

The Reality of the Gaze: A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Flavor of Love*

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Abstract

This project examines Flavor of Love, a reality based dating show broadcast on Vh1, and its place in the continuum of televised subordination of women, particularly women of color. The study uses concepts of the “male” and “dominate” gaze to explore the interplay of race, gender, and misogyny, and the possible implications on audience perception. Television acts as a powerful socialization agent, and shapes audiences racially stratified and gendered world. Critical discourse analysis provides the rich contextual data necessary to extrapolate the relationship between race and gender inequality in reality television. This article highlights the production of meaning created by a visual cultural storyteller housed within a hegemonic tradition that objectifies and subjugates women of color powerless.

Keywords: Gender, Hegemony, Misogyny, Race, Reality Television.

SECTION-1

Flavor of Love is a reality based dating show starring Flavor Flav, the former front man for the 80's hip-hop group, Public Enemy. The show debuted in 2006 and catapulted Flavor Flav and the cable network its broadcast on, VH1, to unprecedented popularity. Over six million viewers tuned in to the finale of the first season of *Flavor of Love*. The success of the inaugural season led to two more. A record-breaking 7.5 million viewers watched the season finale of *Flavor of Love II*, making it the network's highest rated telecast ever and the second highest non-sports basic cable show of 2006 (Jet, 2006).

During the 1980s, Flavor Flav rose to fame from the radical subculture of black maleness, an emerging hip hop culture that materialized from militant anti-racist activism. Flavor Flav served as a front man for one of the most radical black rap groups of that era, Public Enemy (Watkins, 2005). In 1987, Public Enemy burst onto the scene with their debut album, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*. The album introduced listeners to a new sound, which employed an innovative style of sampling that used sounds from daily life to create beats and introduced politically and socially explicit lyricism to rap music. Their music provided motivation and inspiration for young black men seeking liberation from the chains of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2004).

Public Enemy's profound sound and politically charged persona enabled them to become one of the first rap acts to achieve crossover success (Hope, 2006). Consequently, Public Enemy emerged as one of the most important acts in the music industry using rap culture to, “act out a daring yet mostly symbolic revolution” (Watkins, 2005, p.116). Flav quickly became renowned for his outlandish sense of style and asinine behavior. He provided drumming and comedic relief while wearing gold teeth, over-sized sunglasses, and a large clock. Flavor Flav's jester-like, yet subtly edgy demeanor, positioned him as the group's visual centerpiece. In addition, Flav provided vocals for hits like “9-1-1 is a Joke” and in doing so he transcended the role of a modern-day minstrel and became a significant revolutionary figure in the world of rap by becoming its first “hype” man (Hess, 2006).

In the early 90s, despite being an integral member of a revolutionary rap group responsible for initiating a movement in black culture that cultivated self-empowerment and united fronts, Flav began yielding to the benefit and priorities of corporate interests. Eventually Flav became a casualty of the revolution he and Public Enemy inspired and ultimately spent over a decade in entertainment obscurity. The reemergence of Flavor Flav in the 21st century, and the debut of *Flavor of Love*, gave television viewers their first chance to see the original “black bachelor.”

This essay continues the ongoing interrogation of race, gender, and representation in media, proceeding from the intellectual discourse and critical studies of Fiske (1986, 1987, 1989, 1996), Gilroy (1992), Hall (1992), and hooks (1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2003). Whether speaking to issues of gender and race, or politics and economics, critical studies can unmask the deeply embedded power structures that attempt to sustain dominant ideologies (Bell-Jordan, 2008). Hence, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of *Flavor of Love* can facilitate a significant critique of the constructions of race and gender inequality and contribute meaningfully to critical work on reality television shows.

Along with CDA, Mulvey's (1975) and Russell's (1991) examinations of audience viewing perspectives in classical Hollywood cinema will be used as the framework to consider the ways in which reality television creates and maintains gender inequality, race-based stereotypes, and masculine viewing audience perceptions. Because cinema represents the precursor to television, referencing film helps place the televised imagery under review in proper context. Also, it aids in making clear the continuum of racist and misogynistic imagery currently depicted on television.

