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Black Feminism In Popular Culture:
Exploring Representations of Black Feminism in News & Entertainment Media

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Abstract

Over the past decade, concepts and expressions derived from Black feminist theory, a line of intellectual thought historically produced from Black women's unique lived experiences that asks us to consider how one's material realities are co-constituted by multiple, interlocking systems of the oppressed, have traveled into the public sphere through popular media. These theorizations, especially the term 'intersectionality' have increasingly been translated to mass audiences through popular media such as news, television, and music to much scrutiny and debate. While these popular usages can expose mass audiences to the lived realities of Black women, femme, and queer folks in productive ways for thinking about liberation, the neoliberal, individualist impulses of popular media markets often demands a shift in the structural analysis of marginalization that Black feminism intends to offer, leading to problematic moments of misunderstandings and misuse. It is this tension between the history of Black feminist theorizing and neoliberal capitalism that I explore in "Black Feminism In Popular Culture: Exploring Representations of Black Feminism in News & Entertainment Media."

Employing Halls' (1980) model of encoding and decoding, I examine news platforms, television shows, and visual albums that center representations of Black women, femmes, and queer people, to ask: 1) What are the varying social, economic, and technological conditions across popular culture spaces that have allowed for an influx and proliferation of black feminist concepts, politics, and aesthetics? 2) How do various forms of popular media construct Black feminist messages? 3) What messages about Black feminism do audiences decode through these media texts? And 4) What do these encoding and decoding processes say about how Black feminism circulates throughout contemporary popular cultures, and 5) what material and ideological conditions are at stake in these circulated meanings? Broadly, "Black Feminism In Popular Culture" aims to map the possibilities and limitations of communications technologies for spreading and perpetuating liberatory rhetorics, such as Black feminism. In other words, can liberatory ideologies of marginalized communities truly be transmitted through media and technologies that were not only designed within the logic of neoliberal capitalism and mainstream, hegemonic ideology but also historically used against them?

To answer these questions, I employ a range of qualitative research methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews with media creators and practitioners, digital participant-observation within media organizations, close readings of media text, discourse analysis of popular press and trade publications, and qualitative audience response survey. Together, this range of qualitative investigations explores the complex ways messages about Black feminism are embedded and transmitted through popular media; and, on a more material level, can be used to influence the experiences of women and queer people of color in the world.

Ultimately, I argue popular Black feminism can offer a useful and accessible framework for combating pervasive discourses of anti-racist misogyny in popular media. However, in reformulating these messages to conform to the strictures of neoliberal markets, these messages are often presented in ambiguous ways that can be easily missed by those who choose to dismiss them. As such, audience readings of popular Black feminism are often rooted in the positionality of the audience member themselves, with Black women, femme, and queer audiences seeking out this media and seeing its liberatory potential. Thus, while for some popular Black feminism becomes another tool towards liberation, for others, it may be consumed purely for pleasure with little liberatory potentialities.

This project adds to the growing literature at the intersection of Black feminist theory and media and technology studies that seek to understand how historically marginalized communities have used new media and digital technologies to promote counterhegemonic and liberatory discourse.

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Introduction: Popular Black Feminism

The NBC sitcom *Superstore* (2015-Present) chronicles the day-to-day interactions of employees who work at a large retail megastore called Cloud 9. In an episode from the show's fifth season, entitled "Lady Boss," a new multi-national conglomerate buys the retail chain and introduces a new display targeted at young girls, featuring pink apparel that reads "Girl Power" and "Feminist" in sparkly letters, sparking a debate amongst the employees about the role of feminism in contemporary society. While walking past the display, the character Johna, a white, male business school drop-out, framed as the decidedly more "intellectual" of the Cloud 9 crew, remarks, "Wow. Cool shirts. Who knew Cloud 9 would ever catch up to Intersectional feminism?" In her book, *Empowered: Popular Feminism, Popular Misogyny*, Sarah Benet-Weiser (2018) argues that the spread of feminism within popular culture has led to 'popular feminism,' an understanding of feminism that feeds into capitalism, corporate culture, and individualistic neoliberal imperatives. In the scene, the show perfectly portrays how corporations commodify "feminism." However, in this case, what is even more interesting is the show's framing of this commoditized display of feminist branding as "intersectional."

Intersectionality is a term and analytical framework developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw that highlights how intersecting systems of oppression, such as race and gender, shape Black women's lives in intersecting and dynamic ways that do not allow them to access justice in our social and political systems (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Crenshaw (1989) argues that laws meant to establish racial and gender parity in the U.S., which essentialize 'woman' as 'white woman' and 'Black' as 'Black man,' can not fully account for the unique experiences of Black women who face both racial and gendered discrimination. In this way, Crenshaw suggests "with Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis," and thus advocates for legislative frameworks that "move beyond single-axis of analysis" (p. 14). Therefore, Crenshaw argues that in any effort towards liberation, we need to begin by "addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world," and thus others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit." (p. 167). Thus, Crenshaw offers intersectionality as a way to examine how the material

consequences of categorizations intersect, overlap, and compound; and as a framework for discovering new coalitions between and within marginalized communities. As Patricia Hill Collins and Simira Blige (2016) argue, “Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.” (p.22). Thus, as an analytical tool that allows us to see connection and complexity across social and political institutions rooted in white heteropatriarchy, intersectionality reveals not only how inequities take shape, but also how they persist.

A glittery pink t-shirt called labeled “feminist” can not do this. Jonah’s, or rather, the writers and producers at NBC’s, conception of “intersectionality” necessarily takes this analytical tool for liberation in our social and political sphere and flattens it into a commodity that can be produced by multinational corporations and sold to consumers. And while it is possible that the writers merely saw this misuse as a joke, the implication of this unclarified and unchallenged statement (no one steps in to correct Johna) reached all 2.59 million viewers who watched the “Lady Boss” episode of *Superstore*, is no laughing matter (Welch, 2020).

This misuse of intersectionality also extends into other forms of popular media, such as news. In a segment on the news and politics podcast, *The Dispatch*, in an episode focused on the VP selection for 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidate Joe Biden, senior editor David French commented that following the COVID-19 global pandemic, “intersectionality has been overtaken events;” noting that Biden’s previous promise of choosing a woman running mate should take a back seat to choosing a viable ‘competent’ politician to deal with the global public health crisis, which French’s determined so far was only a handful of white, male governors. As French put it, the “box-checking concern” now needs to be superseded by a competence concern. This use of intersectionality reduces the complexity of Black feminist social and political views to surface-level identities. In other words, it turned Identity Politics as it was used by the Combahee River Collective and Audre Lourde as the generative use of Black women and women of color’s experiences to critique sites of power, into neoliberal “identity politics” that views these identities as singular categories meant to promote representation in positions of power (Rodriguez, 2019). The comment takes for granted the potentiality of intersectionality in allowing politicians to see the material consequences of COVID-19 along classed, gendered, raced, and sexed lines.

As an analytical framework, intersectionality can be positioned as part of a larger tradition of Black feminist theory. Black feminist theory is a line of intellectual production rooted in the lived experiences of U.S. Black women and women of color that contends our social, political, and economic lives are shaped by various, dynamic, and interlocking sites of power and systemic oppression, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality (Combahee, 1974; Collins, 2001; hooks, 1989). Black feminism puts forth a *structural* understanding of power, oppression, and liberation in our society: official institutions and power in society privilege white heteropatriarchy. These sites of power oppress people based on deviance from white heteropatriarchy in ways that overlap and intersect. Thus, liberation can only be fully realized by simultaneously addressing all fault lines of power and oppression. However, when concepts, terms, and frameworks from Black feminism, such as intersectionality, are taken up in popular mass media, this structural foundation is often foregone in exchange for an analysis that reduces these frameworks to a neoliberal *individualist* understanding of oppression. As seen in each of the examples above, “intersectional” is reduced to individual identity markers (e.g., Black, woman, gay), someone can use to mark themselves as “intersectional.”

I am far from the first scholar to note how intersectionality has become misconstrued in the public sphere, often through popular media (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Coasten, 2019; Nash, 2019;). However, I suggest, in addition to the term “intersectionality,” Black feminism, as a larger lineage of thought, is increasingly taken-up by U.S. popular media as a way to talk about and represent marginalized communities, especially Black women, femmes, and queer folk. In many cases, while this interpolation of Black feminism by news and entertainment media has allowed for an expansion in the way we see marginalized communities discussed and represented in popular culture, I suggest the tension that exists between the structural vantage point of Black feminism and the neoliberal capitalist impulses of commercial culture inherently lead to reformation, co-optation, and transmutation of the complex understandings of systemic oppression Black feminism has historically aimed to offer.

