a subverted standard of beauty. I'm sure people have to pick up on that. That's the first thing I thought. It so subverts the idea of feminine beauty…. Their outfits are very structured but beautiful. Feminine but not revealing. The red lip, the lashes, you know? The bald heads, the tattoos and they're going to kick your butt. (Toby)

In addition, the physical environments and settings for each movie assists in impacting the ways the dress and styles manifest in the real world for Black women. *Girls Trip* is set in the well-known urban environment of New Orleans, Louisiana. In addition to some scenes set in an urban American neighborhood, *Black Panther* is set in the fantastic land of Wakanda that imagines an alternative history and future of the world. In this Afrofuturistic context, Black Africans have developed the technology to propel them beyond any other civilization. "In many ways, *Black Panther* creates a credible alternative to colonialism, exploring an Afrofuturistic narrative of a country that had never been colonized and oppressed" (Murray). This alternative reality contributes to the characters' *Black Panther* dress and fashion latitude that is not possible for the characters in *Girls Trip*. For example, the backdrop for *Girls Trip* is the legal discrimination against Black hair textures in American schools and workplace.

Furthermore, casting of dark-skinned actresses for all of the main female characters in *Black Panther* eschews the typical colorism in film. This is a significant divergence from *Girls Trip*, wherein the protagonists have medium and light skin colors and the villains have darker skin complexions. The lead actresses of *Girls Trip* represent historical trends for colorism in film casting and society

whereas *Black Panther's* Afrofuturistic setting is highlighted by the dark-skinned successful nation of Wakanda (Leary).

Summary

In our research, we explored the ways in which the mediated Black female body experiences racialization through style and dress in recent popular films *Girls Trip* and *Black Panther.* Accordingly, we examined the stylistic choices that represent or challenge dominant ideals of being a Black woman. To this end, we considered the prevailing expectations for Black female bodies and how these expectations are reproduced through fashion and dress. Dress in films (and popular culture at large) functions as a mechanism to create, challenge, and reinforce racialized understandings of Blackness in popular culture. The stylistic presentations of Black women in films reinforce, challenge, and re-create what it means to be Black and feminine. Accordingly, racialized representations of Black actresses reveal the power, status, and politics of the mediated Black woman.

In both *Girls Trip* and *Black Panther*, Black actresses are challenging controlling images and stereotypes imposed upon Black women. Their dress and aesthetic styles are not always predictable from past stereotypes commonly seen in Hollywood films. *Girls Trip*'s roles for the actresses continue some of the traditional stereotypes for Black women but still offers visual evidence of progress in dress, styles, and skin tone. While *Black Panther* forges new territory, the film is just small steps away from old tried-and-true territories. Overall, *Girls Trip* and *Black Panther* challenge past notions of the ways race is performed for blockbuster films. The relative success of each film further offer opportunities for Hollywood filmmakers to embrace more risk-taking scripts that present Black women in diverse and thoughtful roles and dress.

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