

Framing Condi(licious): Condoleezza Rice and the Storyline of “Closeness” in U.S. National Community Formation

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Using an interdisciplinary integration of insights from Black studies, the study of women and gender in politics, and narrative analysis, I examine the politics of representation animating the political career of Condoleezza Rice. I analyze variants of the dominant storyline of “closeness” that frame discussions of her as a political actor, specifically in light of what it reveals about the gender, race, and class dynamics embedded in imaginings of community within contemporary public discourse. I show how the dominant storyline of closeness paradoxically works both to create and undermine the U.S. national narrative of color(difference)-blind integration. My central argument throughout is that Rice signifies the liminality of Blacks in general and Black women in particular and that this liminality is contrary to the triumph of integration she is said to represent.

INTRODUCTION

Students of Black politics across disciplines have long recognized the role of dominant, controlling images in the development of political and cultural understandings of Black politics in general and of public policy related to

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Black women in particular (Collins 2006; Jewell 1993). Feminists have detailed the special ways in which public discourse about females in politics is gendered. Scholars, for instance, have examined the extra attention that women have received as women, the special importance that people place on women's self-presentation and their relationship to their families, as well as gendered dimensions of women's leadership (see, e.g., Carroll 2003; Miller 1993). Given the unprecedented role of Condoleezza Rice in U.S. politics and foreign policy, political scientists and other scholars should work to understand the ways in which narratives concerning Rice figure within imaginings of the U.S. nation-state as they intersect with issues of race, gender, and class. What are the dominant images of Black womanhood that frame the public life of Condoleezza Rice? More importantly, what are the strategic effects of these images and what do they reveal about contemporary politics? By strategic effects, I mean the practical ways in which these images reinforce the dominant power structure, particularly regarding the production of ideology and of the reconstitution and deployment of controlling images of Black women (Collins 1991).

Although there have been a number of biographies written about Rice (largely for popular audiences) (e.g., Bumiller 2007; Edmondson 2006; Felix 2002; Kessler 2007; Mabry 2007) and works that consider Rice's role as an international actor (Lusane 2006), there have been few scholarly treatments from a feminist perspective (see, e.g., Eisenstein 2007). In this essay, using an interdisciplinary integration of insights from Black studies, the study of women and gender in politics, and narrative analysis, I examine the politics of representation animating the political career of Condoleezza Rice. I assess variants of the dominant storyline of "closeness" that frame the discussion of her as a political actor, specifically in light of what it reveals about the gender, race, and class dynamics embedded in imaginings of community within contemporary public discourse. I demonstrate that the dominant storyline of closeness works both to create and undermine the U.S. national narrative of color(difference)-blind integration.¹

Rice, along with other Black conservatives, has been critically important to White conservatives' projection of their version of an idealized racial present and future. This idealized raced and gendered present and future, which Rice is taken to represent, is one where racism and sexism have been

1. As I will note, this seeming contradiction — that the storyline of closeness can generate competing interpretations and effects — is a function of the instability of the Black woman as a sign (or symbol). The Condi versus Conditious storylines "meet" or have in common the notion of closeness, but with very different results.

practically eradicated and an American Dream ideology that promotes notions of success based on individual effort and work trump collective claims for social justice directed at the state. This conservative vision places Rice as an “insider” or a family member within the U.S. national community. But Rice’s position within this community reveals a liminal status, at best; that is, it reflects the status of one, occupying an indeterminate space between social positions, who is alternatively and contradictorily perceived as acceptable and unacceptable, insider and outsider, fully human and subhuman.² The dominant storylines that frame our understanding of Rice situate her within traditions of gendered racial paternalism reminiscent of nineteenth- and twentieth-century racism, where Whites produce understandings of Blacks as trusted servants situated close to and supportive of the seats of power, not in a color- or gender-blind racial present or future. The conservative notion of the insignificance of race (Wilson 1980) and gender are continually unmade as Rice’s public representation and reception is freighted with the repressed history of Black women’s hypersexualization and exploitation. My central argument throughout is that Rice signifies the liminality of Blacks in general and Black women in particular and that this liminality is contrary to the triumph of integration she is said to represent.

Traditional examinations of the presidency in political science might focus on Rice as one of several insiders or assume a comparative perspective where Rice and her performance are juxtaposed with those of other comparable state actors, such as Madeleine Albright or Colin Powell. Instead, I utilize an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Black feminist and cultural studies perspectives in interpreting politics. This Black-feminist, cultural-studies approach to politics has two advantages. First, it draws our attention to the narrative dimensions of power and politics, allowing us to see political discourses as texts. Political discourse, and by extension policy and social movements, can be understood as depending and trading on various types of narrativity, in this case dominant storylines (Stone 1988), that can be assessed not as taken-for-granted features of politics, but in terms of the strategic effects of their “production and consumption” (Joseph 2002, viii). Second, it allows us to foreground the importance of Black women as

2. I follow the usage of the concept of liminality as advocated by cultural studies scholars, such as Leah R. Vande Berg (1996), who focus on liminality as a “state of being ‘betwixt and between’ social positions” (p. 51). This view does not necessarily rest on a linear notion of the crossing of “limens or thresholds” (p. 62) in a temporal sense and/or the idea of inevitability in “transitions,” but emphasizes instead the indeterminacy embodied in racialized Others traversing bounded social and political spaces.