In this project, I am interested in thinking through what happens when sites of popular commercial media take up Black feminist ideas, aesthetics, and frameworks, especially in ways that may flatten the

structural analysis of liberation they offer in favor of individualist frameworks and analyses. If, as Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, neoliberal understandings of popular feminism foreclose discussions of more systemic understandings of feminism, what happens when the structural underpinnings of Black feminism collide with the neoliberal imperatives of popular culture? Can liberatory ideologies of marginalized communities truly be transmitted through media and technologies designed within the logic of neoliberal capitalism and mainstream, hegemonic ideology and used against historically marginalized communities? In other words, I ask if the logic of popularization necessarily requires a reductionist approach to ideologies initially developed for the liberation of historically marginalized communities.

Throughout this work, I examine the production, content, and audience reception of news media news platforms, television shows, and visual albums that both explicitly and implicitly take up Black feminist frameworks as a way to center representations of Black women, femmes, and queer folks. Through these critical examinations, “Black Feminism in Popular Culture” explores the complex ways, Black feminism gets taken up in popular media. Specifically, I ask 1) What are the varying social, economic, and technological conditions across popular culture spaces that have allowed for an influx and proliferation of Black feminist concepts, politics, and aesthetics? 2) How do various forms of popular media engage Black feminist frameworks to discuss and represent Black women, femmes, and queer folk? 3) What messages about Black feminism do audiences decode through these popular media? And 4) What do these encoding and decoding processes say about how Black feminism circulates throughout contemporary popular cultures, and what material and ideological conditions are at stake in these circulated meanings? In this way, “Black Feminism in Popular Culture” maps the possibilities and limitations of communications technologies for spreading and perpetuating liberatory rhetorics, such as Black feminism. Thus, throughout “Black Feminism in Popular Culture,” I offer a series of frameworks to help us think about the tension and ambiguity created at the intersection of Black Feminist Thought and neoliberal commercial media.

What is “Popular” Media?

When I talk about ‘popular media’ throughout this project, I refer to media circulating within mainstream popular culture. In the United States, the term popular culture, in opposition to what was historically referred to as high culture, refers to cultural objects that appeal to an emergent middle-class

(Fornas, 2014; West, 1990). In this way, the denotation of a cultural object as ‘popular’ is inherently tied to the increasing role of the middle-class as potential consumers within the economic market of late-stage capitalism, which is defined by corporations and mass commoditization (Fiske, 1989). Thus, as media that specifically circulates within this broader space of popular culture, popular media are media such as films, television shows, news, and books, commodified for mass consumption and created to appeal across the middle class. Further, as mediatization theorists note, we have moved from the electronic age defined by ‘mass media broadcast’ to the digital age defined by the internet and digital technologies. Thus, when talking about contemporary popular media today, I am referring to traditional broadcast media, such as radio programs, legacy broadcast and network television shows, and blockbuster movies, as well as digitally-distributed media *intended* and *available* for mass consumption, such as podcasts, movies and television shows available over large-scale digital platforms and streaming services, and digitally-produced news.

While popular culture commodities circulate within the realm of the middle class, in the era of late-stage capitalism, they are often created for and commodified by corporations and institutions that occupy spaces of power and privilege. In the case of popular media, this often includes large broadcast and media production companies, publishing houses, record labels, and celebrities. As John Fiske suggests, “the economic system, which determines mass production and mass consumption, reproduces itself ideologically in its commodities.” Thus, as media made for mass appeal from a site of power, popular media has historically been designed to appeal to the broadest or what is ideologically perceived as the *least objectionable* audience. In the U.S., this has often meant that the media is created to appeal not only to the middle-class but specifically to white, heterosexual, middle-class audiences (Ang, 1985; Gitlin, 1983; Radway, 1982).¹ As Todd Gitlin (2000) argues, broadcast network executives often generate and reproduce hegemonic ideology unintentionally by relying on imperfect ‘scientific’ methods, such as audience surveys and rating, which suffer from underrepresentation of marginalized communities and response bias against storylines that promote socially, racially, and sexually progressive storylines. Further, producers

¹It is important to note that here I do not mean to suggest white people in the U.S. are a monolith. Rather, I mean to emphasize that media industries often do not see audiences as distinct communities but as markets that can be reduced to monolithic understandings of these viewers (Davila, 2001; Gitlin, 2000).

employ ‘ideological strategies’ that appease the social and political taste of what is perceived to be the common audience, steering clear of narratives and representations they feel may be seen by audiences as socially radical or taboo.

At the same time, the middle class is not only made up of white heterosexual audiences. Thus, while aiming to appeal to the dominant ideology, the ‘popular’ must also leave space for the negotiation of meaning by consumers and viewers outside of these demographic communities. As Fiske suggests, “popular culture is deeply contradictory in societies where power is unequally distributed along axes of class, gender, race, and other categories that we use to make sense of social difference. Popular culture is the culture of the subordinate and disempowered and thus always bears within it signs of power relations...equally, it shows signs of resisting or evading these forces: popular culture contradicts itself” (p.5). In turn, the messages created within popular media are similarly a contested ground upon which ideology, values, and identity are negotiated. As a site of exploration, popular media allows us to explicate both the expansive and limited ways in which messages and images around issues of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and class, circulate on a mass scale throughout what Habermas (1962/1989) refers to as the “public sphere,” spaces within society in which social values and ideologies are discussed, negotiated, and defined. In this way, throughout society, popular media acts as an important site of knowledge production through which people come to understand and contest predominant ideological frameworks through which they know the world around them and relate to one another.

What is Popular Black Feminism?

Based on this understanding of popular media, I then define ‘popular Black feminism’ as the circulation of Black feminist ideas, concepts, terms, and aesthetics through various forms of popular media. Black feminism is a politic and line of intellectual production, rooted in everyday, epistemological, and lived experiences of Black and of color women, femme, and queer folks that necessarily contends with how people’s lives are differentially shaped in relation to various sites of power and systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism (Combahee, 1977; Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982). While within the academy what Patricia Hill Collins (1989) terms “Black Feminist Thought” consists of “a second level of knowledge... furnished by experts who are part of a group and who express the

group's standpoint" (p. 750), Black feminism as a social and political standpoint has historically taken shape through the lived experiences of Black women, femme, and queer folk (Collins, 1989). In addition to the academy, like feminist scholar Brittney Cooper (2017), "I understand Black women's knowledge production to encompass the range of places, thoughts, speeches and writing that Black women engaged" (p.16).

In the context of this project, 'Black' feminism should not be understood as a modification of the word feminism, equivalent to 'radical' feminism or 'post-feminism, but rather a specific epistemic and politic developed from the lived experiences of Black women, femmes, and queer folk in the face of racialized sexism and misogynoir, the specific forms of anti-Black misogyny faced by Black women, particularly within spaces of popular culture (Bailey, 2021). As communications studies scholar Catherine Knight Steele argues, "Black feminism is not a reaction to white feminism; it predates it" (Steele, 2021, p. 51). Similarly, African-American Studies scholar Jennifer Nash posits:

I treat the word 'black' [sic] in front of "feminism" not as a marker of identity but as a political category, and I understand a "black feminist approach to be one that centers analyses of racialized sexism and homophobia, and that foregrounds black [sic] women as intellectual producers, as creative agents, as political subject (Nash, 2019, p.5)

Like Nash, Steele, and Black women scholars before them, such as Alice Walker, Audre Lourde, and Toni Cade Bambara, I position Black feminism as its own politic, drawn from a set of experiences that is necessarily tied to Black people whose lives are actively colored by sexism and homophobia.

Throughout this project, I will examine how popular Black Feminism circulates by looking at how these ideas, concepts, and aesthetics manifest themselves in work by and representations of Black women, femme, and queer folks. By taking this approach, I do not mean to suggest *Black feminism* as a theory and political practice is synonymous with *Black women and femmes* or that all Black women are Black feminists and share a singular consciousness. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) reminds us, "An essential understanding of a Black woman's standpoint suppresses differences among Black women...it may be more accurate to say that a Black woman's *collective* standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tension that accrue to different responses by common challenges," (p. 32). In other words, while Black women are not a monolith, the contours of Black feminist theory and Thought takes shape from "the connections

between [Black women] experiencing oppression, developing a self-defined standpoint on that experience, and resistance.” (Collins, 1989, p.749). Thus, while throughout this project, I examine manifestations of popular Black feminism through discussions and representations forefronted by Black women and femmes, *Black women* and *Black feminism* cannot and should not be conflated through an essentialist reading that singularizes Black feminism. Rather my decision to focus on Black feminism through Black women, femme, and queer folks’ interactions with sites of popular culture is rooted in the fact that their lives often serve as the basis for Black feminist intellectual and creative production. Thus, in this context, I am using this community as a starting point for thinking about how Black feminist ideas may manifest themselves in popular culture spaces. Further, throughout the stories, chapters, and analyses that follow, what I mean by or how I define Black feminism shifts and, at some point, even becomes a site of debate to make space for the tension that can arise in the creation of the collective standpoint which Collins describes.

Why Popular Black Feminism?