Additionally, this work identifies reality dating shows' (specifically *Flavor of Love*) place in perpetuating depictions that become a part of the total discourse housed in the hegemonic tradition that visually objectifies, subjugates, demeans, and ultimately renders women powerless. Finally, the study recognizes the inner workings of televised imagery as a system, which is part of an ideological apparatus that structures a white patriarchal world as normal (Mulvey, 1975; Russell, 1991). This article suggests that engaging in semiotic guerrilla warfare by creating alternate meanings to mediated texts will provide readers with the tools necessary to resituate existing power sources through critical engagement and self-definition (Fiske, 1989).¹

SECTION- 2

Studies illustrating the omnipresence of television and the ways in which it serves as a powerful socialization agent that influences public discourse and interpersonal interaction are plentiful in social science literature (Holtzman, 2000; McQuail, 2005; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990; Weimann, 2000). Lippmann (1922) suggests that the pictures in our heads are mainly constructs from the pictures we get from mass media. More recently, researchers refined Lippmann's notion by investigating how specific media content leads to the construction of related social realities (Mastero & Kopacz, 2006; Fujioka, Tan & Tan, 2000). As Gray (1995) argued, television is a contested terrain rather than a finished effect of powerful external determinants. Audiences, largely, possess the cognitive skills necessary to challenge mediated imagery; however, they may not possess the skill set necessary to assess the nuanced underpinnings of televised imagery. Audiences must recognize the linkages from current contextual mediated meanings to its origins in order to engage in dialogue and voice dissent. Hence, television acts as a productive point of engagement where struggles surrounding power, inequity, domination, and difference begin. Weimann (2000) suggests that television is not only the most powerful system of cultural diffusion but also the most pervasive agent of socialization.

Socialization is the total set of experiences in which people learn about norms and expectations and learn how to function as respected and accepted members of a culture (Holtzmann, 2000; Miller, 1999). Through socialization, people learn to enact a more limited set of behaviors based on the internalized dominant values and norms (Holtzmann, 2000). The logic underlying the thesis of media socialization is that media can teach norms and values by way of symbolic reward and punishment for different kinds of behavior (McQuail, 2005). In other words, media provide a framework for acceptable lifestyles and living, and prescribe acceptable actions and behaviors to audiences. Kellner (1995) says “[the] television... industry provides models of what it means to be male and female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless... media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and its deepest values: it defines what is good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (p. 1).

¹ Semiotic guerilla warfare is expanded upon further in the discussion section of this article.

What makes television distinctive from other media is “its ability to standardize, streamline, amplify, and share common cultural norms with virtually all members of society” (Morgan & Signorelli, 1990, p. 13). Its socially constructed versions of reality bombard nearly all classes and groups with the exact same perspectives.

SECTION- 2.1

Reality television has several definitions within existing scholarship (Orbe, 2008). Andrejevic (2004), Dowd (2006), Murray and Ouellette (2008), Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003), and Orbe (2008) have all highlighted different aspects that help to create a complete definition of the genre. The basic definition of the reality genre is programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur. The majority of reality fare depicts common people engaging in uncommon tasks i.e., wilderness survival, international travel and common tasks i.e., dating, home redecorating, giving viewers the chance to compare and contrast their own lives with those of the shows protagonists (Rose & Wood, 2005). The genre, adapted and adopted primarily from British television, is wildly popular. In a typical week, reality programming fills four of the top ten slots of most watched shows (“Top Ten,” 2009). Moreover, reality shows on FOX, CBS, ABC, and CW, formally the WB, beat each network’s average ratings in the 18 to 34-year-old demographic (Adalian, 2004).

