Feminist scholarship about the media is often guided by three key themes, including: (1) stereotypes of women in advertising, film, television, and other media; (2) differences among media representations of women of color; and (3) the role of women in the interlocking axes of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The purpose of this chapter is to, first, offer a glimpse of media stereotypes of women of color. Second, it defines terms relevant to the study of feminist theory as they relate to the study of race. Finally, it explores the primary teachings of Black Feminists, which are central to the scholarship about race and gender.

Stereotypes, Gender, and Race

Lippmann (1922) defines stereotypes as a form of perception that imposes ways of seeing. In other words, “stereotypes are ‘mental cookie cutters’—they force a simple pattern upon a complex mass and assign a limited number of characteristics to all members of the group” (Nachbar and Lausé 1992: 236). Stereotypes are particularly important in gender studies because media messages help citizens make sense of the world around them, especially for depictions of traditionally marginalized groups. It is often through media images that people negotiate identities, ideas, and relationships with other people (see, for example, Hall 1998, 2000; Enriques 2001; and Ono 2009). Additionally, stereotyping is a social tool that builds group solidarity and creates an “us versus them” mentality. The dominant group – the cultural elite – uses stereotypes to dehumanize other cultural groups that differ in values, beliefs, or physical characteristics to maintain its own political power and social control (Lassiter 1999).


Researchers have consistently found negative, biased news coverage of racial and ethnic minorities. U.S. entertainment media and news coverage of people of color
have historically reflected and reinforced racial stereotypes by portraying them as lazier, less intelligent, less moral, and more prone to crime than whites (see, for example, Martindale 1990; Bagdikian 1969; Entman 1990; Chaudhary 1980; Dixon and Linz 2000; Sylvie 1995; Dates and Barlow 1993; Wilson and Gutierrez 2003; Signorielli 2009; Campbell 1995; Campbell et al. 2012). For most racial groups, stereotypes are divided along gender lines, which are explored in the following section.

Asian-American Women

Stereotypes characterizing Asians in movies and TV shows in the US have remained constant over the decades (Scooper 2001). Asian stereotyping began as people from Asian countries migrated to America to help mine gold during the Gold Rush in the middle of the nineteenth century. They worked hard, saved money, opened shops, and eventually competed with Anglos for desirable jobs. In response, early artifacts in popular culture—advertising, newspapers, theater—often depicted members of the ethnic group negatively, as clannish and deceptive. Those messages persisted well into the twentieth century, and the few Asian characters in film and television dramas were often portrayed as villains or owners of laundry shops and restaurants (Harris 1999).

Asian males often played asexual characters and nerds with varying skills in martial arts, ranging from Kung Fu Masters to evil gangsters (Chon-Smith 2006). On the other hand, Asian females were highly sexualized in U.S. movies and television shows, and China doll and geisha stereotypes were extremely exotic and erotic. In stark contrast to that stereotype was the dragon lady, highly skilled in martial arts. In the 1990s and 2000s, Asian women’s images improved somewhat as they appeared in a wider range of crucial roles (e.g., Fong 2002; Paek and Shah 2003). However, their stereotypical sexual power and attractiveness to Anglo males has been deeply ingrained in Americans’ perceptions and in the U.S. media, and Asian women in film and on TV are typically paired with a white co-star (Tierney 2006; Wang and Cooper 2008).

Also worth noting is that not all Asian stereotypes are negative. While media stereotype other people of color as “problem” minorities, they often cast Asian Americans as the “model” minority. The model minority ideal portrays the group as hard working and dedicated to education. Thus, they achieve success and assimilation. The term “model minority” was first coined by sociologist William Peterson in 1966 in an article, “Success Story: Japanese-American Style” published in the New York Times Magazine (Peterson). He suggested that although Asian Americans, as an ethnic minority, were marginalized, they had achieved much more success in the United States than other minority groups.

The “tiger mom” phenomenon added a new dimension to the model minority stereotype and is used to explain why many Asian students excel. On January 8, 2011, the Wall Street Journal published an excerpt of, “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior,” written by Yale law professor Amy Chua in her memoir, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother. In the book, Chua (2011) ridiculed Western-parenting styles as too soft. She held up Chinese parenting as the epitome of successful child-rearing, and the book attracted considerable public attention after the Wall Street Journal published the excerpt.

