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Toward a Theory of Surplus Blackness: Reception, Media Industries, and Blackness

ALFRED L. MARTIN, JR.
University of Miami, USA

This article theorizes *surplus Blackness* as a media industries concept that demonstrates how Black, Latin, Asian, female, queer, and other audiences are configured as secondary for media that presumably represents them. Existing at the intersection of reception and media industries, surplus Blackness provides a framework to understand how representational scarcity, polysemic media texts, and hailing converge. By examining distribution and marketing practices, I argue that surplus Blackness both offers an opportunity to understand the media industries' historical marginalization and neglect of "other" audiences and a call to rethink scholars' and audiences' engagement with media.

Keywords: media industries, media reception, cultural studies, Blackness, race

I begin this article by discussing the big-budget film adaptation of *Wicked* (Chu, 2024). Black British actress/singer Cynthia Erivo was cast as Elphaba, the character who becomes known as the Wicked Witch of the West. In initial publicity, little was made of the ways Erivo's Blackness (underneath her green "skin" in the film) might shape audience reception. Erivo's Elphaba could presumably be read as a "different" young woman rather than one who is explicitly Black. In a *Variety* interview, Erivo said:

> I hope it's a bit of a love letter to everyone who feels different, who feels out of place, to all of the Black women who have walked into rooms and felt like they haven't been welcomed . . . To anyone who's walked into a room and felt like they haven't been welcomed. I am really glad to be the conduit through which this character has been brought to the world. (Jackson, 2024, para. 7)

On the one hand, Erivo mentions Black women in a clause to her first sentence. On the other hand, her "dedication" opens and closes with a general gesture toward "difference," ensuring that difference broadly, not Blackness in particular, form the bookends of her message. That is, her reference to Blackness is sandwiched between a message to everyone. However, nearly a month after its record-breaking debut, a second wave of publicity began in which Erivo centered the ways she made Elphaba a Black woman because, in her words, "representation is a powerful thing" (Headed toward the western sky, 2024). In a TikTok video, Erivo continues to suggest that she fashioned her portrayal of Elphaba as a love letter to Black women but adds that she "wanted Elphaba's long nails, her microbraids and her boldness to not just reflect her

Alfred L. Martin, Jr.: alfredmartin@miami.edu
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greenness, but [her] Blackness" (Headed toward the western sky, 2024). Erivo's comments are useful to begin laying the groundwork for the concerns that animate this article: representation, media industries, and media reception. She implicitly suggests (1) representation matters (representation); (2) that *she* insisted on a particular approach to mediating Blackness and Black womanhood that did not initially align with that of the film's Taiwanese/Chinese director Jon Chu or the film's White hair and makeup designer Frances Hannon (media industries); and (3) that her labor to fashion Elphaba into a "real" Black woman should be rewarded by Black women going to see the film to "feel seen" by Erivo's stated representational practices even as they were not the primary target audience for the film (media reception).

For women, queers, and people of color (and the intersections therein), the stakes of being (and feeling) seen are configured as much higher. Being seen in media for women, queers, and people of color is enveloped in the production of stereotypes that have historically been understood as "harmful" because of an understanding of double consciousness in which media images are important not necessarily because of how one's identity is depicted, but the ways such images can mediate and educate those outside of an identity category to begin (or continue) to think about "the other" (Du Bois, 1989). At various points in American history, Black folks, Latin folks, Asian folks, Indigenous folks, queer folks, and women have embarked up campaigns to attempt to force writers and producers to create their images within (problematically defined and policed) "positive" frameworks. That is, groups who are not White, heterosexual, and male move from what sociologist Gaye Tuchman (2000) called "symbolic annihilation" into what sociologist Cedric Clark (1969) called the "ridicule" stage of representation. As I (Martin, 2021b) have argued elsewhere, the very act of "hailing" into media discourse is typically, first, to make fun of such groups. In the process of representationally mediating the other (often White and male and heterosexual), writers and producers create a vast catalog of incoherent tropes that seek to fix, essentialize, reduce, and naturalize the image of the other for those who may have little to no contact with the other being mediated. Thus, configuring media as a source of education (particularly when media was far more "mass" than we can (or should) legitimately claim in the 21st century), meant that activists became invested in media representation as a direct link to the liberation of a people.

In this article, I partly want to ask, what is the matter of representation? Its mattering certainly cannot realistically be rooted in its ability to reach the masses. Although certainly people consume content that can mediate the "other," audiences for such content are often contemporarily small. Rather, the matter of representation is reconfigured as no longer necessarily mattering with respect to "negative" tropes and is instead rerouted through a focus on a kind of futurity, particularly for big-budget, Black-cast, and Black-led productions. For example, when *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) debuted, its enormous (for the time) $23.4 million budget signaled a crossroads for Black-cast film production: Its success could mean a new era in which the media industries would invest in and produce more big-budget Black-cast films, but its failure would mean, at worst, a disinvestment in Black-cast content, and, at "best," a retreat to the low-budget Black-cast films that characterized the early 1970s film industry. For *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), its futurity was rooted in what the "positive" images of T'Challa and his sister, Shuri, might mean for younger members of an "other" group. As I (Martin, 2025) argue elsewhere, for many Black folks, *Black Panther* matter(ed) because the film was understood as #BlackExcellence that could concomitantly be categorized as a "positive" role model for young Black children. In this way, the films *The Wiz* and *Black Panther*, as big-

budget Black-cast films, were configured as Black cultural productions worthy of Black consumption because of what they might mean for a Black future.

But secondarily, I want to shift from *what* Erivo said to *why* she said it *when* she said it—that is, why was this initial set of key messages about Elphaba's Blackness elided in the first wave of the film's publicity? *Wicked* (Chu, 2024) debuted on 3,888 screens and collected $114 million on its opening weekend and drew an audience comprised of 72% women and 13% Black people (D'Alessandro, 2024). To put it plainly, I argue that these details about Erivo's specific engagement with Blackness were mostly concerned with expanding the 13% of Black audiences. The tweak in Erivo's language attempted to bind authenticity and representation to consumption for a project about which few Black people were interested.