cultural signifiers and, hence, make visible the raced and gendered elements of seemingly race- and gender-neutral political developments. In this work, for instance, instead of gauging Rice's influence within the insider politics endemic to the presidency, I ask what is invested — what is the political work achieved — in Rice as a Black woman being projected as being “close” to the president. I focus in on the unique symbolic dimensions of representations of Rice as a Black female. In doing so, my analysis serves as an example of the “intersectional” analysis currently being called for in the discipline of political science by utilizing a constitutive model of identity.³

In developing this argument, I first outline the dominant storyline of closeness as it relates to symbols of Black womanhood and its connection to Black liminality within contemporary conceptions of national community. Next, I examine two versions of the dominant storyline of closeness. The first, which I identify as the “Condi” or “like one of the family” version, produces Rice as a signifier of the post-1964 integration ideal that positions Blacks within the U.S. national family or community. The second, or “Condilicious,” version demonstrates Rice's liminality as a Black female political actor. Within this version of the storyline of closeness, she continues to be alternatively constructed as a representation of Black female hypersexuality and cultural and political disorder, in ways that affirm essentialist views of Black women. I close with a consideration of Rice's agency as it relates to her public image, as well as the implications of my analysis of Black female liminality for our understanding of U.S. politics.

DOMINANT STORYLINES, BLACK LIMINALITY, AND NATIONAL COMMUNITY

The Dominant Storyline of Closeness and Black Liminality

Dominant storylines are central both to politics as a whole and to specific representations of Black women in public discourse. In her pathbreaking

3. As Julia Jordan-Zachery (2007) explains, intersectionality is a limited term in that it suggests that various aspects of identity are, in fact, separate entities that overlap or, as the term suggests, “intersect.” Likewise, Black feminist political scientist Rose Harris (1999) directly critiques the development of additive and multiplicative models of interpreting identity, including the intersectionality model. She demonstrates that the boundaries of a particular category, such as gender, are elaborated through the boundaries of race. In this light, the language of intersectionality falls short of recognizing the “mutually constitutive” nature of identity formation. For this reason, I prefer to think of these categories as mutually constitutive, and elsewhere argue for an approach based on this constitutive model (Alexander-Floyd 2007).

work, *Policy Paradox and Political Reason*, for instance, Deborah Stone (1988) relays the importance of dominant storylines to the creation of public policy. Dominant storylines, according to Stone, are recurrent thematic frames that structure our understanding of policy problems and implicitly suggest solutions for their alleviation. Stories of decline and stories of control, for instance, lead to policy directed at restoration and committed action, respectively. Stories, synecdoche, metaphors, and ambiguity are part of a panoply of symbols that ground narrative renderings of the political world. Indeed, as Sanford Schram and Philip Neisser (1997) and other narrative analysts relay, rumors, myths, and various types of stories provide a critical mode of political work, not only in terms of public policy but also along a full continuum of political experience, mediating our understandings of ourselves and our perceptions of the worlds in which we operate. Here, I use a postpositivist approach to narrative analysis that focuses on storylines in public discourse centered on the unique representations of Black women.⁴ More specifically, I focus on the dominant storyline of closeness. There are, of course, other storylines one can identify. The storyline of middle-class uplift and respectability, for instance, feeds into that of closeness projected by conservatives and others. The dominant storyline I examine, which features shifting controlling images of Black women, places Black women “close to” or complicit with White male power.

Given the importance of narrative and dominant storylines, it is unsurprising that those who study Black women in politics and culture have worked to identify and explain the controlling images that have defined Black womanhood in the public imaginary. Most scholars point to variations of three foundational images — the mammy, the matriarch, and the jezebel (Cole 1994; Collins 1991; Jewell 1993). Each foundational image is linked to physical and emotional characteristics tied to dominant storylines. These images are powerful symbols whose visual representations come to stand in for and unconsciously invoke the dominant storylines with which they are associated. The mammy, prevalent in the slavery era, is generally portrayed as a large, dark-skinned Black woman, typically arrayed with a characteristic scarf headdress and bright smile (Jewell 1993). Taken as representing the antithesis of White female beauty and femininity (Riggs 1986), she is seen as asexual, an

4. I chose the political narratives, cartoons, and other sources for analysis because they relay dominant themes used to represent Rice. For a discussion of the origins and different types of narrative analysis see Schram and Neisser (1997) and Fischer (2003).

image that is contrary to the historical reality of sexual exploitation experienced by Black women in White slave homes (Jewell 1993, 40; Stephens and Phillips 2003, 8–9). Content in her subservient role within the slave community, she supported the dominant storyline of Blacks' joyful submission to the institution of slavery (Riggs 1986). Although the origins of this imagery were in slavery, variations of it are still prevalent today. Whereas mammy is cast as nurturing of White families, especially children, the matriarch can arguably be seen as mammy's alter ego. As a domineering, abusive mother who emasculates men and usurps their authority, the matriarch is ill-fitted for traditional gender roles (Collins 1991, 73–75). The matriarch symbolizes, then, the dominant storyline of Black female chaos and disorder. Through her perceived role in running slave families, or, in a contemporary context, receiving welfare, the matriarch is deemed as being in alignment with state power. The jezebel, in contrast to the mammy and matriarch, is not only sexualized but hypersexualized, a wanton woman who invites and covets male attention (Jewell 1993, 46). The jezebel represents the dominant storyline of Black female seduction.