Studies indicate that during the 1990s and 2000s, images of Asian women improved. Asian women during this period appeared in a wider variety of major roles, in affluent settings, and with positive images. In terms of interactions with other people, Asian women are portrayed as somewhat more active and approachable than their male
counters, which is consistent with previous studies of sexual stereotypes that permeated Asian females with stereotypical sexual power and attractiveness.

Native-American Women

The longest-standing portrayals of Native Americans are also dichotomous. On one hand, the “ignoble savage” is a stereotypically violent Indian (Griffiths 2001). Once conquered, he or she becomes a thief, a drunkard, and a beggar, unwilling to work but willing to accept government handouts. On the other hand, the “noble savage” is the good or redeemable Indian who is close to nature (Griffiths 2001). The male noble savage is often shown hunting buffalo or displaying expert equestrian skill, while the female noble savage combines elements of innocent, natural beauty with forbidden, exotic sexuality (Merskin 1998).

Popular culture portrayals of Native Americans have not redressed historical wrongs (Lobo and Talbot 2001). For instance, from Seinfeld, a classic television situation comedy of the 1990s, came the episode in which the hero continually finds himself insulting the Native-American woman he wishes to date, using idioms such as “Indian-giver” to draw laughs (Lobo and Talbot 2001). More recently, Lacroix (2011) examined examples from several popular television shows, concluding that representations have not changed much. Native Americans on shows such as The Sopranos, Saturday Night Live, Chappelle’s Show, Family Guy, Drawn Together, and South Park include depictions of Native Americans that reference age-old racist stereotypes of the ignoble savage while simultaneously working to construct a new trope—“the casino Indian.” Lacroix (2011) charted the themes of this stereotype and concluded that while the ignoble savage of the past posed a threat of violence, the contemporary casino Indian image poses economic and political threats. Findings demonstrate Native-American women are still portrayed as exotic and often the prize for a lead character who is usually white or black. Rarely are they in a starring role next to a male counterpart of the same race.

Latinas

Likewise, representations of Hispanics are divided along gender lines. Typically, males are identified by their youthful appearance, aggressive nature, dishonesty, and unkempt appearances. The Latin lover has a hot temper and is sexually aggressive, while the comic or buffoon has secondary status and a lack of intelligence and motivation to succeed (Berg 2002; Mastro and Behm-Morazwitz 2005). Stereotypical behavioral characteristics assigned to Latinas include romantic, sensual, sexual, dependent, powerless, naive, childlike, pampered, and irresponsible (e.g., Mastro and Behm-Morazwitz 2005; Berg 2002). According to Berg (2002), Latinas continue to be characterized as maids who are subservient yet hot tempered (Soto 2008). Similarly, the “dark lady” is dichotomously portrayed as both exotic and erotic, and virginal and aristocratic (Berg 2002; Shugart 2007).

In many cases, historical stereotypes extend to modern representations. For instance, the popular TV drama Desperate Housewives, which aired from 2004 to 2012, featured Eva Longoria in the role of Gabrielle Solis, a Latina who fits many of the stereotypes outlined above (Merskin 2007). At first glance, Longoria’s role appears to be a breakthrough for Latinas. However, a critical reading of the program shows that Gabrielle’s role is stereotypical (Shugart 2007). For instance, in one storyline, she portrayed a conniving gold-digger who cheated on her husband with a much younger “pool boy.” Latina actress and singer Jennifer Lopez also demonstrated the longevity of negative
portrayals of Latinas. Media coverage and movie roles featuring the actress often focused on her curviness rather than her talent, which Guzman (2010) argues might be acceptable in the construction of Lopez as a Latina celebrity, but is not considered acceptable for Anglo celebrities. The researcher concluded that this construction thereby complied with mainstream expectations of Latina beauty, which make it okay for media outlets to focus primarily on sexuality.

**Arab and Muslim Women**

When describing the media’s treatment of Arabs and Muslim, Akram (2002) explains how media never depict members of this group as “ordinary people, families with social interactions, or outstanding members of communities.” Instead, representations of Arabs and Muslims conjure images of “holy war,” terrorism, and oppressive patriarchy among the American public (66).

Portrayals of Arab and Muslim women are particularly negative. Historically, media have portrayed women in the Arab and Muslim worlds as either mysteriously exotic or oppressed and backward. Many images of Afghan women focus on the burqa, the traditional head-to-toe cover that shields women from public view (Ferree and Tripp 2006). Eltantawy (2007) examined articles that feed into the dominating yet distorted stereotype of the victimized and oppressed Muslim woman. She concluded that, especially after 9/11, newspapers increased their photos of mostly Afghani women with their faces veiled to the outside world.

