

The Disposable Black Girlfriend

By: Omonefe Osifo

The Summer I Turned Pretty and *The Flash* are two popular TV series that feature Black female characters in relationships with white male protagonists. Nicole Richardson in *TSITP* and Iris West in *TF* both have very different narrative roles: Nicole serves as a side character and plot device that advances the leads, Conrad and Belly, together, whilst Iris is Barry's leading lady with her own plotlines and identity. Despite the contrasts between these two characters, both of them are written within the disposable black girl trope to echo societal beliefs about Black women as romantic others, even when they are the main objects of affection. Through the frameworks of misogynoir and digital infrastructure, this paper strives to elucidate how Iris West's hypervisibility and structurally controlled narratives, and Nicole's position as romantically disposable from the outset, both exhibit the foregrounded limitations of black female sexuality, desirability, and subjectivity through erasure disguised as inclusion.

The disposable Black girlfriend trope identifies the extent to which on-screen female characters disproportionately serve as temporary love interests that are disposed of in favor of white or non-Black love interests. (Adegoke, 2017) This is another form of tokenism, to check the diversity quotas in Hollywood, but without giving them roles that audiences can identify with or attach to. Moya Bailey in *Misogynoir* writes that the media circulates misogynoir and offers approval of the disparate treatment of black women in society. Whether the Jezebel, mammy, Sapphire, and other stereotypes, misogynistic portrayals of Black women are meant to shape their livelihoods by instructing society on how they are meant to interact with black women. (Bailey, 2021)

Summer Madison's portrayal of Nicole Richardson in *The Summer I Turned Pretty* is the definition of the disposable black girlfriend. She is depicted as wealthy, confident, sexually and romantically explorative, especially with the male lead Conrad. This characterization is pretty much the same in the books, except that in the show, she is Black, and in the books, she is white and blonde. It is a calculated choice that, for the only Black actress in the season, was written with undertones of the Jezebel stereotype, where she is constantly seeking to "seduce" the WASP protagonists whose heart belongs to the female lead. Societal conventions cannot allow for Lola Tung's character, Belly, to be perceived as worthy of the affections of the male lead enough to be picked over a white woman. There is an implicit messaging of the preservation of beauty hierarchies within romantic narratives in media that dictate the types of storylines and racial identities that must be applicable for these ideologies to work and be digested. If the Black woman is desired over those above her hierarchically, resentment must be harbored against her as a way to rectify displacement. In fact, in season 1 episode 3, when Conrad brings Nicole to his home, whilst Belly and her friend Taylor and some others are playing in the pool. The atmosphere instantly gets tense with Taylor becoming passive-aggressive. As the scene progresses and they are playing volleyball, Taylor spikes and "accidentally" hits Nicole's face with it. Here, we see the instant ramifications of Black women being desired over someone socially higher than her and the lengths those around Belly are willing to go to make that discomfort known. This scene is similar to what goes on in the books, but it won't be visually replicated with Nicole as white because Belly isn't fully white; she isn't privileged enough to be desired over the white woman and be defended in a way that upholds that desirability as truth. The next scene in the episode is with Conrad and Nicole, as he touches her face and makes sure she is okay. His responses are aloof and a bit disconnected, but Nicole is starry-eyed, vying and

basking in his attention. She leans to kiss him, and he looks uncomfortable, and is saved by an important text he needs to attend to. This scene is a play-by-play of the majority of the interactions between Conrad and Nicole in the show. There is only one recorded kiss between the two of them in episode 4, and by the end of that episode, he has a romantic moment with Belly and leaves Nicole on read until Belly and he have a fight. Through this inclusion of a Black version of Nicole's character, the sexuality, subjectivity, and desirability of Black women are fundamentally erased in favor of maintaining the status quo. This one-dimensional box defines black female love interests as open, overgiving for any kind of love, a romantic other outside traditional conventions of love, whilst trivializing their own perspectives in favor of the white/non-black lead. Swapping the race of characters to black women on screen barely accounts for the intersections of identities that shape their existence in society, and it strives to cheapen the value of black women and black characters on screen so they become obsolete.