Dialectical Convergence

My decision to focus this project on the interaction between Black feminism and popular media is three-fold. First, I am interested in detangling the parallel relationship between Black feminism and popular media as frameworks for understanding society, especially how they differentially structure the relationships between individuals and institutions. Popular media is a space through which understandings of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and class are often negotiated. Further, as commercially driven forms of media, historically produced to benefit those that occupy social and economic spaces of privilege, popular media has traditionally been underpinned by an ideological framework that upholds white and or heteropatriarchal values. To be clear, I am not saying that all popular media within the U.S. is outright racist, sexist, or homophobic. Rather, I am suggesting that due to the social and commercial impulses of popular media as an industry, more often than not, readily available popular media has historically been infused with some layer of racist, sexist, or homophobic ideology. Over time, what often differs between different iterations of popular media is the degree, orientation, and subtleness through which messages

surrounding these ideological viewpoints are presented to audiences. In this way, popular media creates a specific and ideologically-motivated epistemological roadmap through which audiences across different segments of society come to know the world around them.

Similarly, Black Feminism can offer new frameworks for understanding our social world. U.S. Black feminist theory, as a framework for intellectual production and liberation, grows out of a counter-hegemonic world view that shifts the point of reference away from the predominate, white, male, eurocentric and towards the lived experiences of Black women, femmes, and queer folk. Across Black feminist writing, scholars note how Black feminism offers a different lens to know and see the world rooted in Afrocentric and Black women's cultural traditions. Quoting Black woman activist and singer Bernice Regan in the beginning of her book of prose, *In Search Of Our Mother's Garden*, poet Alice Walker writes, "...I refuse to be judged by the values of another culture. I am a black woman, and I will stand as best I can in that imagery." (p. 2) Likewise, Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1989) suggests, "[Black feminist thought] can encourage collective identity by offering Black women a different view of themselves and their world than that offered by the established social order. This different view encourages African-American women to value their own subjective knowledge base"(p.750). As Collins notes, using Black feminism as a standpoint for world-making as a subaltern form of knowledge is at odds with predominate U.S. heteropatriarchal ideologies, writing, "when white males control the knowledge-validation process, both political criteria can work to suppress Black feminist thought" (p. 752). Thus, if popular media is an epistemological platform through which white males and white male interests have historically controlled not only the knowledge validation process but also the knowledge construction process, this project seeks to understand what happens when it takes up and co-opts a counterhegemonic world-view such as Black feminism that it has long sought to suppress. In other words, if the framework for understanding society offered by popular media has historically been at odds with the framework for understanding society offered by Black feminism, how are the two coming together now? And how do they necessarily change one another?

Black Feminist Neoliberalism?

Within these divergent frameworks of understanding our society, I am especially interested in the potential points of contention between Black Feminism and neoliberal capitalist ideology. As a part of the market economy, what is or is not ‘popular media’ is often, in part, defined by its popularity as a commodity within modern, neoliberal markets. Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices that has predominated in the United States since the late 1970s. Defined briefly, neoliberalism proposes “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2). In this way, neoliberalism as a theory and praxis centers the individual, not institutions, in perpetuating and defining economic success and advancement. However, the neoliberalization of society doesn’t just demand a reorientation of the market economy away from governmental and institutional support, it also depends on restructuring other aspects of our social and political life, such as individual and social rights, divisions of labor, social values, and interpersonal and societal relationships. As economist David Harvey (2005) argues, “Neoliberalism values market exchange as ‘an ethic in itself,’ capable of acting as a guide to all human action” (pg.3). In other words, the success of neoliberalism depends on extending beyond market economy, and reorienting social and political values towards the individual. As such, commodities that circulate within neoliberal market, including popular media, often emphasize and reinforce the prioritization of and focus on the individual. Their commercial potential centers on what the product can do for “you.”

When adapting feminism into popular culture, some feminist politics fit into this framework more easily than others. In her examination of Popular Feminism, Sarah Banet-Weiser calls on Catherine Rottenberg’s (2014) notion of neoliberal feminism as a manifestation of feminism that “values and assumptions of neoliberalism—ever-expanding markets, entrepreneurialism, a focus on the individual—are embraced, not challenged, by feminism,” (pg. 11). Building on Rottenberg, Banet-Weiser argues that neoliberalism is restructuring mainstream feminism politics away from a systemic understanding of gender and sex-based oppression toward individual notions of women and girls’ empowerment, self-love, and confidence as a means of achieving success and parity. In her analysis, Banet-Weiser argues, this works,

in part, because mainstream feminist politics has often focused on conceptions of feminism rooted in the experiences of white, middle and upper-middle-class women, allowing for a feminist politic that can more easily overlook the connection between gender-based oppression and other forms of systemic oppression, such as race, class, and nationality, that may make gender equity through these individual means of success less tenable. In other words, when faced with multiple fronts of oppression, a woman may not be able to achieve social parity with her male counterparts by just “working harder” or “believing in herself;” it is not an issue of internal confidence; it is an issue of material opportunities and resources.

Conversely, a Black feminist political praxis has always centered a systemic understanding of feminism that recognizes the ways gender-based oppression interacts with other forms of material oppression. In their foundational Black Feminist Statement, the Combahee River Collective, a collection of self-identified Black feminist writers, activists, and scholars in the 1970s, define their Black feminist politics as being “actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Combahee, 1977, p. 210). In this way, Black feminist theory focuses on the mutually-constitutive ways institutions social, political, and economic development, particularly as it pertains to historically marginalized communities such as people of color, women, and non-heterosexual individuals. In other words, the burden is not on individually marginalized people to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” because their failure is often not individual, it is systemic. Further, Collins and Bilge (2016) suggest that intersectional analysis can often be mobilized as an analytical tool to deconstruct and resist neoliberal logic. Thus, given the seemingly dialectical nature of Black feminism and neoliberalism as ideological viewpoints, I am interested in understanding how the systemic analysis of society offered by Black feminist theory potentially becomes neoliberalized within popular media. In other words, in what ways do (or do not) Black feminist politics, concepts, ideas, and aesthetics become reoriented towards the individual when taken up by popular media?

Taking Black Feminism to the masses.

The second reason I decided to focus this project on the intersection of Black feminism and popular media is that I am interested in exploring what happens when Black feminist messages operate on a

mass scale. As I articulated, popular media, as a commodity created for mass appeal throughout the middle class, has historically taken the form of *mass media*, or media that is accessible to a large number of potential audiences at once. Early mass media can be traced to the 1400s during what mediaization theories refer to as *mechanization*, a media environment defined by mechanical media and brought about by the establishment of the mechanical printing press by Johannes Gutenberg (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). The mechanical printing press allowed publishers to print identical versions of books, pamphlets, and manuscripts in mass quantities, expanding and standardizing the media content society consumed. While this does not mean that different audiences and society members had a standardized experience of this media, mechanical reproduction “offer[ed] through its standardized reproduction the possibility of reaching a wider group of people via one kind of media outlet.” (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 120). After *mechanization*, the mid-1800s brought about the *electronification* media wave or the development of communications media that could be viewed and distributed via technologies and infrastructures operated by electronic transmission. While electronification allowed for the mass distribution of media such as records and sound-based films, in terms of the development of mass media, this period is often defined by the development of electronic broadcasting technology initially developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Originally created to allow individuals to transmit private messages via radio waves, broadcasting eventually got taken up by media companies to transmit audio content, and later video content, *en masse* to anyone in society with the technology to receive these messages (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). The development of electronic-based media expanded the potential reach of the media circulating throughout the public sphere from localized distribution to national and even international transmission and created the ability for this content to reach these vast and differential audiences *simultaneously*. The ability for mass distribution of media across society through these technological developments was, in large part, what defined its potential to exist within the realm of ‘popular.’ In other words, as media developed the ability to be distributed on a mass scale, large segments of society developed the ability to purchase, consume, circulate and negotiate meaning around said media as a commodity.

In focusing then on mass media, I am specifically interested in examining what happens when broad audiences, who are differentially situated in society across lines of race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, and

sexuality, become exposed to a particular representation of Black feminism through a piece of popular media. While Black feminist intellectual production has historically been circulated within and throughout Black and women of color communities, introducing these ideas into popular media can inherently expose these ideas to those outside these communities. The frameworks for liberation offered by Black feminism are meant to benefit all of society. As the Combahee River Collective (1977) suggests about holding a Black feminism position, “We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression” (p.215). However, Black feminist political and aesthetic focus on Black women and femme communities may obscure this fact from audiences less familiar with Black feminist frameworks, especially when not fully presented. Further, what is at stake when the first time these broader audiences come into contact with Black feminist ideas is through the realm of popular media, with its historical investment in hegemonic ideology. In other words, what happens when Black feminism, which has historically been relegated to the margins of society and academia, becomes mainstream? And, further, what happens when this mainstreaming process happens through a popular commodity that holds other commercial and capitalist interests outside of Black liberation?