The matter of representation is bound within capitalist consumption. The matter of representation is a brand sold to consumers who hunger for visibility. Black media and cultural studies scholar Herman Gray (2013) argues that "visibility and recognition at the level of representation affirms a freedom realized by applying a market calculus to social relations" (p. 771). In short, there is a fee to consume films in theaters, and the cost of production of films is passed to those consuming the film. If one wants to see the latest film in a theater, one must pay for that privilege. Even if one waits until the film is available in syndication on television or streaming, there is still a cost of consumption. One must own a television set, a computer, or a mobile device, and often an attendant subscription to cable or a streaming platform. But more importantly, although the content is "free" to consume on television, the watcher "pays" by having to watch commercials that generate revenue. Visibility is a commodity for which consumers pay.

Thus, media and visibility are inextricably linked to consumerism—which seems obvious. Media conglomerates are in the business of making money. And making money, when it comes to "specialized audiences" (also known as audiences who are not heterosexual, White men) relies on at least three tenets of the media industries: (1) creating polysemic texts, (2) fostering representational scarcity, and (3) strategically hailing "specialized audience" segments.

All media texts are polysemic. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (2021) argues that media are:

> structured in its combination with other elements [which] serves to delimit its meanings within that specified field, and effects a "closure," so that a preferred meaning is suggested. [But t] here can never be only one, single, univocal and determined meaning. (p. 225)

Media makers bring together empty/floating signifiers within series, films, social media posts, and/or songs such that they leave texts open for various interpretive frameworks—even as one framework is "preferred." At the same time, this textual vagueness opens media content to multiple audiences and multiple affects. Embedded in Hall's understanding of polysemy is the relationship between texts and audiences. This symbiotic relationship between media texts and media audiences engenders a relay in which people of color, queers, and women (among others) can connect with media content by *being* seen and/or *feeling* seen. Being seen gestures toward the act of being "freed" from symbolic annihilation. It is simply, for example, seeing Black bodies on a screen. My mother has regaled me with stories of news flying through her

neighborhood when Black people were slated to appear on television in 1950s New Orleans. In an America when racism was more deeply entrenched in law than it is contemporarily, the very act of seeing someone who looked like you broadcast to millions of screens was a wonder. Concomitantly, there are media texts that make members of out-groups *feel* seen. That is, for example, a series like *The Golden Girls* (Harris, Junger Witt, & Thomas, 1985–1992) can resonate for Black and queer (and Black queer) audiences even as their bodies are not depicted on the screen. As I (Martin, 2025) argue elsewhere, for some Black queer folks, *The Golden Girls* resonated because of the series' depiction of alternative kinship networks, and as such, they felt seen (pp. 149–159). Even as both are often significant, importance, particularly for children, is typically placed on being seen in media. That focus on being seen allows the media industries to work within a model of scarcity.

That scarcity is baked into the media industries is also fairly obvious. Marketing scholars Barton, Zlatevska, and Oppewal (2022) summarize that "creating the perception that there is, or may be, potential unavailability of a product increases the perceived value and desirability and consumers' purchase intentions for the product" (p. 741). Within the media industries, this scarcity is partly fostered by what global media industries scholar Courtney Brannon Donoghue (2023) calls the "amnesia loop" (p. 196). This loop positions content featuring queers, people of color, women, and those with disabilities (among other groups) as the first of its kind with no existing precedent. And because there is no precedent, the content is discursively situated such that its success means that the mainstream media industries will produce more content like it, and its failure would mean the return to symbolic annihilation for that group. Thus, scarcity fashions the matter of representation into a process through which consumption is made possible. As such, when discussing audiences, particularly racialized, gendered, and sexualized audiences, the burden of representation is not necessarily about the representation itself but about a what I am calling a *burden of consumption*. The burden of consumption suggests two premises: first, that media industries are commercial and capitalist entities that cannot exist without consumption. And second, that audiences—raced audiences, gendered audiences, and sexualized audiences—feel a Pavlovian response to seeing themselves represented (because of scarcity) and understand that those representations will vanish if they do not consume the content produced. These two premises exist within a symbiotic relationship where each reinforces the other in an endless loop.

I will spend the rest of this article discussing the last point in the triumvirate: hailing "specialized" audience segments. To do so, I use a concept I am calling *surplus Blackness*. Surplus Blackness conceptually draws together audiences, production, scarcity, and representation. But before defining the term, I want to dwell on the Althusserian notion of hailing because it is crucial to understanding surplus Blackness. Philosopher Louis Althusser (1970) suggests that hailing (or interpellation) concerns the act of communication and that it:

> can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: "Hey, you there!" . . . Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. (p. 174)

Although Althusser's invocation of hailing suggests that it is an intentional act, he also understood communication can be imprecise. Althusser (1970) continues, in response to the hail "One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that 'it really is he' who is meant by the hailing" (pp. 174–175). Like Hall's (2021) encoding/decoding, Althusser suggests, then, that the hail can miss and that there are multiple ways the hail can be understood. I am not necessarily suggesting that there are oppositional, dominant, and negotiated ways to "decode" the hail; rather, hailing is not a precise science, and that, like marketing, hailing is an art open to multiple readings of the hail. The hail's multiplicity and polysemy, then, are linchpins to understanding surplus Blackness.