Like Nicole, Iris West in *The Flash* comics was written as a redhead with fair skin; as the changing political climate of the mid-2010s drove the CW network to employ diversity initiatives to its mostly white programming. This decision was met with so much backlash from *The Flash* fandom and ignited a hate campaign that followed Candice Patton's portrayal of Iris from start to finish. Moya Bailey's "Misogynoir Is a Drag" states that "The dragging of Black women and girls often occurs on multiple levels, resulting in harm that includes the circulation of digital caricatures that misrepresent them, which in turn fuel their physical mistreatment by multiple institutions..." (Bailey, 2021) She then identifies platforms like Twitter that were created to facilitate these kinds of toxic environments, and the various hashtags used to try to bait and switch misogynoiristic violence against black women. (Bailey, 2021) Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and other sites were breeding grounds for violent hatred for Iris and Candice, with

many seeking to “preserve the integrity” of the original comic. Others could not imagine Grant Austin finding her attractive, falling in love with her, or even marrying her, and they resorted to a ton of racial stereotyping to degrade and dehumanize her. Iris became the face of a superhero romance, in which she is meant to be a damsel in distress, grateful for his presence, and at the beck and call of a man who is larger than life. Superhero media gives whiteness in our society the space to actualize the savior complex and replay the narratives of the white women who love and protect the male white savior. Candice’s portrayal disrupts that fantasy by placing Black women in a role that society will not allow, forcing white society to digest a reality that isn’t carefully constructed. Platforms like Twitter and Reddit that were built with Anti-blackness and misogynoir interwoven within their fabric have and will continue to facilitate this kind of violence. The facade of social media platforms as the great equalizer always disintegrates when black womanhood is at the center of its wrath, and as the show progressed, the smear campaigns increased, leaving both Candice and Iris at its mercy. Unlike Nicole, whose expendability functions through marginalization, Iris’s disposability is conveyed through the illusion of importance. Many Black fans felt that Iris’s character arc had been written to undermine her character’s significance and appease the hate campaigns by diluting their relationship. In the first season, Iris and Barry are not together because of Iris’s need for independence, having grown up in the same household with Barry. She was given a love interest that sidelined her existence to the “normalcy” aspect of the superhero universe and didn’t allow for much buildup towards her eventual relationship with him. In season two, it’s flipped with Iris grieving her dead partner from season 1, and Patty Spivot, Barry’s white love interest, takes center stage in favor of the main “love” story. They don’t fully begin their romance until season 3, and by that point, Iris/Candice had been so scrutinized that the relationship had very little validity. Iris, as a black

woman, is given the central role as a love interest in a genre that largely underrepresents blackness, yet even as the main character, she is still disposable. Whether that be by the audience continuously dragging her, or by the writer's lack of skill to depict complex narratives that engage with black desirability and sexuality that are fruitful. Iris is not seen as fully human, and it is this fact that creates the hollowness within her portrayal that allows for public scrutiny and no accountability on the studio's part.

Catherine Steele writes that intersectionality has been warped into a postmodern, post feminist ideology, where black women are erased and replaced by structural analysis that emphasizes gender and racial representation in favor of more systemic social and political change. (Steele, 2021) We see this in both Nicole's and Iris's representation in media, where the illusion of inclusivity masks negligent systemic institutions that placate the same representations of Black women in various forms. Society understands that the oppression of Black women, their sexuality, and desirability is necessary for privilege to be maintained by those above them. The media acts as social scripts for what they deserve in interpersonal relationships, in the entertainment industry, and in their everyday lives. If Black women have the opportunity to see themselves be loved and cherished on screen, social expectations have to change, and that is why they are so scarce. Black women have two options: to strive for love like Nicole and be a placeholder for the right kind of woman, or to be chosen like Iris and sidelined for more important aspects of their partners' lives, and risk social scrutiny. Social scrutiny is not just reserved for being picked over privilege; it's for even being picked at all because Black women are taught that they aren't meant to be loved at all.

Works Cited page

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