Although each of these images appeared in different historical moments, they continue to insinuate themselves into the present. The mammy, matriarch, and jezebel figures — and more specifically the constellation of characteristics and dominant storylines with which they are associated — have proven to be quite malleable, morphing into related but distinct representations and storylines over time. As Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2005, 148) argues, “the controlling images of Black femininity . . . are never static. Rather, they are always internally inconsistent . . . and subject to struggle.” In the past century, for instance, we have witnessed the rise of the Black welfare queen (Collins 1991; Hancock 2004; Jordan-Zachery 2001), the Black lady (Lubiano 1992), and more recently, the gold digger, diva, dyke, baby momma, educated Black b***h, and traitor images, among others (Alexander-Floyd 2007; Collins 2005; Stephens and Phillips 2003). In each case, these images emerge as a response to specific happenings within everyday politics and work to rationalize political views and actions. The mammy figure justified slavery, the matriarch affirmed Black women's inadequacy as mothers and as wives, and the jezebel functioned as a rationalization for Black female sexual exploitation and abuse. The Black welfare queen, with its dominant storylines of abuse of government largess and pathological family life, supported the historic welfare reform law of 1996 (Hancock 2004; Jordan-Zachery 2001). The Black *Malinche* or

traitor figure, an adaptation of the matriarch and jezebel images, is a response to Black feminism and public critiques of Black male sexism (Alexander-Floyd 2007). These images are deployed in connection to, and indeed in shorthand form embody, dominant storylines regarding race and gender. The dominant storylines of closeness as it relates to Rice draws on coded racial language tied to iterations of this dominant symbolic imagery of Black women. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, the mammy, matriarch, and jezebel figures can all be linked to Rice and the dominant storyline of closeness.

The dominant storyline of closeness is significant because it constructs Black women as liminal figures within the White national community. Although Condoleezza Rice's symbolic meanings are informed by significations or dominant storylines particular to Black women, her liminality must be seen in light of the ambivalent construction of Blackness as whole. As Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki explain, "[As] cultural signifiers, Blacks now traverse an ill-defined border state, symbolically comprising an uneasy, contradictory mixture of danger/pollution and acceptability. . . . In other words, Blacks in American culture are now *liminal* beings" (2001, 50–51; emphasis in original). This liminality is serviced through the codes of U.S. racial thinking where, as Toni Morrison writes, "Illogic, contradiction, deception are understood to be fundamental characteristics of Blacks and in judging them there need be no ground or reason for a contrary or more complicated view" (Morrison 1997, x). She further elaborates: "[W]hen race is at play the leap from one judgment (faithful dog) to its complete opposite (treacherous snake) is a trained reflex" (p. xi). The Black woman, like monolithic notions of Black people generally, proves to be an unstable sign (Zerilli 1994).⁵ Indeed, as Linda Zerilli (1994, 2) relates, "Woman is not a being, but a signification — wholly arbitrary and fundamentally unstable because dependent for its meaning on the relational structure of language. She is a complex, discursive site of . . . stabilization and destabilization, a site of cultural meanings that are constructed and contested across a wide range of signifying practices." In this context, Rice is produced as a "discursive site of . . . stabilization" in terms of envisioning a postgender, postracial national community, as well as "destabilization" in signaling entrenched racism, sexism, and class inequality.

5. Following Rose Harris (1999), I examine representations of Black women as signifiers of essential racial and gender difference. Harris, adopting Zerilli's critique of the referential theory of language, focuses on the political effects of representations' discursive production within texts.

Condoleezza Rice's liminality is best captured when we examine the metaphorical and real interconnections between fathers within traditional renderings of patriarchal families and the president as father of the national family. In her study of Black domestics, Collins documents the idea of the Black domestic as being "like one of the family"; the designation "like one of the family" captures the patronizing attitude of Whites to those Blacks constructed as close to Whites, but as outsiders who enjoy a dubious position of belonging within the institution of the White family. Just as Black domestics as servants are seen as being close to Whites, but outside of the legitimacy and full membership of the family, so too is Rice constructed not as a political insider but an outsider-within (Collins 1991), that is, a Black female who affirms hierarchical relations of the nation cum family. As Collins (1991) explains, the vantage point of the outsider-within is that of one who is invited or allowed into particular spaces or contexts (here, the nation or family), but whose status is marked as different or Other. The storyline of closeness that casts Rice as Condi the family member exposes the liminality she faces as a Black woman.

Rice and the Conservative Integration Ideal

Conservative ideology on race and gender is conditioned by the dictates of the post-1964 political terrain. The movements for social justice, which climaxed in the 1960s and 1970s, forced a reordering of the language and frames through which conservatives press their agenda. As part of the backlash to social justice movement activity, conservatives fashioned a politics that displaced attention to inequality by offering alternative readings of the causes of poverty and racial and gender injustice. In this new conservative America, a breakdown in cultural values was deemed to be at the heart of U.S. deterioration, particularly emanating from underclass Black America. Instead of looking at macroinstitutional structures, conservatives focused attention on the microinstitution of the family. Family disintegration within Black communities, something that seeped into and tainted the rest of the population, was said to account for the plethora of challenges facing African Americans. Racism and sexism, now legally challengeable through new legal protections, was a thing of the past. All that stood in the way of racial and gender progress and class mobility was the lack of the cultural bona fides of previously disenfranchised groups. Part of this backlash against the social movements of the mid-twentieth century featured a cadre of Black

conservatives who were touted as embracing conservative American values, such as hard work, individuality, and self-reliance, and rejecting the victim mentality that conservatives associated with women and people of color who pressed claims against the state. Most importantly, their identity as Blacks deflected critiques of the racial politics of the Republican Party specifically, and for the conservative movement more generally, and the conservative machinery maximized this benefit by promoting them as spokespersons for the larger Black community (Jones 1987). Black conservatives, then, formed the cornerstone of conservative identity politics in which Blacks symbolized idyllic progress in terms of race, class, and gender in the U.S. national community.