**African-American Women**

As with other ethnic groups, stereotypes of African Americans tend to differ based on gender (Qasim, Hayat, and Asmat 2012). Historically, stereotypes of African-American women have institutionalized white and male supremacist ideologies that produce “specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation and overall domination of all Black people” (hooks 1992: 2).

Wallace (1979) asserted that the myth of the black superwoman essentially consists of stereotypes deeply rooted in slavery and the idea that although black women are able to do more physical labor than the average woman, “they consistently sacrifice themselves for others, have no emotion, and are really just men” (107). She adds that the matriarchal structure of the black family led by a strong black woman during slavery is often credited for the emasculation of the black man and subsequently the dysfunctional nature of the black family. She writes:

Less of a woman in that the Black woman is depicted as less ‘feminine’ and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman.

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These myths of the black superwoman have helped shape the negative perceptions of them as a whole, which carries over to present-day stereotypes found in imagery of black women. Representations of black women are often dichotomous in nature. They include the idea that they are either extremely “dumb” or extremely educated, ambitious or
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listless, attractive or ugly (Boylorn 2008). The sexually promiscuous black woman, also known as the “oversexed-black-Jezebel,” is an extreme opposite of the “mammy,” who is nurturing and passive (Moody and Dates 2014).

Sapphire, another opposite to mammy’s character, is a wisecracking, emasculating black woman whom media often depict in movies and television shows with her hands on her hips. She lets everyone know she is the boss (Yarborough and Bennett 2000). Scholars argue that Sapphire’s character is a control-agent for her counterpart, the corrupt African-American male character, whose lack of integrity and use of trickery provides her with an opportunity to emasculate him with her smart, insulting mouth (Yarborough and Bennett 2000; Collins 2005).

Feminist Theory

To counteract these negative stereotypes of women, feminist-informed research methods put race, gender, and gender-related issues at the center of analysis and highlight notions of power in various methods (Krolokke and Sorensen 2006). Gender-schema theory proposes that people see the world through the lens of gender and that cultural norms tend to polarize females and males by organizing social life around mutually exclusive gender roles (Bem 1981). Kamler (1999) defined “gender” as fluid, negotiable, and complex, versus “sex,” which is biological. Gender also refers to social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts (Holmes 2007).

Film, print, Web content, and broadcast news reflect ideological positions and help reproduce dominant forms of social power, whether based on race or gender. In her seminal work, Sexual Politics, Millett (1969) outlined the twin principles of patriarchy: “Male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger” (20). Media coverage often follows the patriarchal paradigm as outlined by Hartmann (1981), who defines the model as a set of materially based social relations that create a solidarity among men of all races and classes “who are united in their shared relationship of dominance over their women” (14–15).

In media studies, scholars study gender as it relates to power relationships because dominant groups establish and control communication methods (Orbe 1998; Gramsci 1971; Millett 1969). Scholars often apply Gramsci’s (1971) idea of hegemony to analyze mass media messages. Hegemony refers to “manufactured consent” rather than a deceitful plan crafted purposefully by those in positions of power to manipulate the system to serve dominant interests (Chomsky and Herman 1988). Hegemonic processes aim to build consensus among the masses that a certain ideology is normal and that any contradictions to it are deviant (Gramsci 1971). Considerable research has confirmed the existence of hegemonic representations through the study of race, physical appearance, and gender stereotypes (see Collins 2005; Ludvig 2006; Zinn and Dill 1994; Hall 1980; hooks 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Carter and Steiner 2003; van Zoonen 1994; Campbell 1995).

Feminist Theory Timeline

Historically, the dates 1890–1940 typically coincide with the first wave of feminism and its educational, suffragist, socialist, and professional agendas. As Scott (2008) observed, “Feminist activism and ideology of the period, as well as reactions against them, made gender a field of contention, sometimes labeled the ‘sex wars’” (7). The feminist “first wave” is generally identified with the mobilization of strong feminist movements in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and North America that were
concerned with a number of egalitarian and radical issues, which included equal rights for women, educational and legal reform, slavery, and the right to vote (Vavrus 2010). Issues of sexuality and gratification for women and reproductive rights and birth control were highly controversial dimensions of the first wave (Kellner 2002).