Media industries not only want but *need* the subject of the hail to be murky. It is key to how surplus Blackness functions. Surplus Blackness is a media industries tactic that uses visibility and the hunger for such visibility to secondarily hail "specialized" audiences. That is, the hail is meant for another audience, but, for example, Black folks, through visual representation, hear and often respond to the hail. Surplus Blackness, gestures toward how the media industries use Black visibility, scarcity, and polysemy to configure Black audiences not as central for Black-cast media, but as always already surplus, particularly for big-budgeted Black-cast films. My exploration and theorization of surplus Blackness is guided by an attempt to understand the relationship between media, audiences, and capitalism. I use *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) to demonstrate how surplus Blackness works within distribution and advertising practices. These two texts are what media scholar Andre Cavalcante (2017) calls "breakout texts" (p. 539). In theorizing these texts for transgender audiences, Cavalcante (2017) argues that these texts have three characteristics: they break "into the cultural mainstream . . . break with historical representational paradigms, and . . . break into the everyday lives of the audiences they purport to represent" (p. 539). These Black-cast breakout texts illuminate how surplus Blackness functions.

Methodologically this article employs archival, reception, and media industry studies. I rely on materials from *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) archive located at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to attempt to understand the pitching, marketing, and distribution of *The Wiz*. Without these materials, the work I undertake in this article would be hardly possible. To attend to the concerns of media reception, I rely on select interviews with Black people who saw *The Wiz* in its initial theatrical exhibition. These interviews help to recontextualize the racial makeup of American cities to understand precisely how surplus Blackness worked alongside 1970s American racial and spatial politics. Lastly, I use trade journals and press discourse to understand the marketing and distribution of both *The Wiz* and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018). The use of multiple methods gestures toward my own training in media and cultural studies, which suggests that meaning cannot be discerned solely within media texts, but in how they move through their product lifecycles from pitch to consumption.

Surplus Blackness, then, attempts to map the intersection of representation, media industries, and reception by examining distribution and marketing practices for Black-cast media. The term builds on cultural studies scholar Anamik Saha's (2017) engagement with cultural distribution. Saha (2017) defines cultural distribution as "the interface between production and consumption, that is, the process of finding—or making—an audience for a cultural work" (p. 303). Surplus Blackness builds on Saha's work by engaging the intricacies of distribution and publicity to understand how media industries hail (and fail

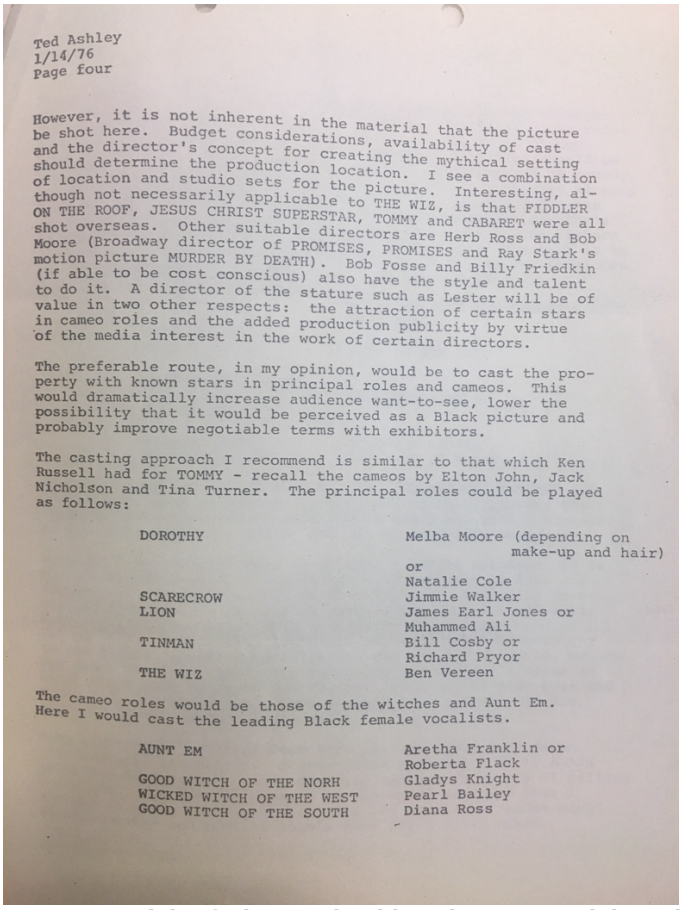
to hail) Blackness. While, like Saha's theorization of cultural distribution, surplus Blackness is invested in understanding the relationship between media industries and Black audiences from a top-down/industry-audience perspective, surplus Blackness is ultimately invested in understanding this relationship from the bottom-up/audience-industry. Building on film scholar Kara Keeling's (2007) assertions about surplus value, Surplus Blackness endeavors to understand Black affective labor as kind of "socially necessary labor . . . involved in the production and reproduction of social reality" (p. 98). That is, surplus Blackness maps the relationship between the continued domination of the mainstream media industries and the exploitation of Black audiences. Surplus Blackness simultaneously interrogates how Black audiences engage with representation and media industries' production of Blackness.

Distribution and Surplus Blackness

The study of media distribution allows for an examination of the practices that shape the relay between the production of media and its availability for consumption. I focus on distribution practices as part of surplus Blackness because these deals, as attorney and author John W. Cones (1997) argues, are "one of the most critical factors in determining whether any profit participants . . . will actually share in a portion of the revenue generated in any or all markets by the exploitation of their own motion picture" (p. ix). Distribution practices are imbricated in understanding that studios, and distributors by extension, want to exhibit films in the theaters where they will make money for themselves and a film's other key stakeholders. Thinking through distribution as a key component of surplus Blackness was particularly important in the late 1970s. The alleged end of the Black Civil Rights in the 1960s filled many Black people with the dream that America would live up to its promises around racial equality. However, the expansion of the highways made possible by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, coupled with real estate redlining practices, effectively reignited racial (re)segregation by allowing White people to move to the growing suburbs and work in the city centers, leaving cities underfunded and mostly occupied by people of color. This trend played out televisually in series like *I Love Lucy* (Arnaz, 1951–1957) where the Ricardos and the Mertzes move from New York City to Connecticut in the middle of its sixth and final season. Additionally, *Leave It to Beaver* (Connelly & Mosher, 1957–1963) takes place entirely in an idyllic White suburban space with Ward Cleaver making the exodus from home to office Monday through Friday via the highway while his wife, June, takes care of the home and their two sons, Wally and "The Beav." In this way, the racial politics of distribution and exhibition are important to understand in examining *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978).