The life course of Rice, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama, to a middle-class family staunchly committed to ideals of racial uplift, fits well into the narrative of triumph over racism, sexism, and class oppression supported by contemporary conservative ideology. This middle-class prescription for integration trades on a related storyline of respectability that dovetails with the storyline of closeness. Rice, in her success and assimilation into the highest corridors of power, represents the road to ultimate middle-class integration for Blacks in terms of conservative imaginings of U.S. community: “As a Black woman in high political office, she represents herself, and is represented, as challenging — perhaps even subverting — traditional institutional inequalities” (Holmes 2007, 67). As a high-ranking official, she is arguably the poster child for diversity in America — conservative style. The first Black female to serve as national security advisor, she is now the first Black female to occupy the position of secretary of state, third in command from the president, a position held only once before by someone who is Black (Colin Powell) or female (Madeline Albright). Of course, as Lakshmi Chaudhry (2007, 13) reminds us: “Over the course of his presidency, George W. Bush has appointed women to some of the most prominent positions in his Administration — all the while working to undermine women’s rights across the board. So it is that we witnessed a fierce assault on women’s reproductive rights even as Condoleezza Rice became the first African-American woman to make Secretary of State.”

Nevertheless, many people, regardless of how they feel about Rice’s ideological views, see her promotion to high levels of international relations as a boon for women. The current director of the Center for the Advancement of Women, Faye Wattleton, for instance, argues that the high public profile of women such as Rice is “an important social progression,” as “[i]t moves us toward a time when we can attack someone like her [i.e., Rice] because of what she stands for and not

because she is Black or a woman, because we already know that the country won't go up in smoke because we had an African-American woman from Alabama as Secretary of State'" (quoted in Chaudhry 2007, 13). Chaudhry also notes that Laura Liswood, one of the founders of the White House Project, sees Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice as exerting the "power of the mirror," mirroring to young U.S. citizens a different vision of women's place in society and politics (quoted in 2007, 13). From this vantage point, some women are inspired and even proud of Rice. Her appointment, and her projection as someone who is close to the president, works to stabilize or affirm our understanding of the U.S. national community as being based in racial, gender, and class equality.

Although Rice embodies the idea of Black integrationism central to conservative notions of national community, she has the difficult task of signifying contradictory meanings of race and gender, and this has to be carefully negotiated; the storyline of closeness serves this purpose well. In some sense, Rice is potentially disruptive of conservative agendas. The fatherhood and pro-family movements are fueled, in no small part, by a reaction to second-wave feminism and the challenge that this has presented to the marketplace model of masculinity, particularly in White middle-class communities, where manhood is based on breadwinning and patriarchal family roles (Gavanas 2004). As an intelligent, assertive, single, childless woman, Rice represents aspects of a model of womanhood that conservatives have long been working against. Figuring Rice as being close to the president, however, short-circuits the threat that her power as secretary of state could otherwise represent in the public imagination. Why? Because, as I will outline, even though she is a key operative for the most powerful country in the world, her public role is reread and reinserted into private space: She is defined through a familial relationship with a man — George W. Bush.

The Dominant Storyline of Closeness and Projection of National Community

The dominant storyline of closeness typically emerges amid a common narrative structure in news articles and other stories about Rice. Not all (or, in some cases, any) of these elements may necessarily be present in the dominant storyline of closeness, but the general outline remains the same. Aside from (and typically prior to) any focus on the substantive parts of her job function (promoting "transformational diplomacy" in the

Middle East or answering for national security mishaps before Congress), most stories focus on Rice's personal attributes and background. There is generally a recounting of her origins as a Black girl from Alabama, with mention of, and personal tidbits about, her father, John Rice (the Presbyterian minister who was once a football coach) and mother, Angelena Rice (Condoleezza received her love of clothes from her mother) (Dowd 2005, 47). These details present a "family romance," to borrow Anne duCille's term (1996, 11), that situates Rice as a child prodigy — the brainchild of her parents, who raised her to be impervious to the impact of the cruelty of segregation and the limitations that some would present to Black women in the United States. Aside from her origins, the common narrative structure in stories produced about (and that, in turn, themselves produce) Rice feature a list of her considerable achievements (e.g., beginning college at 15, serving as provost of Stanford), excelling in competitive endeavors and art (she is a concert-level pianist and once figure-skated competitively), her dedication to exercise (she plays tennis and wakes at 5 A.M. to work out), and her penchant for wearing fine clothes. Finally, she is presented as someone who is unusually disciplined with an impossibly busy schedule, one that by implication leaves her with little time for a personal life, although she is rumored to date on occasion, particularly football players, such as Gene Washington. While the specific contexts and focus may change, most stories are anchored by this basic narrative structure (see, e.g., A. Butler 2007; Dowd 2005; Samuels 2007).⁶

Rice is often noted as having been introduced to Bush by his father, George H. W. Bush. As one source relates, "By the late '90s Rice had again been a witness to history, having advised the first President Bush on the Soviet Union just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The senior Bush was so impressed with Rice's talents that he cooked up a rendezvous with her for his son at the family retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine" (Dowd 2005, 48). This narrative gesture implies a type of homosocial bonding between father and son, where a woman is exchanged (here in acquaintance) in order to strengthen their connection as men (Bird 1996). Rice and Bush's relationship is forthrightly defined as being "close," and