This focus on popular media as mass media also operates in contrast to but remains in conversation with recent scholarship on the intersection of Black feminism and digital technology. As I noted previously, in our current media environment, popular mass media can also be distributed through digital technologies. These new forms of popular media are available for mass consumption but are not necessarily predicated on a publishing or broadcast technology model. While media created within this digital culture can be oriented towards mass appeal, such as podcasts distributed through RSS feeds and television shows available through corporate streaming platforms, corporations (and individuals) are increasingly able to commodify digital media through *niche* appeal to specific subcultures (Fornas, 2014). This is because most digital media reaches audiences through direct search or through search, distribution, and recommender algorithms, both of which orient themselves towards specific consumers who identify themselves as or can be presumed to be interested in a particular type of content. As a

result, as opposed to popular media, which trafficks in the currency of mass appeal, digital can also traffic in the currency of the specific. In addition, the low barriers to accessing production allow individuals who operate outside of corporate structures can create their own mass-oriented media messages or become what is known as ‘prosumers,’ both producers and consumers of popular media messages (Toffler, 1990; Rosen, 2006).

Recently several media and communications scholars such as Ruha Benjamin, Safiya Noble, Kishonna Gray, Moya Bailey, and Catherine Knight Steele have examined how digital media and the internet have opened up new spaces for the production of Black feminist and intersectional media. In *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, Safiya Noble and Brendesha Tynes (2015) offer intersectional critical race technology studies (ICRTS) as an epistemological approach to the study of racialized and gendered identities in digital and web-based media that interrogates “naturalized notions of the impartiality of hardware and software and what the Web means in differential ways that are imbued with power,” and “offers a lens, based on the past articulations of intersectional theory, for exploring power in digital technologies and global Internet(s)” (pg. 3-4) In other words, the authors employ Black feminist theory and intersectional analysis to examine how the internet and digital media rearticulate the politics and representation of racialized and gendered identities within our society and the public sphere. Similarly, Kishonna Gray uses the terms Black Cyberfeminism (2015) and Intersectional Tech (2020) to consider how Black Feminist Thought and intersectional frameworks reconstitute themselves in marginalized women and marginalized users’ respective online usage and production experiences. Like Noble and Tynes, Gray offers a way to examine the unique intersection of Black feminist theory and digital media. These frameworks set a foundation for thinking about how Black feminist theory and Black Feminist Thought are taken up and engaged through digital media. While, on the one hand, these theories are concerned with how the technological underpinnings of digital media differentially exert ideological power over racialized and gendered communities in society, they are also interested in thinking about how the affordances of digital media allow for new dispersions of Black feminist theory.

Similarly, In *Digital Black Feminism*, Catherine Knight-Steele (2021) examines how Black men, women, and queer folks have used the affordances of digital media to engage in Black feminist intellectual

production through blogging, as well as how “digital technology and Black feminism’s convergence yields different principles and praxes.” (pg.9) Thus, *Digital Black Feminism*, sets forth a framework for thinking about *where, how, and to what end*, Black feminism has become a part of our contemporary media environment, especially as it relates to historical understandings and praxis of Black feminism. Likewise, in their work, both Aymar Jean Christian (2018) and Moya Bailey (2021) examine how Black women, femme, and queer folks have used the affordances of digital media platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo to create web series from Black feminists and intersectional perspectives that push against and challenge mainstream stereotypes of Black women, femme, and queer folks.

Like “Popular Black Feminism,” these authors are interested in thinking about how specific media formats take up and circulate Black feminism and Black Feminist Thought to audiences. However, the specifically digital nature of the media being explored by these scholars also means they operate and traffic in the specific. In other words, the audience for Black feminist blogs and intersectional web series are often other Black women, femmes, men, and queer folks seeking out and interested in this content. In her comparison of Black feminist blog spaces to a “virtual beauty shop,” Steele suggests, like the historically safe space of the beauty shop, these digital discursive spaces exist outside the white gaze allowing Black women to “openly discuss things personal to the community with no need to hide their opinion for fear of reprisal,” (pg. 49). In this way, digital manifestations of Black feminism often circulate within and between communities that may be inherently prone to seeing and understanding the value of Black Feminist Thought. Thus, as a complement to this previous research, “Popular Black Feminism” specifically focuses on how Black Feminism has simultaneously been taken up in spaces of mass, popular media to consider how the different histories, industries, and ideological impulses of these media formats differentially dictates how they reproduce Black feminist concepts and praxes; as well as examine what happens when media circulated Black feminism outside of Black and of color communities.

Black feminism, Black women, & the bounds of cultural citizenship

Third, I am interested in the relationship between popular media and Black feminism, as it relates to larger cultural understandings of and extensions of cultural citizenship to Black women, femmes, and queer folk. In her exploration of how Latino communities are imaged and marketed in the United

States, Arlene Davila (2001) argues that markets appeal to a particular rendering of racial and national understandings of what it means and look like to be “authentically” Latino “reflects dominant hierarchies of representation and the greater political economy structures affecting the commodification of Hispanics in these countries,” (p. 24). In their construction of who is and what it looks like to be Hispanic, markets inevitably created an ambiguous “pan-Hispanic” representation of the Latino community that erased the nuances that exist between different ethnic groups within the Latin diaspora in ways privileged certain racial and cultural understandings of “latiness over others,” in ways that aligned with the preferences of those in power within the market. In turn, this privileging of certain manifestations of “Latin-ness” shape how this community is conceived more broadly within the popular culture and the public sphere, particularly by those outside of these communities. Thus, in thinking about how Black feminist concepts are motivated to frame representations of Black women, femme, and queer folks in popular media, I am interested in thinking about how the necessary privileging that takes place in these representations impacts contemporary understandings of what the lived experiences of Black women, femme, and queer folks are in the U.S. are, especially by those who not belong to these communities.

Similarly, I am also interested in how these representations relate to understanding Black women’s cultural citizenship. As media studies scholar Lori Kido Lopez (2016) argues that in their fight for what they perceive as non-discriminatory representation in the media, media activists are “working first and foremost towards actualization as citizens and fighting oppression through media is a necessary component of working towards this goal,” (p. 25). Thus, if Davila’s work shows us how media markets shape cultural understandings of racialized communities, Lopez’s work points to how these perceptions shape the treatment of and the social and cultural benefits provided to these communities within society. The more these representations present historically racially marginalized communities as fitting within the dominant ideology of acceptable “Americanness,” the fewer people from these communities may face discrimination in their everyday social and political lives. In this way, what is at stake in these media representations is the everyday treatment of people from within these communities. Thus, within this project, I am also interested in exploring how these contemporary representations of Black women, femme, and queer folks may play a broader role in shaping public understandings of Black women, femme, and

queer folks' cultural citizenship; and further, what is at stake in these representations —especially in relation to potentially more derogatory or harmful representations of these communities.

Theory: Encoding and Decoding Popular Black Feminism

In examining the emerging relationship between Black feminism and popular media, I aim to take a multifaceted approach to the study of popular media. This project theoretically draws on cultural theorist Stuart Hall's (1980) model of encoding-decoding, an understanding of media that situates meaning as a contested ground between media producers and consumers. Hall argues that the social meaning of media messages are shaped by both the institutional and organizational broadcast structures in which they are produced and the wider social and political societal systems in which they are embedded. In other words, broadcasters encode a meaningful discursive message into media, which is then decoded as a meaningful discursive message in ways that may or may not align with the initial meaning, and then these decoded second meanings are reincorporated back into broadcast messages (Hall, 1980). While these two meanings stem from one another, they are not necessarily symmetrical, meaning the media system does not necessarily dictate the message. Thus, media messages are co-constitutively given meaning by both institutions and the audiences.

Hall suggests that in most cases, misunderstandings or distorted communication between meaning one and meaning two results from viewers operating outside of the dominant, hegemonic code. Drawing on Gramsci's work on hegemonic ideological formations, Hall argues that on an individual level, those viewers operating within subcultural formations and from marginalized positionalities may receive these messages in ways that do not align with the dominant hegemonic understanding. In this way, the model attunes us to the power dynamics often embedded in message creation and reception. Hall theorizes four ways in which individuals can decode media messages: *the dominant/hegemonic code*, in which a viewer reads the message in line with the connotative meaning of the encoded reference, *the professional code*, which professional broadcasters use to transmit a message already signified in a hegemonic manner, *the negotiated code*, in which audience legitimately acknowledges what has been hegemonically and professionally signified but also negotiates this meaning alongside a more personal or localized understanding,

and finally, *the oppositional code*, which reads the meaning of the message against the intended hegemonic code.

“Black Feminism in Popular Culture” takes up Hall’s approach to examining media by evaluating the social meaning of popular Black feminist media messages through multiple points of meaning formation. As work on the intersection of popular media and Black women, audiences by scholars such as Robin Means Coleman (1998) and Jacqueline Bobo (1995) have shown, ideological messages embedded in mainstream media around Black womanhood do not always align with how these messages are read by audiences—especially when these audiences are Black women and femmes. Echoing Raquel Gates (2018), this approach challenges “the notion that media representations have a direct and straightforward impact on people’s ideologies, that media images matter more than histories of institutional oppression, and that the audience always interprets these messages in predictable and knowable ways,” (p.12). Thus, if part of this project’s impetus is to understand the larger possibilities and limitations that stem from using popular media to spread Black feminist ideas, frameworks, and aesthetics, it necessarily must look at this media and its messages from all angles: in its intention (production), in its manifestation (content), and its reception (audience decoding). Thus, this project is divided into three sections, each of which mirrors a different point at which social meaning is formed.