“Second-wave” feminists included young women and girls who were part of the massive baby boom generation (1946–64), born during the period of economic prosperity that followed WWII. Many were the first in their families to receive university educations and were greatly influenced by and involved in the civil rights movement. Societal conventions following the war disenchanted others who went back into conventional roles, often as full-time wives and mothers. Betty Friedan, in the 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*, examined the role of women’s magazines, Freudian psychology, and educational institutions in keeping women in a subservient position. Building upon the suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she described “the problem that has no name” or the widespread unhappiness of women in the 1950s and early 1960s (Friedan 1963). It was during this period that Friedan, who died in 2006, was a prominent leader of the feminist movement. She was a founding member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), the National Abortion Rights Action, and the National Women’s Political Caucus (Betty Friedan Biography 2012).

The feminist “third wave,” as described by Rebecca Walker and others, began in the early 1990s in response to shortcomings of the “second wave” (Gillis, Gillian, and Munford 2007). During this period, women examined not only gender equality but also the intersections between race, class, and culture. Third-wave feminists also distinguished themselves by focusing on issues of sexuality, challenging female heterosexuality and celebrating sexuality as a means of female empowerment. During this wave, there was an increased understanding of bisexual and trans identities. Third-wave feminism was heavily influenced by academic investigations of queer theory (Munro 2014). Queer theory posits that gender and sexuality are fluid categories and do not easily translate into binary understandings of “male” and “female” (Jakubowski 2014).

Second-wave feminists treated women as homogenous groups without paying attention to the many axes of difference that cleave apart the singular category of “women,” so the first two feminist waves limited participation by African-American women. Marabley (2005) noted both the feminist and black movements rendered African-American females and black feminism virtually invisible in mainstream politics and economics. bell hooks’ seminal *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981) noted the devaluation of black femininity and the invisibility of women of color in the feminist movement. She argued that these actions reinforced racism and classism within the movement. hooks’ book drew attention to the need for multiple feminisms; therefore, it was pivotal in the development of the third wave of feminism.

The women’s movement was quiet through the early 2000s, which are sometimes characterized as the “ladette” years, a culture marked by young women engaging in the heavy drinking sessions and bad behavior once reserved for men (Macrae 2013). But, as Coleman (2009) observed, new movements surfaced:

The past fifteen years has witnessed a proliferation of new feminisms: post-feminism, third wave feminism, cyberfeminism, power feminism, even DIY feminism. Depending on what you read, we are either in a postfeminist era or in the third wave of feminism.
In 2013, the women’s movement came back with force (Cochrane 2013). Today, the movement’s concerns shift constantly as activists personally encounter pay gaps, rising childcare costs, and pregnancy discrimination (Cochrane 2013). With the magnitude of these pressing issues, feminists fight on several fronts. The campaigns of the 2010s were started by individuals or small groups, who have responded to issues about which they feel strongly (Cochrane 2013).

Many commentators argue that the Web has enabled a shift from “third-wave” to “fourth-wave” feminism (e.g., Munro 2014; Martin and Valenti 2012; Schuster 2013). As Phillips and Cree wrote, “We are currently witnessing a resurgence of interest in feminism across the world, with a claim that we are experiencing a ‘fourth wave’ in the global North that has its birthplace primarily on the Internet” (2014: 930). The Internet has created a “call-out” culture, in which “sexism or misogyny can be ‘called out’ and challenged” (Munro 2014, para. 7). This culture is indicative of the continuing influence of the third wave, with its focus on challenging bigotry and misogyny in everyday rhetoric in mass media messages (Munro 2014).

Fourth-wave feminism combines finances, politics, mental health, and stability in an overarching vision of change (Diamond 2009). Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, detailed her struggle to achieve equality in a historically male-dominated workplace environment in her 2013 book, *Lean In*. She encourages women to take their places at decision-making tables and to “lean in” to their careers. Sandberg offers strategies for women to pursue career advancement without sacrificing family life. She argues that it is no longer necessary for women to choose between having children or careers.

*Lean In’s* reviews were mixed, with critics praising it for its insightful advice on how to balance both career and family and panning it for a seemingly elitist perspective. For instance, hooks (2013) discussed Sandberg’s definition of feminism, which she stated, “begins and ends with the notion that it’s all about gender equality within the existing social system.” hooks continued:

> From this perspective, the structures of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy need not be challenged. And she makes it seem that privileged white men will eagerly choose to extend the benefits of corporate capitalism to white women who have the courage to “lean in.”

*(para. 5)*

hooks adds that Sandberg’s construction of simple categories (women and men) was long ago challenged by visionary feminist thinkers, particularly individual black women and women of color.