These racial politics were also top of mind for industry executives. When Warner Bros. briefly considered producing *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978), Warren Lieberfarb (1976), the company's then-vice president of marketing, understood that casting the project with crossover Black stars was key to improving "negotiable terms with distributors" (p. 4; see Figure 1). Although Warner Bros. did not produce *The Wiz*, Lieberfarb's conceptualization of *The Wiz* signals that the film's success hinged on using Black representation to hail Black viewers, but that the film ultimately sought to reach White consumers rather than Black ones. Lieberfarb's (1976) suggestion to "lower the possibility that [*The Wiz*] would be perceived as a Black picture" included casting Jimmie Walker as Scarecrow, James Earl Jones or Muhammad Ali as Lion, Bill Cosby or Richard Pryor as Tinman, Aretha Franklin as Aunt Em, and Diana Ross as Glinda to attract White audiences to the film (p. 4). Although cast in different roles, both Diana Ross and Richard Pryor would be part of *The*

Wiz that Universal produced, suggesting that this logic permeated the project as it eased on down the road to movie theaters.



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However, it is not inherent in the material that the picture be shot here. Budget considerations, availability of cast and the director's concept for creating the mythical setting should determine the production location. I see a combination of location and studio sets for the picture. Interesting, although not necessarily applicable to THE WIZ, is that FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR, TOMMY and CABARET were all shot overseas. Other suitable directors are Herb Ross and Bob Moore (Broadway director of PROMISES, PROMISES and Ray Stark's motion picture MURDER BY DEATH). Bob Fosse and Billy Friedkin (if able to be cost conscious) also have the style and talent to do it. A director of the stature such as Lester will be of value in two other respects: the attraction of certain stars in cameo roles and the added production publicity by virtue of the media interest in the work of certain directors.

The preferable route, in my opinion, would be to cast the property with known stars in principal roles and cameos. This would dramatically increase audience want-to-see, lower the possibility that it would be perceived as a Black picture and probably improve negotiable terms with exhibitors.

The casting approach I recommend is similar to that which Ken Russell had for TOMMY - recall the cameos by Elton John, Jack Nicholson and Tina Turner. The principal roles could be played as follows:

DOROTHY	Melba Moore (depending on make-up and hair)
	or
	Natalie Cole
SCARECROW	Jimmie Walker
LION	James Earl Jones or
	Muhammed Ali
TINMAN	Bill Cosby or
	Richard Pryor
THE WIZ	Ben Vereen

The cameo roles would be those of the witches and Aunt Em. Here I would cast the leading Black female vocalists.

AUNT EM	Aretha Franklin or
	Roberta Flack
GOOD WITCH OF THE NORH	Gladys Knight
WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST	Pearl Bailey
GOOD WITCH OF THE SOUTH	Diana Ross

Figure 1. Memo from Warren Lieberfarb to Ted Ashley about potential casting if Warner Bros. decides to produce The Wiz (Lieberfarb, 1976, p. 4).

The Wiz (Lumet, 1978) was structured by industry lore, a term global media industries scholar Tim Havens (2013) describes as impacting "what gets produced as well as how, where, and when productions get watched" (p. 4). The "where" of industry lore is the point at which distribution practices for Black-cast media content collide with surplus Blackness. As Cones's (1997) work and Lieberfarb's (1976) memo attest, media content distribution and exhibition are always principally concerned with ensuring profit for the studio. Havens's addition of thinking about where productions get watched (and his overall attention to Blackness) is useful in understanding surplus Blackness because of how the "where" is enmeshed in how media industries think about the production of Black content and Black audiences.

In this section, by examining distribution and exhibition in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, I argue *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) representationally hailed Black audiences by activating "must-see Blackness."

The concept, as I (Martin, 2019, p. 741) elsewhere defined it, describes the industrial mechanism used to understand and exploit Black audiences' imperative to consume Black-cast content. The "must-see-ness" of Black-cast media consumption is activated to stave off the possibility that the particular Black-cast media content will financially underperform and result in Black representation becoming scarce within the media industries. Black audiences, then, were industrially constructed as a taken-for-granted, or a surplus, audience for *The Wiz* because the mantra "representation matters" structured Black audience consumption. Must-see Blackness, as a component of surplus Blackness, is ensnared in how, when, and where Black-cast productions get watched.

For *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978), which I (Martin, 2021a) have argued is the first film conceptualized as a Black-cast blockbuster, examining its distribution strategy reveals the surplus nature of Black audiences in the late 1970s. With a budget that ballooned to $23.4 million ($112.7 million adjusted for 2024 dollars), *The Wiz* was one of the most expensive films of the 1970s, and easily the most expensive Black-cast film produced in the decade. As such, the film needed a crossover audience for its success. *Los Angeles* arts critic Charles Champlin (1978) suggested that given the film's budget, *The Wiz* would have "to hope for a crossover audience. Whether it will find it remains to be seen" (p. E1). The film's producers were keenly aware of that fact. *The Wiz* starred pop diva Diana Ross as Dorothy and future King of Pop Michael Jackson as Scarecrow, among other Black stars of the time. This casting was key to Universal's distribution strategy: Black stars could be used to capture White *and* Black audiences.