While the reality realm represents television’s newest genre, it also exemplifies the old adage ‘the more things change the more they stay the same.’ Reality television is not the first genre to depict the domination of women by men, it simply represents the latest incarnation of misogyny-ridden television programming (Holtzmann, 2000). Several genres of popular television shows, from earlier decades including situation comedies such as: *The Jeffersons* and *All in the Family*; dramas such as: *Dallas* and *NYPD Blue*; and daytime soap operas such as: *All My Children* and *General Hospital*, blatantly display(ed) patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies (hooks, 1992). While social, economic, and political struggles continue to take place within the boundaries of reality television, it presents a new and more dangerous threat to viewers because it claims to represent authentic social interaction with truly authentic representations of people (Patton, 2006). Reality shows, however, are anything but “real.” They employ writers and directors who “construct” the most provocative “realities” at the lowest cost for networks. Dubrofsy (2006) states, “what occurs on reality television shows is a constructed fiction with the twist that real people create the fiction of the series” (p. 41). Thus, the narrative that reaches viewers is one that has been constructed, manipulated, manufactured, and edited to project the beliefs and ideologies of the storyteller. To the viewers, reality television shows may be seen as innocuous forms of voyeuristic entertainment (Yesil, 2001). However, when critically examined, reality shows, especially reality dating, appear to represent a means for dissemination and maintenance of ruling class ideologies that value men’s power over women and white sensibilities over marginalized ways of knowing.

SECTION- 2.2

Reality dating shows typically follow a formula that usually features women competing for a man’s attention/affection/desire (Dubrofsky, 2006). And, it is the authors’ contention that these shows are sexist at their core. These types of programs suggest that no academic, political, personal, or professional achievement is as important to women as a man selecting her to become “Mrs. [insert man’s name here].” When a show with a sexist foundation is coupled with an overt display of racialized gender hegemony it creates an environment rife with misogynistic under and overtones. Regardless of a seeming array of reality dating shows, nearly all display the same misogynistic gender dynamics, and many of them boast the same characters: a male lead, or “Casanova,” and a large group of female contestants, his concubines. In shows like *Flavor of Love*, *The Bachelor*, *My Antonio*, *Joe Millionaire*, *More to Love*, *Frank the Entertainer in a Basement Affair*, *For the Love of Ray J* and *Rock of Love*, the “Casanova” is given free reign over his harem as he picks through the women to find the one he likes the most. While going through the process of finding a mate, the men have limitless opportunities for “lustful forays with many women who await the pleasure of being conquered” (Dubrofsky, 2006, p. 48). While the “Casanova” is depicted as a lover of women, he simultaneously enacts dominance over them by forcing each woman to engage in a competition where she must be more appealing (physically, sexually, etc.) than her counterparts in order to stay in the competition. Every episodic adventure allows the voyeuristic viewer to watch each contestant engage in an individual or small group challenge where the winner(s) receive dates with the male “prize.” And, despite the fact that he is intimately connected with most, if not all, of the women, they are expected to remain exclusively devoted to him. In fact, the women strategically allocate all of their attention and energy toward him in order to receive a small portion of his elusive attention in return.

They appear to crave his acknowledgment, as if they are empty vessels unless and/or until he notices them, fills them with his presence, and makes them the object of his gaze. Reality dating shows exemplify the “male gaze.” Mulvey (1975) first introduced the concept of the male gaze in her groundbreaking work that offered a feminist critique of Hollywood movies. Mulvey contends that film serves the political function of subjugating female bodies and experiences to the interpretation and control of a heterosexual male gaze. According to Mulvey, any viewers’ potential to experience visual and visceral pleasure from watching Hollywood movies is completely predicated upon acceptance of a patriarchal worldview in which men look and women are looked at; men act and women are acted upon. She further contends that this distinctly male-oriented perspective perpetuates sexual inequality by forcing the viewer, regardless of gender, to identify with and adopt a perspective that dehumanizes women (Gamman & Marsh, 1989). Extending Mulvey's concept, Russell (1991) uses the term “dominant gaze” to describe the “tendency of American popular cinema to objectify and trivialize the racial identity and experiences of people of color, even when it purports to represent them” (p. 244). Like the “male gaze,” the “dominant gaze” “subtly invites the viewer to empathize and identify with its viewpoint as natural, universal, and beyond challenge; it marginalizes other perspectives to bolster its own legitimacy in defining narratives and images” (p. 244). While critics of both the “male” and “dominant” gaze suggest it is simplistic in its condemnation of Hollywood film, arguably, these notions of the gaze are an apparent and key component in the blueprint used to design many reality dating shows including *Flavor of Love*.