6. James Clingman, "Blackonomics; Sad to Watch 'Condo' Condescend," *The Sacramento Observer*, 22 October 2003, sec. C., <http://proquest.umi.com> (August 21, 2007); Oscar W. King, III, "Condoleezza, Are You Fact or Fiction," *Michigan Citizen*, 19 February 2005, sec. B., <http://proquest.umi.com> (August 21, 2007); Gilbert Price, "Conservatives Playing Race Card on Richard Clarke and Condoleezza Rice," *Call and Post*, 14 April 2004, sec. A. <http://proquest.umi.com> (August 21, 2007); Sonya M. Toler, "Who Is Condoleezza Rice?," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 Dec 2000, City Ed., sec. A. <http://proquest.umi.com> (August 21, 2007).

then details that track the development of this closeness or give clues to its dimensions are discussed. They are both putatively Christian and often talk about faith as being personally significant and even relevant to their decision making and functioning as public officials. Both Rice and Bush love football and exercise, for instance (Dowd 2005, 48). She is reportedly so close to the president and his wife, Laura, in fact, that she often spends time with both of them at home, sharing “dinner with the Bushes on Sunday nights and sometimes watch[ing] movies with the first couple before they go to bed” (Samuels 2007, 50). As one story notes, “now colleagues say she is so close to W that it’s hard to tell what’s his idea and what’s hers” (Dowd 2005, 48). Another states that “[i]n Washington, nothing matters more than access to and face time with the President. What distinguishes Rice from her predecessors is her personal and professional closeness to George W. Bush” (Butler 2007, 87).

All of these various elements of the storyline of closeness situate Rice as Condi or like one of the family. Ann E. Butler (2007, 87) observes: “She [Rice] is a politically astute performer with a brilliant mind and a keen sense of diplomacy, which has helped her maneuver into the heart of one of conservative America’s most powerful families, the Bushes.” But it is important to note that Rice occupies at best the status of outsider-within. Her singleness or high-powered career does not present a problem for conservative America that is set on reaffirming woman’s role in private space, because Rice is part of a family — Bush’s family. In fact, Butler suggests that Rice is Bush’s “work wife,” a counterbalance to his “real wife,” who stands in as a model of respectable, traditional womanhood (pp. 90–92). To the extent that Bush’s clan stands in for conservative imaginings of national community, Rice’s role as being like one of the family constitutes a powerful ideological message for Blacks and women: Embracing color(difference)-blindness is the path to acceptance and integration. It is a means for conquering class, gender, or race-based inequality. Unfettered by the chains of legalized discrimination, Others can obtain freedom at home, in the family, and in the nation. As I demonstrate in the next section, however, Rice’s national family relations are ultimately unstable and chimerical.

Condilicious: Destabilizing the Color(Difference)-Blind U.S. National Community

The idea that Condoleezza Rice represents the U.S. integration ideal, where race, gender, and class exploitation are fading relics of years gone by,

is continually unraveled by the “Condilicious” version of the closeness storyline. This version, read through political cartoons and other cultural artifacts, codes her variously as mammy, matriarch, and jezebel in ways that affirm essentialist notions of Black female identity. These essentialist notions mapped onto Rice cast her not as a tentative insider but as part of the constitutive outside (J. Butler 1990) of the White U.S. national community.

Cartoons serve as an important source of symbolic and political meaning. As Beth A. Ferri and David J. Connor (2006, 76–77) relate, “Political cartoons are cultural artifacts that offer a glimpse into various points of view operating during particular times and places. . . . In a cartoon, even complex issues can be reduced to a single image with minimal writing. As such, cartoons have the ability to convey meaning in an extraordinarily concentrated manner.” Because of the limited space of cartoons, cartoonists often condense meaning into ideological scripts that convey suggested interpretations. These suggested interpretations are not uniform in their effect, because their reception can and is challenged and reinterpreted in myriad ways (Ferri and Connor 2006). Still, the particular conventions of cartoons’ form, such as labeling, captions, and balloons, along with images, produce ideologically significant meanings and systems of significations that not only mirror but, indeed, generate raced and gendered concepts and perspectives (pp. 79–85).

In this version of the dominant storyline of closeness, Rice is figured as politically affirming of U.S. power at home and abroad. This theme is particularly prominent among liberal to left-leaning cartoonists and/or proponents, and is often showcased in political dialogue via the Internet. In one cartoon, Rice is shown as a vulture identified with the United States (Cartoonstock.com 2007). This representation pictures Rice, stern-faced and somewhat sullen, as a vulture perched along a dead vine. At the tip of the vine is an American flag, signifying her as a faithful envoy of U.S. political interests, interests that require her to be pressed into service to feed off slain or dead political enemies. In a second representation, displayed on a left-leaning blog site, Rice is portrayed as a female Klingon who is “Admiral of the Klingon Empire” (Ablogalypse Now 2005). She stares pensively into the distance, one hand wrapped around her chin with fingers suggestively shaped as talons. Dressed in a Klingon-issued uniform, she is shown with long hair and pronounced vertebrae-like ridges displayed across her forehead characteristic of Klingons. This image is significant for a number of reasons. First, it constructs Rice as a warrior, given that Klingons (whose aircrafts are described as “birds of prey”) are a people skilled at war

and who live ready to die while serving to carry out their missions. Second, this image, in line with classic notions of scientific racism, depicts Rice as fundamentally subhuman. Klingons, like Lieutenant Worf of *Next Generation Star Trek* fame, are typically portrayed as noble savages, savages who are given to explosive anger and violence. Notably, Rice is also shown in a sexually suggestive manner, with her cleavage bared. She arguably becomes a sexualized warrior princess (Eisenstein 2007), who dominates others, in part through her sexual prowess. A third image, entitled "Condoleezza Rice Is a White Man," depicts her "shaking hands" with Fouad Siniora, the Lebanese prime minister (Sparx 2007). This image was released after U.S.-backed bombings occurred, and it positions Rice as both fully supportive and facilitative of U.S. hegemony in the region. Overlaying the picture are words written in various shadings: "what is the enemy"; "power is the enemy"; "whiteness is the power."