After the film's premieres in New York and Los Angeles, on Friday, October 27, the film debuted in five additional major American markets, three of which I discuss in the pages that follow—Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. In Boston, *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) was exhibited at Cinema 57, a two-screen movie theater in the heart of Boston's theater district owned by parent company Sack Theatres. The very notion that *The Wiz* was exhibited in a downtown Boston theater reveals at least two facts worth exploring. First, the film's exhibition partly gestures toward the ways Universal understood the film as having some semblance of appeal for those who typically go to the theater to see musicals, and perhaps, positioned seeing the film version of *The Wiz* as a less expensive night out at the theater. Second, and more central for the purposes of this article, the location of the theater gestures toward the centrality of White audiences rather than (necessarily) Black audiences. To put a finer point on this, Sack Theatres president told *Variety* that *The Wiz* "seems to just be reaching a cross-over audience" at its Cinema 57 movie house ("'Secrets' Good $10,700," 1978). The use of "just" could have two meanings here, both of which are vital to understanding surplus Blackness. In the first instance, "just" could mean that *The Wiz* was *only* reaching a crossover audience, not an overwhelmingly White or Black one. In the second instance, "just" could mean that *The Wiz* had *finally* reached a crossover audience. In either case, this had to have been welcome news to Universal as they hoped for the film to become a blockbuster success.

In Philadelphia, the film premiered on a single screen, the Midtown. Located in the heart of Philadelphia at 15th and Broad streets, the Midtown, which initially opened in 1921 as the Karlton Theatre, was a familiar establishment to Philadelphia residents. Jaye, a 60-year-old artist I interviewed for a separate project on *The Wiz*, described the theater as located:

> next door to the record store and City Hall [was] around the corner. [There was a] bank across the street, clothing stores, independently owned and reasonably priced. Veronica Underwood [a Philadelphia singer who has sung backup for artists including Celine Dion, Diana Ross, Michael Bolton, and Phyllis Hyman] and [her] family would sing on the corner once a week. [The neighborhood was] completely mixed racially but basically all white-owned. (personal communication, July 19, 2024)

In short, the area where *The Wiz* was initially distributed was integrated, and as Jaye detailed, the spectators were also integrated. She says, of her memory of the racial makeup of the crowd at the Midtown when she saw *The Wiz*, "it was all mixed." A week after it opened at Midtown, *Variety* reported that the film was:

> fetching big biz in its first week to whiz past the Midtown's house record with a towering $75,000. Numbers would be even higher except for a not unexpected abundance of small fry [children] at half the $4 adult tab. Whether the picture's legs will remain firm or wobble after early customers pass the word remains to be seen. Future reception in non-Black areas also cues conjecture. ("*Wiz* Peak 75G," 1978, p. 15)

The uncredited *Variety* staff writer seemingly suggests that *The Wiz*'s box office haul at Midtown, while astonishing, relied on mostly Black consumption of the film and that, in the absence of Black viewers, the film's fortunes would suffer. Like the film's New York run at the Astor Plaza (where it premiered) where *Variety* reported that "the audience [for *The Wiz*] was, however, predominantly Black," despite distribution of the film to theaters in integrated areas of town, both Boston and Philadelphia seemingly played to larger Black audiences even as they were imagined as surplus (Segers, 1978, p. 2).

Boston and Philadelphia reveal how surplus Blackness functions within distribution when *The Wiz* was being exhibited at a single theater. Turning to Chicago further reveals surplus Blackness's racial politics across multiple screens in major metropolitan areas. In Chicago, *The Wiz* was shown on seven screens. Two of those screens, State/Lake and Ford City, were within the city of Chicago with the other five in suburban spaces (including Oak Park, which *Variety* described as a "Black suburb"). Sabrina, a 53-year-old Black, female Chicago native, saw *The Wiz* at the State/Lake and recalled:

> We went to the show—what we call the movies—and everybody did it, and the shows were all downtown [like the] State/Lake, the McVickers. . . . We always went downtown to the show given where I lived . . . where I grew up. (personal communication, July 19, 2024)

When she saw the film at the State/Lake, she recalls that the theater was "packed" and was composed of "mostly Black" people, an observation underscored by *Variety* in its reporting about the film's first-week box office haul in the Chicagoland area. Ginsberg (1978) reported:

> *The Wiz* flew into town at seven [theaters] and it's estimated the pic will take a smash $300,000 away for the week. It's doing better business in Black areas than white, reporting an incredible $130,000 for the Loop's State/Lake, the strongest biz that theatre has done in years. (p. 3)

That figure made *The Wiz* the top-grossing picture of the week in Chicago, besting a bevy of White-led new releases.

In the Chicago "Black suburb," Oak Park, *The Wiz* "played to near record audiences at . . . the Lake Theatre, a 1200-seat [theater] which doesn't always play first run [movies]" (Ginsberg, 1978, p. 3). The film made $25,000 at the theater on its opening weekend partly credited to "a blaring sound system outside the theater that . . . attracted a number of ticket-buyers from neighborhood streets" (Ginsberg, 1978, p. 3). But in Whiter suburb Niles, although *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) collected an impressive $35,000, it was nowhere near what the theater was making on *Animal House* (Landis, 1978), which, in a smaller theater at Golf Mill, made $70,000 that week, leading Ginsberg to conclude that *The Wiz*'s "good showing was not good enough to boost its nationwide grosses" (Ginsberg, 1978, p. 3). In short, *The Wiz* was, indeed, making money in theaters that attracted Black audiences, but Universal's (and, quite frankly, the White trade press's) focus was on White spectators. As such, *The Wiz* was configured as "failing" to cross over to White audiences because Black audiences were surplus in the studio's calculus.