Flavor of Love offers hyperbolic performances of gender/race that shed light on gender/race performance and its relationship to “reality” and catapulted Vh1 to unprecedented popularity. Over six million viewers tuned in to the finale of the first season of *Flavor of Love*. A record breaking 7.5 million watched the season finale of *Flavor of Love II*, making it the number one telecast on cable the night it aired and the network’s highest rated telecast ever (Jet, 2006). In addition, it’s no surprise that the show was one of the most successful shows ever broadcast on Vh1. According to Geiger and Rutsky (2005), “successful films are those that are able to articulate prevailing cultural beliefs, effectively making them seem natural and universal rather than culturally and historically determined” (p. 25).

As noted, *Flavor of Love* follows the same proven formula for success as most reality dating shows; however, it brings together notions of gender and race, which creates a new complexity. *Flavor of Love* differs in that the concubines/harem cast is comprised almost exclusively of women of color, mainly African American. The show is not only reflective of conventional discourse surrounding gender but also of commonly held beliefs regarding race. While *The Bachelor*, and other shows with predominantly white casts like *Rock of Love*, *More To Love*, *My Antonio*, and *Joe Millionaire*, feature bachelors who are young, white, attractive, financially, and emotionally stable, *Flavor of Love* features William Drayton, Jr. also known as, Flavor Flav, a middle aged hip hop artist and ex-convict, as the show’s male “prize.” Similarly, the women on white reality dating shows are typically young, white, beautiful, successful, and in search of genuine love. In contrast, the contestants on *Flavor of Love* are young, racial and/or ethnic, urban women portrayed as tawdry, promiscuous, gold-diggers.

The objectification of women in television and film has a longstanding history that transcends the boundaries of race. Images of women of color as lascivious, sexual deviants whose sole purpose is to be consumed by men have been a mainstay in popular culture for centuries (Hill- Collins, 2004). Consequently, the depictions of women of color are almost exclusively as one-dimensional sexual objects, and audiences come to understand them as such (Hill- Collins, 2004). According to Butler (1993), sex is materialized through an existing discourse. In failing to disseminate images and a discourse that displays the multi-faceted sexualities and femininities within marginalized groups, mainstream media are telling its viewers that (black) womanhood is static and predictable and that the dynamics present within manhood are simply nonexistent for women. In a society that is racist, sexist, and patriarchal at its core, the omission of divergent images of minority women works to preserve the interconnected systems of oppression that subjugate and devalue them (Hill- Collins, 2004). As such, “it has been typical for the media to utilize stereotypes disparaging females and minorities, and thereby perpetuate myths concerning their existence” (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002, p. 300). In addition, these stereotyping practices advance a “common sense view of reality that is oppressive and exploitative of groups with less power in society” (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002, p. 301).

SECTION-3

A critical discourse analysis of seasons one and two of *Flavor of Love* (11 episodes in season one and 12 episodes in season two) reveals the ways in which the show promotes the perpetuation of race based stereotypes and gender inequality, and reinforces Mulvey's (1975) and Russell's (1991) conclusions about audience viewing perspectives. CDA examines the enactment, reproduction, and resistance to social power abuse. In addition, it examines dominance and inequality through text and talk within social and political contexts. Critical discourse analysts seek to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. Therefore, it is the task of discourse analysts to explore the relationship between discourse and reality through an in-depth re-reading of the text (Hardy & Phillips, 2002). Consequently, this article will offer a close read and re-read of *Flavor of Love* paying particular attention to the intersections of race and gender because racial discourses, like discourses of sex/gender, are performative and work not to describe existing subjects, but rather to produce them (Atluri, 2009).

Analyzing televised stories allows the researcher to discover and reveal latent meanings and values that may not be apparent at a first viewing (Stokes, 2003; Yin, 2005). Because Vh1 has broadcast each season of *Flavor of Love* in its entirety, as well as released it on DVD, the researcher viewed each episode of season one and two individually, within the sequential context of that particular season, collectively, within and across specific seasons, and reflectively, viewing earlier episodes with knowledge of subsequent episodes/ seasons (Orbe, 1998). The findings are presented in the form of examples from the show. It is important to note that these are true exemplars of *Flavor of Love* and not isolated, exaggerated events, or anomalies that occurred during the two seasons of the show that are under review. While these scenes are not exaggerations, the researcher acknowledges that they are indeed constructions, born out of much work by producers and editors.