A Note on Black Feminist Methods

Black feminism as a political praxis and worldview is not only central to this project’s investigation but also central to my praxis as a researcher. On the most basic level, my analytical orientation throughout this project foregrounds standpoint theory or the understanding that the particular positionality of individuals, organizations, and institutions in relation to various sites of power influences their experiences, actions, and orientations within our social world. Thus, in my examination of producers’ and organizations’ media production practices and audiences’ meaning-making practices, I am deeply invested in understanding how the social location of each as it relates to race, gender, and capital informs their creation and understanding of media content. In this way, drawing on scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2019), I engage intersectionality as a form of critical social theory to better understand the role of popular Black feminist media in structuring our social world.

Additionally, the methods employed throughout this project are informed by Black feminist research and literature that privileges the value of lived experiences in theory building. As Patricia Hill Collins suggests, “Black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups” (p. 747). It is these material realities that can be used as the groundwork for alternative knowledge validation processes (Collins, 1989). In this way, as scholars such as Lisa Bowleg (2008) Carolyn Nielsen (2011) have suggested, doing Black feminist or intersectional scholarship asks us to move beyond looking at identities as binary additives, or Black + Woman = Black woman, and instead to look towards how people lived material realities are uniquely shaped by their positionality at different sites of power and oppression. Thus throughout this project, I engage in various qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured, in-depth interviews, ethnography, close reading, and open-ended qualitative surveys, to privilege qualitative illustrations of lived experiences.

Further, as a Black woman researcher, my positionality and epistemological orientation are inextricably linked to my orientation towards and framing of racial, gender, and sexual politics. As Black feminist Education scholar Venus E. Evans-Winters notes, “depending on our location in the world and a particular body of politics, Black women scholars borrow different language(s) and/or “frames,” to accentuate and forefront our memories and lived realities based on personal taste, aesthetics, and convenience,” (p. 14). My positionality and experiences as a Black woman, former media producer, and audience member of many media I explore throughout this project continually inform my qualitative inquiry. I, as the researcher, am candid in the notion that I am separate from but also a part of the research process. While some may argue this approach to research stand in opposition to classic conceptions of qualitative researchers as objective observers, it is also important to remember that these conceptions of research developed within a Eurocentric masculinist thought-model knowledge-validation process that inherently represents the specific epistemological and political interests of the scholars, experts, and publishers who established them (Collins, 1989). Further, Patricia Hill Collins argues it is these very knowledge-validation processes that have historically worked to suppress Black feminist thought. In this way, my push against claims to complete objectivity in research not only open the door to new forms of Black feminist thought

production but also highlight how these claims to complete objectivity in research, in many ways, have always been a falsehood.

In line with this, I also draw from Evans-Winters' assertion that "The Black feminist qualitative researcher begins with reflections of their owned lived experiences and brings those insights into the research process... she does view her observations of the social world just as significant to the research process as that of others," (pg. 20). Many of the chapters throughout this project begin with my own memories, experiences, and engagements with the discussion at hand. In this way, while the research throughout this study is based on data that reflects the practices, world-views, and experiences of others, I make clear that I, too, am a part of the various communities that I am studying. Further, my engagement with narration and storytelling brings forth a dialogical engagement with research that brings forth a "mutuality in questioning, observing, theorizing, and contemplating one's interaction with the social world" (Evans-Winters, p. 22).

Mapping "Popular Black Feminism": A Chapter Outline

This project is divided into seven chapters. In the first chapter succeeding this introduction, I give an overview of the historical connection between Black feminism and neoliberal capitalism. Throughout the chapter, I give a historical overview of neoliberalism, Black women subjects' relationship to neoliberalism, and in turn, how this sets the stage for Black feminism's historical relationship to neoliberalism. Through this history, I suggest that over time Black women's intellectual production and Black feminist scholarship have had a contentious yet ever-changing relationship with neoliberalism. Specifically, I highlight how despite the presumed incompatibility between Black feminism and neoliberalism, overtime, and especially within the context of our current digital age, the gulf between these frameworks has begun to close, setting the groundwork for the incorporation of Black feminist ideas, politics, and aesthetics into spaces of popular culture.

The succeeding six chapters, notwithstanding the conclusion, are divided into three parts: news and production, entertainment media (television shows and visual albums) and content, and audiences. The media objects I engage with throughout the project often feature representations of Black women, femmes, and queer folks. In other words, though they are operating within the space of popular media in

terms of their mass approach to commodification and/or development by a popular, mainstream artist or network, these media objects seem to *intentionally* take up or speak to aspects of Black feminism. Thus, unlike the example of *Superstore*, which casually throws around the word “intersectionality,” these media outlets more overtly call on Black feminism to produce popular content and attract audiences. My decision to orient this project towards these media objects in particular stems from two key impulses: (1) As popular media that more overtly and deliberately try to bring Black feminism into the popular space, these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums test the limits of how Black feminism can be brought into the popular. In other words, rather than give a passing mention of a Black feminist term or idea without context or explanation, this media seems determined to actively combined the frameworks of Black feminism and popular media, providing a richer space of analysis to think about how these two frameworks can and can not fully come together, laying bare the contested ground of the popular. (2) The specific and overt calls to Black feminist concepts across these popular media spaces can, in different ways across each medium, be read as a strategy to call in both mainstreams (read: white) audiences and niche (read: non-white) audiences. Thus, by looking at how people respond to these manifestations of popular media in particular, which aim to make themselves legible to audiences who inhabit different but potentially overlapping positionalities, we can begin to see whose perspective and values become prioritized through the messages these media ultimately create. Further, it allows us to see how the positionality of different audience members shapes what it is they take from this media as viewers and fans.

Part I: The Promise & Struggles of Black Feminist Practices in Journalism

The first part of the project consists of Chapters 2 & 3. In these two chapters, I use semi-structured in-depth interviews and ethnography to examine how independent, digital news organizations, often though not always those led by Black women, femme, and queer folks, are intentionally taking up a Black feminist praxis and analytical lens in their approach to the production of news. While these news outlets do not constitute what one may not initially think of when they think of ‘popular’ mainstream news, I suggest these news outlets actively and intentionally aim to engage with mainstream, mass audiences (the public) as well specific identity communities (counterpublics) to intervene and interrupt traditional

mainstream news narratives. In other words, in their founding, these news outlets were not necessarily meant to be niche news silos but ultimately aim to attract mass audiences to engage in popular discourse.

In Chapter 2, I interview 28 news journalists, publishers, and editors, many of whom use the affordances of the internet and news media to intentionally bring a Black feminist praxis into their approach to news editorial or their decisions around what stories to report on and how to report on them. Throughout this chapter, I argue that as opposed to traditional mainstream and alternative models of news editorial, which historically privileged a singular perspective in their approach to news, these Black feminist news creators intentionally draw on their understandings of Black feminism and intersectionality to decenter any singular identity in their reporting. However, as a form of popular media, I also investigate how the Black feminist values that underpin their news work make it hard for many of them to commodify their media products.

The Black feminist news practices uncovered in Chapter 2 act as a gateway for the more in-depth, ethnographic exploration of how these practices are implemented in real-time production at a Black-focused and Black woman-led digital news outlet in Chicago, *The TriiBe*. Throughout this hybrid traditional and digital ethnography, I use my observations of staff editorial meetings and production practices and interviews with the staff to better understand how Black feminist thought shapes the organization's approach to news work. At *the TRiiBE*, I argue that Black feminist concepts of care and community accountability are often mobilized to think about how reporting is approached and how news stories are framed. I also consider how *The TRiiBE*'s reliance on boot-strapped, digital production practices allows them the freedom to reimagine what news and journalism could look like in a way that more closely aligns with a Black feminist politic.

Part II: Black Feminism in Popular Entertainment Media

The second part of the project consists of Chapters 3 & 4. In these chapters, I employ close reading of media texts to examine the deployment of Black feminist aesthetics, politics, and concepts in popular entertainment content. In Chapter 4, I draw the definition of popular as mainstream, examining media produced by legacy television networks for mass consumption. Here, I draw my definition of legacy television networks from Aymar Jean Chrisitan's (2018) work on legacy television networks as networks that

use a "linear or traditional network distribution" model taking a top-down approach to the production of television and often "characterized by scheduled and time-based distribution via broadcast, cable, or premium (subscription) networks like ABC, TNT, or HBO, respectively," (p. 4) In this chapter, I examine select episodes of two popular television shows, *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, a Black woman-led sketch comedy show on the premium subscription channel HBO, and *Pose*, a show that focuses on the lives of Black transwomen and queer folks on the cable station Fox. I situate my close reading of these episodes in the history of Black women's participation and representation in television production and discourse analysis of trade press articles about these specific shows' production. I suggest that the increased value of marginalized audiences for these television networks in the wake of social media has compelled television networks to respond to calls from Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and LGBTQIA+ audiences to portray diverse, complex, and authentic representations of Black womanhood and queerness on mainstream television. However, I ultimately question if the particular commercial impulses of the networks that distribute these two shows at this particular moment puts the sustainability of shows such as these into question.