The U.S. box office failure of *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978) was principally because it relied on must-see Blackness but was underdistributed in Black areas to ensure Black patronage. The tensions between how Black representation hailed Black viewers and distribution practices spatially privileged White spectators reveal the very nature of surplus Blackness. As an industrial practice, surplus Blackness centralizes Black consumerism and the scarcity of Black images, while making few overtures toward the desirability or necessity of Black audiences. Put another way, Black audiences were expected to see *The Wiz* because it featured Black stars, whereas White viewers were courted and coaxed to see the film because it was made available across multiple screens in areas where they lived. And because White audiences "failed" to see *The Wiz* it could be marked as a failure—even as "it took *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) over twenty years to earn its money back" yet the word "failure" is rarely discussed with that White-cast version of L. Frank Baum's tale (Harmetz, 1977, p. 19).

But it is not just distribution practices that fashioned Black audiences as surplus. And surplus Blackness is not a concept that can be understood only by looking back to the 20th century to see it in action. The deployment of surplus Blackness has shifted to accommodate changing industrial practices. In the next section, I use *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) to illustrate how surplus Blackness works 40 years after the release of *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978).

Marketing and Surplus Blackness

Film marketing is an additional front on which surplus Blackness can be observed. In using the phrase "film marketing," I am referencing the media, advertising, and promotional events designed to generate awareness, and most importantly, hype around a release. For high-concept films like *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), awareness marketing campaigns, including print ads, trailers, television commercials, and special events, are designed to hail audiences into the text. High-concept films are, as media scholar Justin Wyatt (1994) defines them, those films "considered as a form of differentiated product . . . through an integration with marketing and merchandising" (p. 7). Film marketing, then, is a kind of "hail." That is, because marketing is designed to move products, its messages must always have an intended audience.

Film scholars Mingant, Tirtaine, and Augros (2015) forward that film marketing plans, on the one hand, understand and target a core audience, but on the other hand, identify "a secondary group to which the film could cross over" (p. 2). Even when messages are intentionally polysemic, they are focused on hailing specific audiences. But more than that, for the purposes of theorizing surplus Blackness, I suggest that film marketing around big-budgeted, Black-cast breakout texts treat Black audiences as secondary not because the film could "crossover" to a Black audience, but because of the representational scarcity built into the media industries.

Black audiences being understood as secondary is the point at which marketing tactics engage surplus Blackness. Because media industries have so forcefully and effectively taught Black audiences that being seen in media is important and that the way to appreciate that import is through consumption, scarcity, representation, and surplus Blackness are inextricably linked. Thus, when *Black Panther* was announced, its difference within the Marvel Cinematic Universe was laid bare. Journalist Jen Yamato (2014) opened her story by suggesting that "After 10 films, and $7 billion [in box office receipts], Marvel Studios is finally stepping up the diversity in their long-range superhero slate" (para. 1). Positioned as Marvel's "answer" to the Black Lives Matter movement within media industry discourse, the novelty of a Black-led "superhero movie" was both shrouded in scarcity and an amnesia loop in which *Black Panther* was positioned as the only/first successful Black-led superhero film. This amnesia loop deliberately "forgot," for example, *Blade* (Norrington, 1998), which not only made $131.2 million against a $45 million budget but also spawned two successful sequels, a television series, and a video game.

However, unlike *Blade* (Norrington, 1998), *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) was unquestionably the most expensive Black-cast film ever produced with a reported $200 million budget ($250.1 million adjusted for 2024 dollars). The sheer size of *Black Panther*'s budget meant that it had to have broad crossover appeal. *Black Panther*, then, had to be two films in one. Media studies scholar Racquel Gates (2018) discusses the cinematic twoness of Black-led films like *Coming to America* (Landis, 1988), suggesting that director Landis was making a mainstream big-budget comedy with a Black cast for White audiences and star Eddie Murphy was making a film that would speak to and for Black audiences (p. 58). Similarly, *Black Panther* was conceived and marketed as both a Marvel film and the brand's first Black-led film.

Thus, *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) had to be marketed to appeal to at least two consumer segments. The first was a Marvel fan. Journalist Kyle Buchanan (2017) centered the importance of the Marvel audience when he wrote that *Black Panther* had "to be familiar enough to fit into Marvel's ever-expanding cinematic universe" (para. 3). The second key audience for the film was a Black spectator who may or may not care about Marvel films but was invested in Blackness and Black representation, and its attendant scarcity. This audience could presumably simply be hailed to the text by the mere presence of Black bodies—or must-see Blackness. Discursively, journalists like Brooks Barnes helped to activate must-see Blackness by centering the importance of the collision of big-budget content and studios' DEI initiatives. Barnes (2016) wrote that "for the first time," San Diego's Comic-Con featured:

> studio presentations [who] paid more than lip service to diversity. Marvel Studios started its Saturday session inside the San Diego Convention Center's cavernous Hall H . . . by

> bringing out [director] Ryan Coogler . . . and his four black leads: Chadwick Boseman, Lupita Nyong'o, Michael B. Jordan and Danai Gurira. (paras. 4 & 5)

I use this excerpt from Barnes's article for two purposes. First, it centers how Marvel used *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) to make itself look good (and collect a pile of news clips about its efforts). Second, and more important, it centers how Black audiences were made surplus in marketing efforts. There are, without question, Black folks who attend Comic-Con. But that could not have been the audience Marvel sought in its event at Comic-Con. And although Black audiences were undoubtedly important to the film's box office success, Marvel did not mount a similar splash at, for example, Essence Fest 2017, where Black people compose most of the attendees.

Even as Black audiences were configured as surplus, journalist Kyle Buchanan made the film's success about its very Blackness. Buchanan (2017) wrote:

> if the movie succeeds on the worldwide scale of most Marvel entries, it will refute the notion espoused by many Hollywood executives that Black films "don't travel"; more importantly, if it's a creative breakthrough that launches a new mythology and coaxes underrepresented audiences to dream bigger, it could become a Black *Star Wars*. (para. 8)

Put another way, if *Black Panther* succeeded, it would be a successful *Marvel* film, if it failed, it would be a *Black* failure.