Some might argue that these images, displayed on private blogs or Websites, are not indicative of mainstream sentiment, but such a view misunderstands both the importance of new media and modes of cultural production and the significance of these images as constitutive of symbolic meaning. As our forms of communication have radically shifted, so too have communities of assessment and types of cultural production and political discourse. Moreover, these images are not merely reflective but are constitutive of the storyline of closeness; that is, they must be read as politically relevant cultural phenomena that instantiate Rice as a political neo-jezebel and/or warrior figure within the dominant storyline of closeness.

Whereas the aforementioned images pictured Rice as "close to" or supportive of U.S. power in ways that were not necessarily sexual, other representations of the Conditional storyline of closeness suggest that she is more intimately involved with and supportive of White male power. Several noted cartoon representations, for instance, symbolize her as a mammy figure. In perhaps the most noted of these cartoons, entitled "Condoleezza Rice in the Role of a Lifetime," Jeff Danziger shows her sitting barefoot in a rocker, holding and feeding an aluminum tube (ostensibly a weapon of mass destruction, or WMD) and speaking in "pidgin English" (Ampersand 2004). In the cartoon, Rice echoes the lines Butterfly McQueen made famous playing "Prissy", a maid (or "mammy") to "Scarlett O'Hara," in the movie *Gone with the Wind* ("I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' babies"),⁷ stating: "I knows all

7. Lizette Alvarez, "Butterfly McQueen Dies at 84; Played Scarlett O'Hara's Maid." *New York Times* (1857-Current file), 23 December 1995, 28, <http://proquest.umi.com> (June 18, 2008).

about aluminum tubes. (Correction). I don't know nuthin' about aluminum tubes." Rice is shown, as well, with several tubes to her left and one lying across the floor to her right. This image is significant because here she signifies Black womanhood that is close to and supportive of state power. It alludes to her role in affirming the presence of WMDs in Iraq as justification for initiating the U.S. war against Iraq, on the one hand, and the inability of the United States to produce evidence about such WMDs, on the other. Rice's role here as nurturer of the WMD argument to legitimate the war parallels her support of U.S. international objectives.

The mammy figure, as noted, situates Black women as happily serving existing power arrangements and nurturing of White masculine authority. Here, the aluminum tubes stand in for the ideological narrative of the state in fostering destabilization in the Middle East. Although most receive mammy as an asexual figure, it is important here to unpack the underlying meaning of this symbolic representation. As Barbara Christian and others have noted, the representation of mammy as asexual distorts the reality of Black women's sexual subjugation at the hands of White men in slavery. As Christian notes, the diaries of slave mistresses speak to the distress caused in slaveholding households because of the predatory nature of White men toward Black slave women within the context of slavery (Christian, as cited in Riggs 1986). I interject this historical context here in order to make sense of the depiction as mammy. These symbolic images work in part as codes that are implicitly linked to a body of ideas, meanings, and storylines. By setting mammy within an historical context, we can detail the underlying sexual meaning embodied in this important image.

The notion of sexual desire and involvement embodied in this alternative storyline of closeness is made explicit in other cartoon images and songs about Rice. In his popular *Doonesbury* cartoon series, Gary Trudeau, a regular contributor of editorial cartoons for major media syndicates, suggests that Rice and Bush are romantically and/or sexually intimate. In the cartoon, he shows balloon captions above the White House, without directly showing Rice or Bush. In the captions he writes:

[Bush:] Condi, what if I nickname Clarke "stretcher." You know, because he's stretching the truth? [Rice:] Not strong enough Mr. President . . . I mean, this guy is the **king** of lies! Sir! Do you know what he wrote about our first meeting? [Bush:] Of course not — it's in a book. [Rice:] He wrote I gave him the impression I'd never even **heard** of Al Qaeda!

[Bush:] Had you? [Rice:] Oh, like, **you** had! [Bush:] Careful, “Brown Sugar.” (Ampersand 2004; emphasis in original)

This cartoon embodies a tangle of contradictory significations. It plays on the popular notion that Bush is unintelligent and takes direction from the intellectually superior Rice. Rice here is exerting influence and control consistent with the symbolic image of the Black woman as matriarch or Sapphire, a stereotype of Black women based on the Amos ‘n Andy character by the same name who constantly berated her Black male counterpart (Jewell 1993). Conversely, it also suggests that former National Security Council counterterrorism adviser, Richard Clarke, is correct in his assertion that Rice was unaware of a critical U.S. security threat, one of the many indicting statements penned in his controversial book, *Against All Enemies* (2004), about his time fighting terrorism. Notably, his public statement that Rice was ignorant of Al Qaeda blatantly signals Rice as incompetent. Moreover, the tenor of the conversation between Rice and Bush shifts from what seems to be a professional (albeit trite) exchange to dialogue that suggests Rice and Bush have extraprofessional relations. The discussion is happening in the White House, and Rice repeatedly refers to Bush in formal terms, such as “Mr. President” and “Sir.” It is not until the last two frames that the viewer gets the suggestion that Rice and Bush are having more than a political discussion in the Oval Office. The term “Brown Sugar,” popular in the 1960s and 1970s, refers to Black women who are the sexual intimates of men, particularly those who are White. Indeed, its most notorious usage in recent history is as the title for one of the most popular songs by the Rolling Stones, one where Mick Jagger celebrates White slaveholders’ sexual exploitation of Black women. The fact that Trudeau chooses not to physically show Rice or Bush, coupled with the sexually suggestive reference “Brown Sugar,” guides the reader to speculate whether Rice and Bush are “in bed” literally and/or metaphorically in the Oval Office.