Then, in Chapter 5, I similarly examine the commercial politics surrounding recent visual albums by mainstream, popular Black femme artists initially released on two legacy television networks Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, which originally aired on the premium subscription channel HBO in 2016, and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, which originally aired on the Viacom-owned cable stations BET and MTV in 2018. I engage in a close reading of these two films, situating my analysis within the competing impulses of Black women's independent film production and the commercial music video. Additionally, I locate the Black feminist political and aesthetic work that each of these films enacts within the historical celebrity of each artist. From my analysis, I argue that these films are manifestations of what I term "commercial Black feminism," the packaging of Black feminist aesthetics into a neoliberal framework. Specifically, I suggest commercial Black feminism plays on the ambiguity of the visual album format to create work creatively and visually rooted in Black feminist aesthetics that address issues of systemic oppression, while simultaneously offering individually-oriented and heteronormative solutions.

Part III: Popular Black Feminism Audiences and Fans

In the final section, consisting of Chapters 6 & 7, I examine how audiences understand and engage with the popular Black feminist media examined in Parts I & II. In Chapter 6, I examine open-ended responses from an online survey I solicited via the online survey platform Qualtrics to self-identify consumers of one of five news outlets whose creators I spoke to in Chapters 2 or 3: *Hear To Slay*, *Refinery 29's Unbothered*, *The TRiiBE*, *Essence Magazine*, *Marsha's Plate*, *Prism*, and/or one of the entertainment shows examined in Chapters 4 & 5: *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, *Pose*, *Lemonade*, and *Dirty Computer*. The survey asked respondents about how they came to these shows, what they understood the message to be, what they thought of the show's representation of Black women, femme, and queer folks, and what pleasure they derived from these shows, as well as self-identified race, gender, sexuality, and class. Through my analysis of survey responses, I argue that audiences of popular Black feminist news and entertainment media often decode these representations as complex and nuanced Black women, femme, and queer experiences in line with Black feminist thought. However, I also suggest the heavy concentration of these audiences within Black femme communities and on entertainment media specifically holds significant implications for the focus and reach of this messaging content.

Then, in Chapter 7, I then turn to Twitter co-viewing tweets posted within 24 hours of the initial airing of *Lemonade*, *Dirty Computer*, and the select episodes previously examined of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and *Pose* examined to understand how social fan communities make sense of these popular Black feminist television shows and visual albums in real-time. Drawing on fan studies literature, particularly Rebecca Wanzo's (2015) identity-hermeneutics in fandom, I suggest that fans of these shows use the affordances of Twitter to engage socially and collaboratively to understand the meaning of these shows, especially as it relates to issues of racial representation. Further, I suggest, how Black women, femme, and queer folk are represented in these shows becomes a generative point of both fandom and anti-fandom for those engaged in those conversations, necessarily highlighting the link between one's own identity and the potential to become a fan of popular Black feminist media, despite its representational limitations. In this way, through these two chapters, I suggest that despite the commercial and representational limitations

of popular Black feminist media, Black women, femmes, and queer folks often still see this media as a generative site of widely circulated Black feminist ideas and concepts in media.

Conclusion

The project concludes with a discussion of what is at stake in how we produce and receive popular Black feminist media. Parallel to Banet-Weiser's parallel of popular feminism to popular misogyny, I suggest that opposing corollary to popular Black feminism often comes in the form of popular media spaces in which Black men, specifically, promote anti-racist logics that perpetuate misogynoir and transphobia. Therefore, I argue, what is at stake in the potential limitations of popular Black feminism is the ability, on a broad, mass media scale, to counteract harmful logic perpetrated against Black women, femmes, and queer folks that circulate throughout popular media, often spearheaded by Black men. I also ask consider what is at stake in the fact that popular Black feminism is usually only fully recognized by people who belong to historically marginalized communities. How does this impact how popular Black feminism spreads and is used across our society?

CHAPTER 1

The Matrix of Tension: Black Feminism(s) and Neoliberalism

“She knew first hand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free. To wander through the streets of Harlem, to want better than she had, and to be propelled by her whims and desires was to be ungovernable.” - Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*

In October 2020, after a summer of quarantining and racial unrest, while in a conversation with friends, I learned that at the end of the month, we were all supposed to ‘Buy Black.’ Specifically, on October 30th, 2020, the company formerly known as Facebook launched an initiative called #Buy-BlackFriday, asking users to spend their consumer dollars across the internet to invest in Black-owned businesses. In the press release for the event, the company said they were “harnessing the energy of the year’s biggest retail day,” also known as Black Friday, to celebrate and support Black-owned businesses and their communities,” which had “been hit especially hard by the pandemic,” (Sandberg, 2020).

For my friends, all of whom are Black women, this initiative was conceptualized as a call for us to spend the day buying products and goods specifically from other Black women. #BuyfromBlackWomen, if you will. Indeed, the press release from Facebook (now Meta) incorporated a Black women-owned business into its announcement of the event. The release featured the picture and story of La’Asia Johnson, an entrepreneurial Black woman who started her own skin-care line after years of living with Crohn’s disease, a chronic ailment that made her have an allergic reaction to most mainstream beauty products. My friends saw it as their duty as good, Black woman citizen subjects to join in this initiative and work towards the capitalist success of other Black women. As Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai (2021) suggest, #BuyBlack and other initiatives of ‘wokeness capitalism’ or “the corporate extraction of value from the struggles for recognition led by historically oppressed populations” (p. 11) play on media cultures (in this case hashtag activism) and neoliberal affects of individual gratification, positivity, and relatability to obfuscate true social change and institutional oppression. As an effective endeavor, buying

from Black women made my friends feel good. Yet, as a form of woke capitalism, their investment in #BuyfromBlackwomen to collectively uplift ‘us’ as a community towards some notion of equality also rearticulated community-based Black feminist ideas of liberation through a neoliberal subjectivity. Our support of Johnson, a disabled Black woman, would not come through dismantling systems of oppression around race, gender, and ableism — it would come through buying her skincare products.

Feminist scholars such as Angela McRobbie (2004), Nancy Fraser (2009, 2013), Catherine Rotenberg (2014), and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) have discussed and lamented the neoliberalization of feminist politics. As I note in the introduction, neoliberalism is a political economic position and ideology which champions unfettered free markets and the right and responsibility of the individual to be the arbiter of their own success (Harvey, 2005). In their work, these feminist scholars illustrate how neoliberalism as a structural ideology has reduced feminist values of institutionalized equality to the progress of individual women within institutions of power. As Rotenberg suggest:

No longer concerned with issues such as the gendered wage gap, sexual harassment, rape, or domestic violence, ambitious individual middle-class women themselves become both the problem and the solution in the neoliberal feminist age. And by tapping into what Sara Ahmed has termed the current ‘happiness industry’ (Ahmed 2010), neoliberal feminism attempts to ensure that the new feminist subject is oriented and orients herself towards the goal of finding her own personal and felicitous work-family balance.

Further, as these scholars note, those individual women who have been the most vocal proponents of these neoliberal feminist subjectivities tend to be white, upper-middle-class women who find themselves unencumbered by the other forms of oppression that may make it harder for other women to, in the words of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, “lean in.”

For this reason, one may presume that the neoliberal co-optation of Black feminism specifically, a politic rooted in the systemic oppression of Black and women across multiple fault lines, would be a harder sell. And in some ways, it has been. Indeed, according to the 2019 census data, Black women in the United States were paid 63% of what non-Hispanic white men were paid, 20% less than the overall earning disparity for all U.S. women, a pattern that highlights the limits of applying neoliberal logics to Black women’s individual success (AAUW, 2020). In some cases, individual Black women, such as former first lady Michelle Obama, have used their own experiences to critique the utopian dream offered

by neoliberal feminist politics (Weaver, 2018). Additionally, Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (2018) have employed Black feminist theory to critique how neoliberal applications of feminism, such as “lean in,” leave no space to contend with structural inequalities such as systemic wealth inequality, racism, and white supremacy. hooks’ analysis underscores how Black feminist theory and praxis can run antithetical to neoliberal logic.