Yet, as I have been arguing, from a marketing perspective, Black spectators were considered surplus to the target/more desired Marvel audience. For example, although undoubtedly *some* Black folks were watching, the first *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) trailer aired during the NBA Finals. And the announcement of the film's ticket presale was somewhat similarly announced in a national ad during the College Football Playoff National Championship on January 8, 2018. It cannot be denied that with a $200 million budget (excluding marketing costs), *Black Panther* could not afford to cater to Black audiences at the exclusion of other-raced audience segments. However, as the first Black superhero film, Black audiences were largely treated as surplus because the media industries relied on must-see Blackness. As such, within marketing, Black audiences could be reached by a general hail in their direction. This general hail simply used the sign of Blackness wherein Black audiences took up the "representation matters" banner without being called on specifically to do so. Black audiences remained surplus yet behaved as if they were the primary subject of the hail.

The Matter of Surplus Blackness

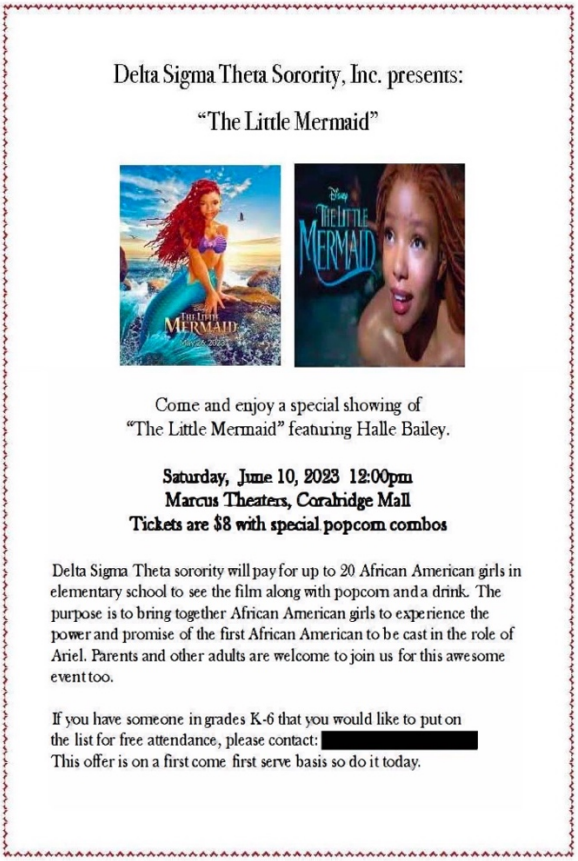
What do a Black Elphaba in *Wicked* (Chu, 2024), *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978), and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) have in common? As polysemic, mediated images, they mean everything and nothing. Their meanings are always subjective and specific to the subject position of the viewer. They mean everything when the investment in these mediated objects is affectively high. This high-affective engagement is made possible by the media industry strategy to maintain the scarcity and precarity of images of those who are not White, heterosexual men. *The Wiz* means something because it offers a peek into what a future media

landscape might look like when it is filled with high-budgeted Black-cast films that feature the "right" kind of representation—the kind that presumably matters, like an Elphaba in *Wicked* being portrayed by a Black British woman with microbraids. And *Black Panther* resonates because it had a big budget, like *The Wiz*, and because its characters Shuri and T'Challa, from technologically advanced Wakanda, forward "positive" STEM-based representations for Black children's imaginations. When every "good" Black, Latin, Asian, queer, and/or trans image could be the last one, that precariousness and the specter of scarcity shape both consumption *and* surplus Blackness. That is, while Black folks flocked to theaters to see *The Wiz* and did the same while also buying out theaters for youth groups to watch *Black Panther*, I am left with the question: What did/does the flex of our consumer purchasing power get us? What did our taking on the burden of consumption get us? What if the media industries will always configure us as marginal and never the center? What if we are always surplus?

As a media industries concept, surplus Blackness provides a framework to understand the inconsistent production and distribution of Black-cast and Black-led media. Dating at least back to the 1970s with *The Wiz* (Lumet, 1978), media industries understood they could use Black visibility to draw in Black audiences while focusing marketing budgets on hailing Whiter and wider audiences. They reshaped the politics of representation into a burden of consumption. More contemporarily, a film like the 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* (Marshall, 2023) demonstrates that surplus Blackness continues to structure how media industries engage with Black audiences. Based on the 1989 animated film, which is loosely based on the Hans Christian Andersen tale, the 2023 version casts Ariel as a Black woman with red hair, portrayed by singer/actress Halle Bailey. But as the film's director, Rob Marshall, makes clear, "There was no agenda to cast a woman of color [as Ariel . . .]. We looked at everybody for that role. I mean, across the boards, every ethnicity . . . It was really just, 'Let's just find the best Ariel'" (Polowy, 2023, paras. 2–3). Marshall, at turns, relies on the logics of colorblind casting specifically and casting generally. In the denial of an agenda around making Ariel Black, Marshall underscores that the production was bound by colorblind casting, a technique in which there is either no race or ethnicity attached to the character and/or the race or ethnicity of an actor is not considered within the casting process. In casting Bailey, then, she was not cast because she was Black; she was cast because she was deemed the best actor for the role. In the best-actor discourse, as Black media studies scholar Kristen Warner (2015) avers, the notion of who is "best" for a role is positioned as beyond reproach as if it is not a qualitative assessment. The slipperiness of "best" aside, in "blindly" casting a Black woman in a role that had been visually cemented as White in its first cinematic adaptation removes any semblance of Black cultural specificity from the role, and what is mediated is not a "Black Ariel" but an "Ariel who just happens to be Black."