Others, besides Trudeau, have highlighted the question of whether or not Bush and Rice are intimately involved. Rice, while attending a 2004 party thrown by Philip Taubman and his wife, Felicity Barringer, reportedly had a Freudian slip. She stated, “‘As I was telling my husband —’” and then quickly changed to “‘As I was telling President Bush’” (quoted in Schoenemann and Moran 2004). One comedic Website recounts this story and accompanies it with a collage of pictures in which Rice and Bush are standing close to one another, in bed, or apparently sharing

a kiss (Kurtzman 2004). Significantly, within this scenario, Rice is framed as a Black woman who not only desires the president but also wants to be joined to him within the institution of marriage. She is a signifier of Black female desire for White men, in particular, and female incompleteness in the absence of sexual and legally sanctioned attachments to men more generally.

One music video, in particular, “Condilicious” (This Just In 2007), provides a particularly poignant example of Rice’s hypersexualization and alignment with U.S. state power. The video begins with her being questioned about the war in Iraq by Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat from California. Rice’s character says, “Man, forget these questions,” and breaks out into a rap song video based on Fergalicious, a popular song and video by Fergie, a White female singer, in which she touts her sexual power and authority, including her preeminence over other females and her ability to attract and dazzle men.⁸ In like fashion, in “Condilicious,” Rice is shown promoting her power and authority in highly sexualized ways, blowing kisses, grooving to pulsating music, and detailing the ways in which she is superior to Democrats and other women. As with other narrative renderings, this video follows the closeness storyline. Rice is not only supportive of the United States but also in control of the war in Iraq. As the song relates, “she sends boys to Ir-Iraq” and is generating a military situation “like Vietnam.” She serves as a “sexual decoy” or cover for U.S. hegemonic power internationally, as Zillah Eisenstein (2007) argues.

Just as in other contexts, the public anxiety over the “disorderliness” of her status leads to contradictory significations.⁹ Some representations of Rice highlight aspects of her personality that affirm femininity, the effect of which is to stabilize a traditional, less threatening gender identity. Her love for shoes is mentioned, for instance. On the other hand, her reportedly ambiguous sexual orientation is highlighted. Rice demonstrates affection for White, male Fox News reporters, and one news story is shown with the caption “Condi Loves Bush.” Early in the Condilicious video, she says

8. The song “Fergalicious” invokes the hypersexualization of Black womanhood embodied in Destiny’s Child’s 2001 mega-hit, “Bootylicious,” written and performed by Black female, lead singer Beyonce Knowles. In a striking parallel to the evolution of Blackface minstrelsy, Fergie, as a White female, enacts a persona based on Black stereotype, that is later performed or copied by a Black female actress in the “Condilicious” video. For a discussion of minstrelsy, see Rogin 1996.

9. Feminist political theorist Linda Zerilli explains that worries about gender norms are generated “in part” by women who challenge them. What intersectionality theory suggests is that the norms in question and responses to their transgression will reflect the race, class, gender, and sexuality of these boundary-crossing or “disorderly and disordering” women (Zerilli 1994 5, 142).

that she is “really manly, but not Rosie,” referring to the openly lesbian celebrity Rosie O’Donnell. Later in the video she says, “girl on girl with Mary Cheney,” Dick Cheney’s lesbian daughter, and is shown suggestively pressing hands with Cheney as they descend out of view. Ultimately, the video is a political satire whose aim is to critique and ridicule Rice’s image and her role in supporting the war. It captures well her neoconservative commitments and her construction as an emasculating neo-jezebel or warlike figure.

Since people on all sides of the political spectrum are uncomfortable with Rice in this position of power, they highlight and implicitly critique and surveil her performance of gender, racial, and sexual identities in myriad ways. Rice, for instance, is portrayed as being ill-fitted for femininity. One political cartoon, “Condi Kiss,” shows Rice vigorously washing in the shower after brushing her teeth and gargling, leaving empty tubes of paste and mouthwash lying around. In the rear of the cartoon stands the looming image of a Canadian Mounty, suggesting her purported romantic interest in Canadian Minister of National Defense Peter MacKay (Cartoonstock.com 2007). Elsewhere, in their monologues, comedians joke about Rice’s status as a single woman, and her indomitability by, and presumed incompatibility with, the male sex. As Jay Leno remarks, for instance, “It’s rumored in Washington that Condoleezza Rice has a new boyfriend. Allegedly, he’s Canada’s Foreign Minister [Minister of National Defense], Peter MacKay. Since he’s a diplomat and he visits her at the White House, he has to have a Secret Service code name. Do you know what his Secret Service code name is? ‘Captain Kirk.’ You know why they call him that? Because he’s going where no man has gone before” (Kurtzman 2007). Likewise, David Letterman states: “Today is the 54th anniversary of the first man getting to the top of Mt. Everest. Now, if only we could get one on top of Condoleezza Rice” (Kurtzman 2007). He also remarks: “Condoleezza Rice is apparently dating a Canadian politician. It’s a proud day for Canada. They’re the first nation to put a man on Condoleezza” (Kurtzman 2007). Chillingly, these remarks implicitly echo and call forth Black female sexual assault at the hands of White men. They also reflect anxiety with women who are not connected to men sexually. In other corridors, some have gestured more directly to essentialist notions of racialized gender difference, as a means of containing or responding to her disorderliness. In one noted cartoon, Rice is depicted as a pregnant woman giving birth to a monkey (Klein 2006). The image uses essentialist notions of Black female bestiality to critique her role in supporting U.S. policy in the Middle East.

