Screening Black Lives Matter: On-Screen Discourses, Distortions, and Depictions of Black Lives Matter

Francesca Sobande

Cardiff University

The year 2020 has frequently, and often flippantly, been referred to as a year of reckoning with racism in the US and further afield. Although sustained Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Black liberationist organizing has existed for many years before then (Ransby 2018), depictions and discourses concerning such activism were particularly prominent in 2020. More specifically, in the weeks that followed the deaths of Black people in the US such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Tony McDade, who died as a result of police brutality and violence, there was heightened media visibility of galvanizing BLM organizing. In the months since then, there has been a surge in popular culture discussions about anti-Blackness, anti-racism, white supremacy, and BLM; from the content created and shared by influencers, to the plots that underpin TV and film. The proliferation of popular culture depictions of BLM yields questions about media and marketing professionals' (mis)use of representations and rhetoric associated with social justice movements, and, more precisely, Black activism (Sobande 2019).

While some people may perceive an increase in on-screen depictions and discourses of BLM as indicating a progressive move closer towards liberationist goals, others may view such changes as simply signaling how media and marketing professionals tap into social justice activism to platform and/or recuperate the image of brands. Perhaps, there is a messy yet

potentially generative space in between which involves acknowledging and critiquing the thorny entanglements of visibility, transnational solidarities, Black liberationist work, and media institutions—without denying both the possibilities and limitations at stake when Black activism is depicted in various media contexts.

This commentary is titled "Screening Black Lives Matter" in an attempt to: 1) reflect on how BLM has been re-mediated and re-presented on screen in mainstream media and popular culture, and 2) consider who and what is typically excluded ("screened out") from such images, narratives, and media production processes. Make no mistake about it, inclusion in anti-Black institutions, including media organizations and industry discourse, is far from being a liberationist goal. However, reflecting on who and what is foregrounded in on-screen depictions and discourses related to BLM in TV and film can contribute to important understandings of how Black social justice organizing is typically framed in contemporary mainstream media in ways that distort the reality of activism, such as by sidelining the work of Black LGBTQ+ people and diminishing or denying the radical politics at the core of such collective and transformative efforts.

As Sherri Williams (2016) observes, while drawing on the central work of Patricia Hill Collins (2005), "mainstream media has a complicated history when it comes to covering black women, from overlooking them completely to circulating stereotypical images of them in abundance" (Williams 2016, 925). Further still, as the extensive work of Bailey and Trudy (2018, 762) highlights, the lives of Black women are distinctly impacted by "misogynoir," which is a term that "describes the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience." Relatedly, in what ways are popular culture portrayals of BLM shaped by misogynoir? To what

extent do representations of BLM in TV shows recognize the Black feminist praxis involved in much Black liberationist organizing, rather than presenting postfeminist perspectives that may be more "palatable" to white audiences? (How) do films that feature depictions of BLM and the legacy of Black grassroots organizers avoid glamourizing and romanticizing the work and risks involved in Black activism? Are there (m)any nuanced on-screen popular culture portrayals of BLM that do not foreground cis-heteropatriarchal viewpoints that valorize the leadership of Black cisgender heterosexual men, and trivialize, demonize, and erase the work and lives of everyone else? Is it possible for commercial media organizations to create depictions connected to BLM that do more to aid Black liberationist work than promote individual actors, producers, and industry professionals? These are just a few of many pressing questions that arise when critically considering what the ascent of on-screen depictions and discourses of BLM do or do not mean, including in terms of when, where, and why Black feminist and queer liberationist work is invisiblized in popular culture portrayals.

Kristen Warner's (2017) crucial work on "plastic representation", which explores "representational expectations" and "plastic deliveries", articulates the importance of not assuming that a rising number of media representations of Black people is a sign of significant changes regarding tackling intersecting oppressions and structural power regimes. In the poignant words of Warner (2017, 34), "[t]he hunt for representational affirmation can lead to erroneous interpretations". Furthermore, "[p]lastic representation uses the wonder that comes from seeing characters on screen who serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more. In this instance, then, progress is merely the increase of Black actors on screen in both leading and supporting roles" (Warner 2017, 35). It

is by turning to the vital research of scholars such as Warner (2017) that a clear, critical, and considered understanding of on-screen discourses and depictions of BLM can be grasped.

The TV and film "genre" of "Black Lives Matter" is simultaneously becoming more firmly established and contested, as is indicated by the inclusion of such a category on Netflix, and critiques of this that have been expressed. Moreover, brands are continuing to invoke images and ideas associated with BLM as part of their marketing strategies which are often repackaged as a commitment to addressing anti-Blackness and intersecting oppressions (Sobande 2021). What does all of this suggest about the future of the relationship between media, marketing, and Black activism? Such examples may symbolize the relentlessness of marketplace activities and commodification processes bolstered by deep-rooted histories of racial capitalism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy, which have involved corporate efforts to mimic and neutralize the radical potentials of Black liberationism. Are TV and film on-screen depictions and discourses of BLM inherently devoid of the capacity to contribute to valuable actions to address anti-Blackness? For me, the more meaningful issue to continue to examine is who and what do such on-screen images depict and distort, and (how) can such representations and the discourse surrounding them be understood as being the by-product of a complicated and, often, contradictory dynamic between social justice activism and consumer culture?

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