This positioning helped the live action *Little Mermaid* (Marshall, 2023) to centrally hail White viewers into the text with a colorblind, postracial dreamscape. And Black viewers, who are always an afterthought, are hailed simply via the sign of Blackness without the text reckoning with the fact of Blackness. As I am using the term here, the fact of Blackness engages what it means to be Black—our hair, our skin, our language, our inflections, the way we move, the ways we speak. The fact of Blackness is located within what producers Mara Brock Akil and Salim Akil describe as writing characters who are clearly Black, "and equally as important, are written by Black folks" (Warner, 2020, p. 109). The Akils are aware that they are producing media content within historically racialized and racist media institutions. However, as writers, they center Blackness by writing characters that do not simply look Black but also those that "feel" Black.

Conversely, the sign of Blackness is part and parcel of colorblind casting whose goal is to "prioritize a critical mass of characters who are physically different but not necessarily culturally different or complex" (Warner, 2020, p. 109). Colorblind casting, and surplus Blackness within it, relies on the sign of Blackness to hail Black bodies into the text. Once hailed, Black spectators are required to fill in the blanks left by the evacuation of cultural specificity for Black colorblind-cast characters like Bailey as Ariel to make it "feel" Black rather than simply Black representationally. Black audiences are configured as surplus because films like *The Little Mermaid* rely on Black folks to consume it while attempting to ensure that other audiences (namely White ones) are not alienated. On the one hand, the strategy clearly worked to draw a multicultural audience: According to Essence.com (Ruff, 2023), "35% of opening weekend ticket buyers were Black, 33% were white, 23% were Latinx, and the remaining 9% were classified as Asian or other" (para. 6). On the other hand, the fervency with which Black consumers took up the burden of consumption to pressure each other to consume the film, and the ways Black sororities like Delta Sigma Theta members (see Figure 2) bought out theaters to suture consumerism, activism, and visibility, gesture toward how surplus Blackness continues to shape contemporary media industries and Black reception practices.


Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. presents:

"The Little Mermaid"

Come and enjoy a special showing of
"The Little Mermaid" featuring Halle Bailey.

Saturday, June 10, 2023 12:00pm
Marcus Theaters, Coralridge Mall
Tickets are $8 with special popcorn combos

Delta Sigma Theta sorority will pay for up to 20 African American girls in elementary school to see the film along with popcorn and a drink. The purpose is to bring together African American girls to experience the power and promise of the first African American to be cast in the role of Ariel. Parents and other adults are welcome to join us for this awesome event too.

If you have someone in grades K-6 that you would like to put on the list for free attendance, please contact: [redacted]
This offer is on a first come first serve basis so do it today.

Figure 2. Flier offering the opportunity for children to see The Little Mermaid starring Halle Bailey at no charge. The experience of seeing the film was positioned as an opportunity for Black girls to see "the power and promise" of seeing a Black woman as Ariel (Berry, 2023).

I am left with Michel Foucault's (1977) proclamation when discussing the panopticon that visibility is a trap (p. 200). For Foucault, the panopticon restricted the viewpoint of its wearer but offered the opportunity for the wearer to be surveilled. To extend the metaphor to media, media is an apparatus that exercises its power to construct the other on its own historically racist terms. It doles out whatever content it pleases, precisely when—and only when—it pleases to extract value from "neglected" audiences. And it does so because within reception practices, raced, gendered, and otherwise "othered" bodies suggest that media's panopticon provides a view of what is imaginable. And in this configuration, mediated images are important because representation matters. But as media and cultural studies scholar Herman Gray (2013) avers, the

> impossibility of achieving (and representing) Black freedom within the liberal discourse of freedom and subjectivity [illuminates . . .] the limits of representation and a politics of culture built on the quest for visibility and recognition within the context of market sovereignty and consumer choice organized by a logic of difference. (p. 775)

And yet, the cycle continues where scarcity gives way to consumption, which gives way to scarcity, and Black folks continue to consume media as if the end of our mediation will mean the end of us.

So, what do we do with surplus Blackness? On the one hand, we do nothing. Surplus Blackness arms us with the playbook key players in the media industries use to make us feel that we are the target audience for media and that if we consume it, more will come. On the other hand, we shift from thinking about representation to thinking about our pleasure. We shift from understanding ourselves as consumer citizens to supporting ourselves and our joy by any means necessary. For Black audiences, it means loving the media we love without feeling guilty about it. It means ignoring media that does not speak to our tastes no matter how important it feels (because there will inevitably be another important one behind it). It means, as digital humanities scholar Andre Brock (2020) argues, centering Black joy as a celebration of our Black selves "in defiance of norms that can be imposed by both external and internal forces" (p. 131). And we center that Black joy because, as Black digital media studies scholar Raven Maragh-Lloyd (2024) forwards, it "operates as the nexus between resistance strategies in that the primary focus is well-being, not always with a concern toward dominant publics" (p. 92). We focus on our Black joy so that we can be prepared to fight the fights ahead that come from living in a fundamentally racist, sexist, and anti-Black world.

For scholars studying Black popular culture and media, a politics of pleasure means freeing ourselves from the notion that "representation matters." Instead, it asks for a continuation of the phrase: representation matters to _____, where the blank can be filled with the group to whom it matters because that, then, forces a centering of reception/reception practices. It means focusing on how and why media resonates for viewers. I am not suggesting that everyone conduct in-depth interviews, focus groups, and surveys, or scrape social media for data (although that would be nice). This work can be as simple as centering that your reading of a particular media text is informed by your own reception practices. The shift to thinking about why audiences choose what they choose and why they find pleasure within it frees us from always responding when we are shown something that resembles us. It shifts to thinking about what resonates with us or what I (Martin, 2025) have elsewhere called a politics of resonance, which "shifts

representation from the terrain of 'being seen,' which gestures toward the visual, to the register of 'feeling seen,' which invokes an affective attachment" (p. 128). It helps us consume media on our terms. It helps us dwell in our own joys and pleasures. As long as media industries treat us as surplus, we should behave accordingly and treat their content as surplus to our lives as we center our own Black joy. Because our Black joy and our Black selves are sometimes all we have.

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