### The Black Feminist Movement

The long and arduous fight for equal rights for black women began during the slave era (Gines 2011). In 1831, Maria Stewart published a pamphlet critiquing the prevailing assumptions that blacks were “an inferior race” (275) and men were superior to women. She called on black women to unite in support of one another (Gines 2011). The booklet also discussed class oppression and emphasized the exploitation of black women as free labor. During the same period, Sojourner Truth fought for the abolition of slavery and for women’s suffrage (Guy-Sheftall 1995). This was the beginning of the fight for equality for black women.
Studies included in the Black Feminist literature have shown that while media and societal structures are unjust to both black and white women, they marginalize black women to a greater extent (e.g., Wallace 1979; Collins 2005; Benedict 1997; hooks 1992; Squires 2007). Alice Walker (1983), Angela Davis (1983), bell hooks (1981), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), and many other womanists argued that black women experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression from that of white women.

In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins identifies Black Feminists as “women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society” (22). Black Feminists assert that one cannot conceive of black women’s experience of various issues as separable from their experience of racism. That is, women of color do not experience sexism in addition to racism, but sexism in the context of racism. Stereotypes in popular culture—described earlier in this chapter—illustrate key differences (Mathis 2007). hooks (1992) labels this matrix a *politic of domination* and describe how it operates along interlocking axes of race, class, and gender oppression. Black Feminists contend that the liberation of black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression.

**The Concept of Intersectionality**

Debates about the adequacy of gender as the central concern of feminist theory led to the useful concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 2004), which emphasizes the study of intersections between forms or systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination. Beale (1970) identified multiple systems of oppression facing black women along the lines of race, class, gender, and sex in *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*. Black feminists make the perspectives of black women central by embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression (see Zinn and Dill 1994; Dill 1979; Davis 1983; Collins 1990; hooks 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). Davis (2008) points out the complications of the concept:

Since its inception, the concept of “intersectionality”—the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination—has been heralded as one of the most important contributions to feminist scholarship. Despite its popularity, there has been considerable confusion concerning what the concept actually means and how it can or should be applied in feminist inquiry.

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Subsequent studies have used intersectionality to examine how whiteness is privileged and to expose how the dominant “gaze” of whiteness shapes and shades societal understandings of black femininity (e.g., Griffin 2014; Collins 1990; hooks 1992; Benedict 1997; hooks 1992; Squires 2007; Schell 2003). Black Feminist Theory and the notion of intersectionality have been applied in a variety of studies of the media, including several described in the next portion of this chapter.

**Applying Feminist Theory**

A number of scholars have observed that journalistic coverage of white women who have “gone missing” is far different from the coverage of missing African-American women.
Liebler (2010) cited the examples of two California college students, Kristin Smart and April Gregory, who both disappeared over the same weekend. Kristin, who was white and from an upper-middle-class background, received a great deal of media attention. On the other hand, April, an African-American student at Syracuse University, received very little media coverage. Her university even failed to announce her disappearance. Liebler (2010) writes that one stark difference between the two young women, besides race, was class. While Kristin was a principal’s daughter, April worked at a McDonald’s. Liebler argues that middle-class missing women have media-savvy parents who can help to shape the media’s portrayal of their daughters, resulting in inequitable media treatment across class lines. The author noted that April had two strikes against her—her class and her race.

Similarly, Moody, Dorries, and Blackwell (2009) concluded that national news coverage of missing black women demonstrated numerous inconsistencies in comparison to the coverage of missing white women. For instance, just the number of transcripts found in the research suggested that coverage of missing white women was more prominent and lengthier than missing black women. This skewed coverage of missing, white, young, attractive, middle- to upper-class women became so commonplace in the mid-2000s, PBS Journalist Gwen Ifill referred to the phenomenon as “missing white woman syndrome” at the Unity Convention of Journalists in 2004 (Johnson 2005).

Conservative political commentator Michelle Malkin referred to this trend in June 2005 as “missing pretty girl syndrome” and “damsel in distress syndrome” (Malkin 2005). The assumption, backed by media ratings, is that white viewers may not connect with stories unless they see themselves as possible victims (Kane 2004). Eventually, this oversight led to self-criticism focusing on the disparity in coverage. Journalists admitted wealthy, attractive, white women were much more likely to receive attention and coverage than missing black, older, and unattractive women (Moody, Dorries, and Blackwell 2009).