SECTION- 4

The "visual" domination of the women begins during the show's introduction. As the music plays to introduce the show, the contestants in season one appear as blue faceless shadows in tiny black bikinis. One shadow kneels with her legs wide open facing the camera, while others lay on their backs giving the audience a full frontal view of their silhouetted bodies. Flavor Flav is the only non-shadow shown during the show's introduction. As the camera pans across the scattered, shadowed bodies, it finally focuses on Flav who is smiling as he admires the bikini-clad silhouettes before him. He is seen and heard laughing as he sits atop a throne while the shadows remain silent. The viewer has no idea which shadow represents which woman. This opening scene implies that contextual complexities inherent in each individual woman are neither relevant nor important. Moreover, this scene suggests that contestants on *Flavor of Love* represent a collective woman whose sole purpose is to service her man. And, Flavor Flav is that man. These cues serve as a precursor to the powerless and voiceless position the women in *Flavor of Love* assume throughout the show. It also makes Flav's purpose abundantly clear; he is there to gaze upon and rule over the shadows that inhabit his kingdom. This visual relationship between the male "prize" and female contestants may reinforce to the audience the underlying power dimension that privileges men over women.

Another instance of *Flavor of Love*'s perpetuation of the "male gaze" and visual power over the women is during the show's naming ceremony in the premiere episode of each season. In the naming ceremony, each woman stands before Flav as he looks them over and establishes suitable nomenclature for them. Flav scrawls sexualized and often misogynistic names on tags that he gropingly affixes to the women's breast and/or buttocks. A name is a unique personal identifier for an individual. It represents personal and often a cultural identity. A name can have symbolic and linguistic (connotative and/or denotative) meaning, and in many cultures, naming a child is an important and meaningful ritual. Flav literally takes the women's names away from them and replaces them with names like "Nibblez [sic]," "Payshintz [sic]," and "Red Oyster." Flav named one contestant "Bootz [sic]" because he was eager to "knock boots" with her.² Another woman was given the name "Deelishis [sic]" because he wanted to taste her body and was sure it would be delicious. In fact, upon seeing "Deelishis [sic]" for the first time Flav stated, "Yo, when something's good to me it's delicious, that's going to be your name." When the contestant turned around and proceeded to leave the room after receiving her new name Flav turned to the camera said, "She got a big table ass for real... you can have a picnic on her ass, for real!" Flav even named a contestant "Tik [sic]" because she, "...got a small head and a big ass... like a tick."

² Knocking boots is an urban expression synonymous for having sex.

These scenes, like the majority on the show, serve to illustrate to the audience that Flav has ultimate power and the women are there to serve purely as a sexual function with no power or recourse. Another example of the “male gaze” and subsequent dehumanization of the women throughout both seasons of the show is the call and response routine. The women on *Flavor of Love* have to respond to Flav’s infamous catch phrase, “FLAAAAAVOR FLAAAAAV” that might ring at any hour of the day or night. At the sound of the catcall, the contestants gather in an assembly area where they line up, virtually naked, and submit to a physical inspection by Flav. These scenes emphasize that, much like Mulvey’s (1975) assertion of the cinematic apparatus of classical Hollywood cinema, reality television inevitably puts the spectator in a male oriented perspective forcing the viewer to adopt a frame where the figure of the woman on screen is the object of desire to be looked at.