Yet, at the same time, there has been a ‘neoliberalization’ of Black feminism. Lean Ins becomes books like *A Blessing: Women of Color Teaming Up to Lead, Empower and Thrive* (2020), a guide for Black women’s corporate success written, and podcasts like *Brown Table Talk* that specifically provide leadership and corporate lessons for women of color. Identity politics get morphed into questions about representational politics (Rodriguez, 2019). Community activism that addresses the structural inequities becomes woke capitalist calls to buy from Black women-owned businesses. These neoliberal strategies do not claim to be ‘Black feminist.’ Yet, they draw on Black feminism’s investment in addressing the structural inequalities Black women face and rearticulate them by placing the responsibility for overcoming these inequities on individual Black women. Here, I do not mean to indict individual Black women and women of color, my friends included, who engage with and invest in these strategies to better their own lives and the lives of other Black women. Rather, I aim to highlight how these strategies rest on the assumption that individual Black women can achieve liberation through being good neoliberal subjects that prioritize capitalist investment and support of the free market.

The question then becomes: how does this happen? How does Black feminism, a politic that appears so antithetical to neoliberalism, get reformulated into a neoliberal framework. In this chapter, I suggest this becomes possible because the relationship between Black feminism and neoliberalism is not necessarily as clear-cut as one may presume. Historically, the development of Black feminist intellectual production, which I position as the basis for Black feminist theory, and formalized Black feminist theories in the U.S. have had a complicated and contentious relationship to capitalist neoliberal ideology. While at some points in history, Black feminist theory’s resistance to and rejection of neoliberal ideology was clear, at other points, this divide has been less apparent. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that U.S. Black women’s lives are organized by a unique ‘matrix of domination’ characterized by intersecting forms of

oppression. As a parallel, throughout this chapter, I present the relationship between Black feminism and neoliberalism as a matrix of tension, intersecting with and resisting each other at different points in time due to the changing positionality of Black women's relationship to capitalist structures.

In this chapter, I outline the contours of neoliberalism, the historical relationship of Black women subjects under liberal and neoliberal capitalist policies, and in turn, neoliberalism's relationship to different conceptions of Black feminism. Thus, I show how different conceptions of Black feminism have taken up or been resistant to neoliberal logic over time. For this reason, I use the term Black feminisms, plural, to denote the ever-changing and historically orientation towards capitalist systems. As I have noted previously, Black women and Black feminism are not and should not be interchangeable terms. However, to foreground how Black feminism engages (or does not engage) with neoliberalism, I draw on Patricia Hill Collin's notion of a Black feminist collective standpoint to suggest that Black feminism's relationship to neoliberalism develops from Black women's relationship to neoliberal capitalism. While I do not necessarily aim to give an exhaustive outline of every piece of Black feminist literature, I hope to outline the main contours of Black feminist theory, especially as it relates to the intersection of Black women's lives, neoliberal capitalist logics, and liberation. Further, while I understand Black feminism as a politic expands beyond the borders of the U.S., a point that has been well highlighted by Black feminist scholars across the diaspora, such as Francesca Sobade and Akwugo Emejulu, due to this project's specific focus on U.S. media and commercial culture, my analysis will mainly be focused on U.S.-based conceptions of Black feminism.

The argument I build throughout the chapter, in part, is that historical changes in Black women's relationship to understandings of equity and access to capital in the age of digital media brought about new possibilities for the creation of Black feminist neoliberal subjects and, in turn, the melding of Black feminism and neoliberal ideologies. The above quote, from Saidiya Hartman, then points to what may be the inherent desire and yet, arguably, impossible reality that drives Black women to want to be neoliberal subjects: a utopian dream that they can be freed from the burdens of oppression to, and to live unencumbered by the oppressive foot of capitalism.

Defining the Neoliberal Subject

Neoliberalism is arguably a new (neo) formulation of classical liberal economic policies set forth by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* (1776), which argues that the best way to accumulate wealth and capital as a nation is to allow rational actors (read: white men) to be led by the invisible hand of the free-market, unobstructed by state intervention. Through the model of liberal economic policies Smith outlined, he critiqued economic policies and tax laws of the time that directed the majority of European wealth towards the ruling monarchy and aristocracy. In this way, classic liberalism rested on free trade and minimal government economic interference. As political theorist Wendi Brown (2005) notes, this *economic* understanding of liberalism is importantly distinct from *political* liberalism, which also focuses on individual freedoms but is also concerned with the state's role in securing said freedoms equally to all peoples.

Liberal economic policies were used to structure markets in the U.S. for the majority of the 19th and early 20th centuries, championing laissez-faire economic policies that promoted wage labor and large-scale industrial growth (Hall, 2011). However, following the great depression and the international fall-out of the Second World War, the U.S. began looking towards economic policies that would mitigate geopolitical rivalries and create a class compromise between capitalist industries and the laboring class (Harvey, 2005). These political-economic policies were, often referred to as 'embedded-liberalism,' "to signal how market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but in other instances led the way in economic and industrial strategy," (Harvey, 2005, p. 11). On an international level, financial institutions such as the United Nations (U.N.), International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.), and World Bank were put in place to stabilize international relations and encourage free trade under fixed exchange rates secured by the convertibility of the U.S. dollar into gold. On a state-level, the U.S. turned to Keynesian economics policies, named after British economist John Maynard Keynes, which encouraged state intervention in the form of social welfare and market intervention to stabilize internal wealth distribution and maintain market stability (Hall, 2011; Harvey, 2005). However, by the 1960s, the economic progress of embedded-liberalism began to break down internationally and domestically. Within

the U.S., inflation and unemployment began to surge, and internationally, capital exchanges between states led to several crises that put pressure on the fixed exchange rates (Harvey, 2005).

As embedded-liberalism hit a crisis point, the ‘Keynesian welfare state’ gave way to the Chicago School of neoliberal economic policies (Hall, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Brown; 2005). Neoliberal economic policies were initially developed in the 1930s by Australian economist Friedrich von Hayek, who took as his primary assumption that all human activity is a form of economic calculation (Metcalf, 2017). In 1974, Hayek, alongside a small group of supporters, including economists Milton Friedman, created the Mont Pelerin Society, which, in its founding statement, argued:

The position of the individual and the voluntary group are progressively undermined by extensions of arbitrary power. Even that most precious possession of Western Man, freedom of thought and expression, is threatened by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power in which they can suppress and obliterate all views but their own. The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved.²

Against a Keynesian approach to economics that advocated for state intervention in ensuring market function, the neoliberals of the Mont Pelerin Society saw market competition on both a societal and individual level as paramount to preserving freedom. In this way, the group presented themselves as ‘liberals’ in their adherence to Smith’s classic conception of free markets and ‘neo’ to specifically mark their association with free market principles of neo-classical economics that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century (Harvey, 2005).

However, as scholars such as Michael Foucault (2008), Wendi Brown (2005), and Stuart Hall (2011) have noted, another part of what is ‘neo’ in neoliberalism is its moves beyond economic policies. As Brown suggests:

Neoliberalism is not simply a set of economic policies...rather, neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality,

²Retrieved from: <https://www.montpelerin.org/statement-of-aims/>

while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player.

In other words, in positing that all individual actions are an economic calculus, neoliberalism insists that all subjects under neoliberal ideologies can be reduced to their market value. Therefore, a good neoliberal substantiates their entrepreneurial value by constantly working in their own self-interest. In this way, neoliberalism, as opposed to classical liberalism, is not just an economic orientation but also a structuring ideology that dictates how people understand our social world.

Following this, Brown suggests the extension of economic rationale to social and political policy through neoliberalism buttresses the autonomy of once-independent institutions and closes the proverbial gap between individual freedoms and the promise of equality offered by political liberalism. Brown argues, “Liberal democracy cannot be submitted to neoliberal political governmentality and survive “ (p. 56). Further, neoliberalism, unlike liberalism, does not mean there should be no state intervention in people’s lives, but rather that this intervention is oriented towards the production of good neoliberal subjects under conditions that punish the usage of social welfare programs and other actions that threaten the neoliberal state (Brown, 2005).

Black women Subjects Under Capitalism

If Black feminism develops from the collective epistemic of Black women, then to understand Black feminism’s relationship to neoliberalism, it is first important to understand Black women’s relationship to free market capitalism, and later, neoliberalism.

Black women in American Chattel Slavery

As Black feminist scholars such as Hortense Spillers (1987) and Sadiya Hartman (2007; 2019) have noted, Black women did enter into American society as the ‘rational subjects,’ Smith envisioned, but as literal commodities within free market capital under American Chattel Slavery. Discussing the captive Black body on the slave ship in her seminal work, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar,” Hortense Spillers (1987) notes how slave men and women were written about as indistinguishable objects, reduced to size, weight, and bulk commodities to be ordered and sold.” Further, “under these

conditions,” Spillers argues “one is neither female nor male, as both subjects are taken into ”account” as quantities. The female in ”Middle Passage,” as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies ”less room” in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart,” (Spillers, p. 72). In this way, under conditions of American chattel slavery, Black men and women were extracted of their ability to be rational human subjects and instead were reduced to their fungibility within capitalist markets. Further, as Barbara Omolade (1995) explains, within the context of the slave-master relationship, cisgender Black women became specialized commodities:

Every part of the Black woman was to be used by him. To him she was a fragmented commodity...her head and her heart were separate from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and her vagina. Her back and her muscles pressed into field labor where she was forced to work with men and work like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family...Her vagina, used for sexual pleasure as the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment... the resulting child the accumulated surplus worth money, on the slave market. (p. 366)

As special commodities within slavery, Black women came to understand the condition of their existence under a capitalist system that treated them as commodities, not market actors. As with all Black people in the U.S. at the time, their bodies were tools that helped feed the capitalist needs within the context of growing industrialization and king cotton. For this reason, Black women’s public intellectual production and Black feminist politics are embedded with capitalist critiques that call free market capitalist and economic policies, especially in a self-oriented neoliberal context, into question. While as Saidiya Hartman (2019) notes, in their own ways— both big and small—Black women and queer folks resisted the fungibility of their lives under capitalism; as Christina Sharpe (2016) argues, “The history of capital is inextricable from the history of Atlantic chattel slavery” (p. 7).