A second media representation that Black Feminist Theorists have examined is the portrayal of black, female athletes, who have been found to receive less media attention or who are victimized by biased coverage. One study that examined sports magazines such as Sports Illustrated and Women’s Sports and Fitness found that black women were scarce. Maas and Hasbrook (2001) found that when they were depicted, black women were more likely than white women to be depicted in team sports, which they argued are considered “more masculine” than individual sports. Such depictions imply black female athletes do not meet white American standards of beauty and are defeminized. Studies have found that U.S. sports media often give women of color considerably less coverage than they give their white female counterparts (Blinde and McCallister 1999; Maas and Holbrook 2001).

The absence of minority women supports the traditional belief that sports are solely for white, heterosexual, non-disabled women. Such portrayals are of concern because they play a role in how people treat black women. For example, Ruggiero and Lattin (2008) concluded female intercollegiate coaches, like their male counterparts, often believe they can arbitrarily use the power granted to them within the sports organization to perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes.

Rap music is a third topic that has been frequently examined from a Black Feminist perspective. Traditionally, African-American youth mainly used rap music to attract attention to social issues like poverty, police violence, and discrimination (Cheney 2005). However, some studies suggest rap music in the 2000s is more likely to promote violence, drug use, materialism, and degradation of women (Kubrin 2005; Zillmann et al. 1995; Dines and Humez 2002; Rose 1994; Sommers-Flanagan and Davis 1983; Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang 2009).
Based on a textual analysis of rap lyrics, Tyree (2009) concluded black women are the primary focus of misogynistic rap lyrics, and the targets of a sustained historical misogynistic American ideology. The analysis of 24 songs about rappers’ mothers and “baby mamas”—the unmarried mothers of their children—revealed that black male rappers saw their mothers as worthy of love, adoration, and respect, while “baby mamas” were sexual conquests portrayed as worthless, unethical gold-diggers and freaks. Tyree argued that the “baby mama” was usually young, single, poor, and urban, unlike the “black queen” who is middle-class and usually has a husband (Tyree 2009). A study by Reid-Brinkley (2007) also revealed a dichotomy between “good” black women media deem the “queens” or “princesses” and “bad” black women, who rappers characterize as whores.

Moody (2011) concluded that while rap songs depicting the “independent woman” present a somewhat positive representation of women, as they focus on “superwomen” skills and not drugs or violence, the songs often contain mixed messages. Both male and female rappers use misogynistic language to describe women; however, they juxtapose images of independence with material wealth and unrealistic ideals of beauty. Male rappers were more likely to include images of beautiful, overachieving women paired with average men while female rappers focus on their own sexual prowess.

To assess the effects of such lyrics, many scholars have explored audience responses to misogynistic lyrics (e.g., Devine 1989; Dunning and Sherman 1997). Cobb and Boettcher (2007) concluded that exposure to misogynistic rap lyrics “primed” sexist attitudes in males and defensive attitudes in females. Likewise, Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang (2007) found that viewing more misogynistic videos predicted greater acceptance of female degradation and less likelihood to believe that the music actually degraded females. Another study concluded only males showed higher levels of sexism towards women when viewing high-sex videos (Kistler and Lee 2009).

The Future of Gender and Black Feminist Studies

The studies highlighted in this brief review of the literature provide crucial insights regarding the ideas and positions society are likely to embrace about women. They also demonstrate that historical representations of women of color are still strong and have an impact on modern portrayals of the marginalized group. Cultural narratives and stereotypes send viewers, readers, and listeners hidden messages that suggest a story’s importance and, ultimately, people’s importance within society.

Future media studies must reexamine the way media outlets portray women of color in new media platforms. While censorship is undesirable, scholars must advocate for literacy programs that encourage students to identify and seek positive, accurate messages in mass media. Leaders in the entertainment industry must advocate for positive depictions of women. Reporters must also seek diverse sources and representations that characterize the wide spectrum of women. Furthermore, scholars might encourage public discussions and texts such as this one, which will help keep issues of race, class, and culture on citizens’ minds.

Maintaining both the invisibility and the negative representation of women and their ideas has been critical in maintaining social inequalities. Squires (2011) encourages critical communication scholars to identify and promote counter-frames to intervene and counteract stereotypical portrayals in popular culture. She argues that this type of advocacy becomes necessary as old discourses of colorblindness morph into celebrations of
a “post-racial” millennium. As Squires (2011) argues, “By diversifying our tactics and approaches to the problem, we can creatively and proactively make some headway and by doing so, set important examples for our students and colleagues in the process” (47).

References


Further Reading