Throughout the series, *Flavor of Love* is rife with male dominated scenarios. When Flavor Flav is asked what he wants in a woman, he explains that he wants a woman who will watch his kids while he is out partying, clean up around the house while he is on tour, and sexually please him even if he fails to sexually please her. Flav’s desires illustrate his power and subsequent subordination of women by limiting their roles in his life to sexual satisfier, babysitter, cook, and maid. He reiterates this notion in an episode called *She Works Hard for Her Honey*, where contestants participated in a challenge called “hold down the fort.” During this challenge, Flav instructed a small group of women to clean up Warren G’s mansion the morning after he hosted a large party.³ As the women cleaned toilets, washed dishes, and mopped floors, Flav looks directly into the camera and further subordinates the women by stating, “I wanna know a girl can keep my house clean.” In this scene, the “dominant gaze” is evident as the show continues a sordid history of televised depictions of women of color being reduced to a house- worker/servant/maid, which reinforces racial stereotypes to the viewers.

Flav’s voracious sexual appetite is prominently on display throughout the show. He expects each woman to enthusiastically satisfy his sexual whims. In fact, in the episode *Steppin’ Out Flav Style*, where one contestant is granted a private date on a yacht with Flav, his power over her and her complicity in gendered hegemony is evident as she arrives at the dock wearing a string bikini. As soon as she spots him, she bends over allowing her breasts to spill from her itty-bitty bikini top. Standing atop the yacht, Flav screams out her name, then looks directly into the camera, and declares, “I saw ‘New York’ coming down the ramp and she looked SLAAAAAAAAMIN, made me almost fall off the boat”⁴ Once she boards the boat, she begins to passionately kiss him, and between each deep and slow kiss says to him, “What would you like to drink?—I’ll have it waiting for you on the rocks.” Flav then cups her breasts with both of his hands and lowers his mouth to her chest. He then begins to suck her nipples, and answers her question with a precocious reply—“milk.” “New York” laughs and willingly allows Flav to fondle her body while he repeatedly asks the question “Got milk?” “New York” illustrates her own complicity in becoming a sexual object by coyly replying, “You know I do.” This scene highlights the “male dominant gaze” by illustrating Flav’s willingness to maintain and perpetuate a masculine ideology that encourages the sexual objectification and domination of women, and by “New York’s” portrayal of a black women’s eagerness to be used as a sexual satisfier for men like a modern day Jezebel (Author, 2008).

Flav controlled the destiny of the show’s contestants who were living in the mansion. If they did not fulfill his wishes to his level of satisfaction, they risked elimination from the show. During the episode *Flav is Blind*, one contestant won a private date with Flav on a romantic gondola ride. At one point during the outing, Flav snuggled up to the contestant, nestled his face into her neck, and then tried to kiss her. She immediately recoiled. After sensing his disappointment, she explains to him that she does not feel comfortable kissing a man with whom she is not in a monogamous relationship. Her explanation and attempt at justification for her (in)action did not satisfy Flav. After the date ended, Flav reacted to the incident by telling the audience, “Honestly, how in the world would you [the contestant] expect for this to work with us, if I can’t kiss you?” Another example of his control over the women occurred during a group date in the same episode, where Flav is blindfolded and fed by the women. A contestant, who recognized Flav’s ability to control her destiny, offered an on- camera confession stating, “After a while when it started getting down there to the last few girls, it was like...man I ain’t trying to feed this guy, let me try to feed this guy *me*. Let me let him grab a butt cheek or something. Let me let him grab a nipple. Maybe I can let him grab my thigh, so I can stay around.”

³ Warren G is a hip-hop legend and personal friend of Flavor Flav

⁴ “New York” was the name Flav prescribed to the contestant.

Later in the same episode, a small group of contestants discussed the subject of having sex with Flav. One contestant says, "I think if anyone doesn't sleep with him, he definitely won't pick that person [to stay], unless you give a good blow job." The show also illustrates how Flav's entitlement to ogle and grope the female contestants whenever and wherever he pleases. For instance, in the inaugural episode of season two called *Sumthin's Stinkin' in the House of Flav*, a buxom female contestant approached Flav wearing a body-hugging, low-cut dress that displayed her cleavage. As she sauntered toward him, Flav overtly stared at her exposed breasts as if transfixed and seemingly unable to concentrate on anything else. When the woman said, "I'm up here Flav," he responded by pointing at her cleavage and saying, "I can't help it. I'm looking right here right about now." During that same episode, Flav wanted to check on a contestant who had recently fallen ill. After searching for her and discovering that she was showering, he said "I walked around the house trying to find 'Sumthin,' and I found out she was in the shower, so you know, a guy like me, you know, went over there and knocked on the door like bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!"⁵ Without her permission, he walked into the bathroom where she was showering and leered at her naked body through the glass shower doors as he spoke to her. Regardless of the contestants' implicit or explicit approval or disapproval, they are in visual positions of powerlessness, where not only Flav but also the viewers, gaze at them without consequence.