These representations of and remarks regarding Rice affirm essentialist notions of racial and gender difference, affirming and reasserting normative understandings of masculinity, femininity, and race. Moreover, this fascination with Rice's sexuality — her singleness, her availability, her sexual power, and her proximity to the president — are all reflections of the anxieties that people have with Rice as a “disorderly and disordering” woman (Zerilli 1994, 142), the dissonance-generating nature of her role as an upwardly mobile Black female secretary of state. Far from signaling the triumph of U.S. democracy over racism, sexism, and class barriers of the past, the various meanings attached to Rice emerge precisely because she so deeply troubles long-standing, actively nurtured, and (in some cases) cherished notions of racialized femininity along the political spectrum. These myriad reactions to her point to the persistent liminality in which Black women such as Rice are situated.

CONCLUSION

What are the implications of these representations for future Black women in public office? What is at stake in recognizing the liminality of Black women as political actors? What does it reflect, in the final analysis, about the politics of gender, race, and class in the U.S. political system? What is clear is that the diverse representations of Rice from across the political spectrum reflect deep anxieties about redefining and reconstituting nationhood in terms of race- and gender-based identity. These anxieties are addressed and negotiated in myriad ways. Where conservatives work to contain U.S. diversity and equality by stabilizing acceptable, nonthreatening definitions of identity, as represented by Rice, for instance, others, including those of left-liberal leanings, assail this project by resorting to essentialized understandings of race and gender. One resounding lesson, then, is that in lieu of a celebrationist approach highlighting markers of formal gender and racial equality, students of Black women in politics and U.S. racial and gender politics more generally would do well to continue to map and subvert new manifestations of the gendered racism that continues to define U.S. politics and culture. Indeed, the convergence of neoliberal and conservative thought on class, gender, and race presents a difficult terrain for Black women to negotiate. My analysis of Rice suggests that there is a register of essentialized notions of race and gender that people across ideological lines tap into, and which Black women officials from whatever

ideological camp would have to confront. This assessment helps us to understand, for instance, the political conflict generated by Jocelyn Elders's discussion of autoeroticism (she was cast as fanatical) (Elders and Chanoff 1996) or the failed potential appointments and/or nominations of Black women, such as Johnnetta B. Cole or Lani Guinier during the Clinton presidency (Guy-Sheftall 1995, 20; Harris 1999).

The reactions to Black women political actors, such as Rice, that disorder or disrupt normative standards for race and gender are arguably beyond their control. The question, however, is not whether or not there is space for agency, but how such agency can be directed in ways that progressively challenge the status quo. Condoleezza Rice, for instance, has arguably exercised agency in executing a middle-class strategy of advancement through educational and professional exceptionalism, pursuing power, and acting aggressively on behalf of George W. Bush's administration. This expression of agency, while personally advantageous, has been in the service of state power in ways that do not serve the cause of fighting institutionalized social inequality. To be sure, controlling images of Black womanhood have impacted her public representation, indicating the symbolic power of these images in ways that cut across class status. Indeed, an interesting paradox is that, however unsettling Rice's visibility upon the world stage as secretary of state may be, she ultimately does not displace the dominant power structure. As Holmes (2007, 67) remarks, although Rice is seen as defying forces of oppression, "[i]n truth, her validation and power depend upon her active repetition of this dominant [U.S.] culture and its value system."¹⁰ Her ability to achieve the status of secretary of state was made possible by the deep ways in which her persona legitimates conservative political narratives, values, and orderings of national community. In this light, the supposed beneficial effects of having women such as Rice in high positions of authority because of the mirror effect

10. This is true even in Rice's sexualized power dressing (in 2005, Rice appeared at Wiesbaden Army Airfield in a Black "Matrix"-style topcoat and knee-length boots) on the international stage (Robin Givhan, "Condoleezza Rice's Commanding Clothes," *Washington Post*, 25 February 2005, sec. C., <http://www.washingtonpost.com> May 1, 2008). It is interesting that Rice, who is aware that she is in the limelight, has been adamant about defying stereotypes about Blacks, and is concomitantly conscious of her self-presentation, would choose this attire. It could be that her performance of racialized gender identity at this moment (and, in general) can be read as her effort to exert agency that functions to defy and disrupt the Western racialized gender matrix (Butler 1990). Inhabiting racialized phallic power by affirming White political power and White masculinist modes of being (i.e., through dress, public address, and the cultivation of cultural markers that are valued by White society as a means of legitimacy and efficacy) is ultimately ineffective. Challenging stereotypes can be beneficial in negotiating a racist and sexist terrain (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003), but Rice moves beyond negotiation to imitation. Rice, in her performance of racialized phallic power, remains caught in and scripted by the gaze of White masculinist authority.

are questionable: Rice pictures Black women assuming status and success by embracing the norms of White male power.

The liminal status of Black women must continue to be examined in studies of Black women in national and cultural politics and counteracted through political activism by groups and individuals. Narrative analysis that examines dominant storylines and framings of this liminality can be a powerful intellectual tool that can complement important, traditional modes of analysis and theorizing. The insights it generates can inform the priorities and agendas of political organizations and community groups as they work to undermine the dominant controlling images that continue to affront and assail Black women.

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