Flav further illustrated his license to invade the contestants' bodies in the season two episode, *Jelly on the Telly*, where he went on a one-on-one date with a woman to a strawberry patch. During the date, they proceeded to talk and flirt while they picked berries. However, as he walked behind her he stared lustfully at her buttocks through her skin-tight, hip-hugging jeans. She notices his antics and asks, "Flav, you gonna follow me?" He responds by saying, "You think I ain't following *that*?" and then proceeds to grope her. During his narration of the scene to the audience, he excitedly declares, "I could not keep my hands off of that ass! Bootylicious! Folks, you gotta feel it to see it... I mean, see it to feel it." He continued to display sexual domination during the entire date by continuously feeling her rear end without invitation or permission. This was neither the first nor the last instance Flav groped contestants' bodies at his own discretion.

SECTION- 5

Analyses of popular mediated depictions of minority women are critical because this imagery can have a direct impact on their lives and livelihood. Acknowledging the primitive, impulsive, hyper-sexualized, stereotypical trope that the women on the show represent may not be difficult for most viewers to discern; after all that is part of the shows "hook." As previously mentioned, we view television as a contested terrain where audiences represent active participants in the process of constructing cultural and/or self-identity and can challenge mediated imagery. However, recognizing the elements of misogyny on display in the show is not the main issue here, nor is it that the depictions of minority female caricatures exist. The real problem is the lack of breadth of depictions present in the reality television landscape of, and for, women of color. Yes, contemporarily there are more people of color on fictional television shows like *Grays Anatomy*, *Law and Order*, and *CSI*, however, more visibility does not always mean greater representation. And, what few representations do exist are merely functions of the hegemonic media machine and are delivered with painful amounts of white liberal guilt.

Flavor of Love is not harmful because women of color will internalize or act out the absurdity of the women portrayed on the show in their real lives. On the contrary, since reality television shows, like *Flavor of Love*, place audiences in masculine viewing positions, the real harm comes from the interpersonal interactions real women of color have in their everyday lives. These interactions may be impacted by another viewer's exposure to the popular show, or from others' preconceived notions surrounding black womanhood that may be informed by exposure to the show. Media consumers transfer knowledge obtained from the media to other contexts because "the distorted appraisal of a subsequent stimulus induced by activation is unlikely to be consciously corrected" (Hansen & Hansen, 1988, p. 290). In other words, *Flavor of Love* viewers who are exposed, in real life situations, to black women who do not embody the stereotypic portrayals of African American women found on the show, won't consciously correct their impressions formed from mediated depictions.

Ironically, Flavor Flav served as a front man for one of the most radical black rap groups of that era, Public Enemy, which provided motivation and inspiration for young black men seeking liberation from the chains of "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2004).

⁵ "Sumthin" is the name Flav prescribed to the contestant.

Today Flavor Flav is far from a revolutionary figure. As the protagonist in *Flavor of Love*, his radical agency is neutralized. Through depictions of him as unthinking and uncivilized, the hegemonically situated media have stripped him of all cultural capital. Moreover, Flav's reward for relinquishing his cultural currency gained him fame, fortune, and power over women. Flav was placed in a position to judge, demean, select, scold, and reward women without repudiation. This ascribed power reinforced the notion that women can be (figuratively) bought by men who might otherwise be seen as undesirable, but for their access to capital. And, it suggests that women are not only complicit but also willing participants in a system that offers their lives, livelihood, bodies, and values to the man who represents the highest bidder. This distinctly male-oriented perspective insidiously perpetuates sexual inequality by forcing the viewer, whether male or female, to identify with and adopt a perspective which objectifies and dehumanizes women.

Ultimately, the byproducts from *Flavor of Love* are not only detrimental to the shows participants, but also to young male viewers who are encouraged to perpetuate the "male dominant gaze," and young women who are encouraged to enjoy and participate in the process of being looked at. Hence, it is important for those who repeatedly expose themselves to *Flavor of Love* to remain critically vigilant. Critical vigilance allows viewers to recognize the troubling (racist and sexist) stereotypes that the show's cast embodies and perpetuates. This is especially important for women, who according to Mulvey (1975) are only able to achieve true equality in societal relationships if they make a concerted effort to deconstruct and disrupt the male gaze. Critical vigilance empowers viewers to engage in the kind of necessary discourse whereby imagery is critiqued, dissected, and rearticulated in such a way that the power dynamic no longer rests solely in the hands of the image creator(s) but also in the hands of the image recipients. This can only happen if viewers engage in a thorough re-reading of the text. Re-reading *Flavor of Love* allows viewers to recognize ties between the insidious nature of the race/gender caste that is depicted on television and that exists within American culture. It also provides viewers with an opportunity to employ postmodernism by rejecting traditional power structures and empowering themselves to extract new meanings from a modernist text like *Flavor of Love*. These new ways of knowing can serve as a means for a redistribution of power. It is essential for marginalized groups, those rendered powerless by the hierarchal and hegemonic social structures, to engage in semiotic guerrilla warfare to empower themselves.

Semiotic guerrilla warfare is a term taken from Umberto Eco by John Fiske to describe a strategy employed by marginalized groups as a means to resist dominant ideology in "the constant struggle between domination and subordination (Fiske, 1989 p. 18). Subordinate groups execute this strategy by constructing counter hegemonic meanings for media texts. In other words, a close re-reading of *Flavor of Love* can provide a person of color with the tools necessary to detect the historic and contemporary connections between stereotypical media portrayals and the real world implications that follow. Further, re-reading might even serve as an impetus for women of color to affront the systemic oppression they might face. In other words, as young minority female viewers recognize that their bodies exist for the consumption of men anywhere, anytime, and that sexual trespasses are normal in the world of reality television, they can empower themselves by choosing a lifestyle that confounds, refutes, and rearticulates this notion in their everyday lives.

The discourse surrounding this study's analysis elucidate the author's view that current media practices within the reality dating genre of television are problematic--not only for women of color, but for all viewers. It is the hope however, that this interrogation leads to new ways of being, new forms of organizing, and new forms of resistance for viewers and those whose lives are impacted by shows like *Flavor of Love*. This area of research is critical for a number of reasons. First, media (re)presentations of women, specifically women of color, are especially harmful because women are often assumed to represent their entire race and gender through their personal choices and actions (Hill-Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992). Secondly, though there is an abundance of media imagery of blacks engaging in misogyny, sexism, and violence against women, generally speaking, blacks do not consider these urgent issues (Rose, 2004). According to Rose (2004), blacks still think the most urgent issues that warrant action within their community are racism, police brutality, and black male oppression. Arguably two out of three of these issues disproportionately impact men. When male centric issues represent the nexus of concern for any community, issues that impact women (within that community) are negated, nullified, and viewed as superfluous. The goal of this research—to encourage audiences to critique seemingly transparent images on screen through the lens of a cultural critic—spotlights an issue (the subordination of women) that women and men within the black community must see as critical and worthy of exploration and action.

Scholars should investigate the inner- workings of gender/race inequality while siphoning out the features of masculinity that produce relations of domination and those that do not. By investigating the hegemonic strata's depiction of marginalized groups that exist in mainstream mediated texts, scholars have the capacity to go beyond defining all valued characteristics of men as hegemonic and can begin to identify the subtleties and intricacies that impact the conditions of domination and subordination in Western culture. Critical discourse analysts must continue to find ways to examine, critique, and subvert the "male gaze." In addition, they must heed the call of Schippers (2007) who encouraged scholars to engage in the development of theory that places relations of domination back into the center of gender hegemony rather than continue to use hegemonic masculinity as a catch all for all practices of men.

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