As a result, Black women’s foundational existence in America has historically been shaped by a need to prove their humanity in resistance to this fungibility. One of the most famous moments of historical Black feminist thought that clearly outlines Black women’s relationship to systems of capital was Sojourner Truth’s extemporaneous speech to the white suffragettes at the 1851 National Convention on Women’s Rights, “ain’t I a woman?” In her speech, Truth, an ex-slave, clearly outlines how her

Blackness and her womanhood are shaped by their relationship to labor under capitalism. In a version of the speech transcribed by Frances Dana Gage (1863), Truth states, “Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted...And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief.” Similarly, in an alternative version transcribed by Marius Robinson (1851), Truth says, “I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?” Despite their differences and the contested accuracy of Gage’s translation, in particular,³ within in both statements, Truth is defending her womanhood against the fungibility of her Blackness. To Truth, while Blackness laboring under capitalism attempted to ungender her within an American grammar, she pushed against these structures to insist on her humanity.

Free Black women under Capitalism

After the official end of slavery, this fungible nature of Black women’s labor under capitalism persisted. In her essay “Negro Women in our Economic Life,” Sadie T.M. Alexander (1930), the first African-American woman to receive her Ph.D. degree in Economics, noted that at the time, outside of the home, paid work was more widespread among Black women compared to white women, presumably because of their differential relationship with labor. Additionally, more Black women began working in manufacturing and mechanical industries at the start of WWI due to the higher demands for labor; however Black women were often confined to less skilled roles and were systematically paid less than men *and* white women. However, Alexander argues despite their lower wages, Black women’s involvement as paid laborers within capitalist systems helped their families amass more purchasing power which uplifted the Black family and, on a personal level, increased her degree of self-respect, signaling an early blurring between Black women’s intellectual production and future neoliberal ideologies.

³While Gage’s version is the more popular of the two, its accuracy has also been contested, specifically her use of the phrase “Ain’t I a woman.” Gage’s version of the contains dialectical inconsistencies that play on stereotypical slave dialect, which Truth as a Dutch speaker from New York would not have used. In addition, Gage’s version is written from notes and memories of the event a decade later, and there is no evidence she used a direct transcript (Siebler, 2010).

The early 20th century similarly championed a vision of Black women's liberation that could make them good capitalist subjects. As Britteny Cooper (2017) argues in her book, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Black women public intellectuals within institutions such as the Church and advocacy organizations like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), such as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida Wells-Barnett, used a discourse of respectability and racial uplift, or literally "lifting up" the race, as a pathway to equity for Black people, but particularly Black women and queer folks. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) defines the politics of "respectability" as calls from Black leaders of the racial uplift movement for Black people to act in "proper" and "respectable" ways that would make them worthy and deserving of civil and political rights. In other words, respectability politics framed equity to whiteness as coming only through assimilation into white, middle-class heteronormativity. Discourses of respectability and racial uplift, then tasked Black people with censoring and policing each other to achieve racial and economic equity.

Within this framework, Black women took a community-based approach to Black people's overall success under capitalism. As Cooper suggests, the racial uplift ethos of the NCWA, underpinned by their motto, "lift as we climb," reinforced class divisions within the African-American community. Citing Historian Kenvin Gaines, Cooper notes that despite opposition to class differentiation, their orientation towards lower-class African Americans placed a moral stigma on poverty in a way that fed into their classed-based oppression. However, Cooper highlights how this orientation to lower-class African Americans was still embedded within a greater framework of community responsibility, emphasizing the necessity of upper-class Black people in helping and uplifting the lower-class Black people in their racial and economic ascension. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, against 'the model of community advanced by dominant white society [that] reflected capitalist market economies of competitive, industrial, and monopoly capitalism" (p. 59-59) that stressed early notions of neoliberalism through individual decision Black women public intellectuals such as Anna Julia Cooper called out the inextricable connection between capitalist exploitation and racism. Therefore, against an individualistic neoliberal ethos, racial uplift and respectability took a community-oriented approach to capitalist, economic gain.

Black women under neoliberalism

Contemporarily, then, Shannon Winnubst (2015, 2002) suggests the fungibility of all people under neoliberal ideologies, or their reduction to a market value, necessarily reproduces the fungibility of Blackness and Black women. As Winnubst writes:

As the modes of subjectivity transform from the classically liberal model of rights-bearing interiority into maximizing circuits-of-interests, the foundational violence of anti-blackness persists, even as the abstraction from its historical markers intensifies. These processes of internalizing neoliberal fungibility as a mechanism of subjectivity are, therefore, already racialized – that is, they track and signify differently according to different racialized situatedness in the colonial ontology of anti-blackness. (Winnubst, 2020).

In other words, the layering of neoliberal fungibility on top of the fungibility of Blackness means that neoliberal projects are necessarily racialized—producing differential realities and ontologies for differentially racialized subjects.

Further, in thinking about Black women's conditions under neoliberalism, it is also important to think about why neoliberalism took hold in the way it did. In his telling of neoliberalism in the U.S., David Harvey (2005) suggests the move toward neoliberalism was not an accident or a natural progression. Rather, Harvey suggests the crisis of embedded-liberalism precipitated an opening through which political and social elites mobilized neoliberal theories to stabilize and protect class privilege. As Harvey argues:

Neoliberalization was, from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power. After the implementation of neoliberal policies in the late 1970s, the share of national income of the top 1 percent of income earners in the US soared, to reach 15 per cent (very close to its pre-Second World War share) by the end of the century.

To this end, Harvey suggests powerful, wealthy individual and corporate elites in the U.S. and the U.K., who realized they did not benefit from state intervention, seized the moment to deploy neoliberal economics to their advantage. Starting with the Carter administration in the 1970s, neoliberal economists were deployed in think-tanks and within government institutions to create a shift away from the Keynesian welfare state (Harvey, 2005). It is important to note that the term “class power” here refers to those who possess “ownership and management of capitalist enterprises” (p. 32) and those who profit from capitalist dividends. In other words, those people who own the means of production. Thus, as Harvey

outlines, “one substantial core of rising class power under neoliberalism lies, therefore, with the CEOs, the key operators on corporate boards, and the leaders in the financial, legal, and technical apparatuses that surround this inner sanctum of capitalist activity,”(p. 33). By contrast, those most hurt both domestically and internationally were those furthest away from the means of production — including, but not limited to, Black women. In this way, Black women were not intended to be good neoliberal subjects. I argue these experiences of Black women under capitalism and within the context of neoliberalism’s formation that grounds a Black feminist critique of neoliberal ideology.

A Black Feminist Critique of Neoliberal Logics

In the 1970s, while neoliberalism was making a foothold within the U.S., Black women activists and academics began to formally theorize a Black feminist politic. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black women scholars used the terms like “Double Burden” or “Double Jeopardy” to describe the unique condition of Black women who faced both racial and gender oppression. These Black women scholars, such as Francis Beal (1969), noted how this ‘doubly burdened’ position of being a Black AND a woman meant contemporary anti-racist movements, which focused on the needs and experiences of Black men, or feminist movements, which focused on the needs and experiences of white women did not fully account for their experiences. Over the next 20 years, Black women within and outside of the academy, including the Combahee River Collective, Gloria Anzaldua, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Deborah King, and Kimberle Crenshaw, expanded on the idea of the “Double Jeopardy,” arguing: (1) Black women and women of color’s lives were not only shaped by race and gender oppression, but other stratifications of oppression related to socially constructed notions of power, (2) that the relationship between these systems of oppression was not additive but dynamic and mutually-constitutive, and (3) Black women’s unique lived experiences offered a unique critique of dominant, hegemonic understandings of society.

Building from Beal’s (1969) notion of “Double Jeopardy,” Deborah King (1988) suggests Black women face “Multiple Jeopardy.” Unlike “Double Jeopardy,” which argues the impact of racism and sexism on Black women’s lives are additive, or in other words, racism + sexism = Black women, “Multiple Jeopardy” conceptualizes various systems of oppression have as having a multiplicative relationship in shaping Black women’s lived experiences, or, racism x sexism. While this understanding of the impact of

intersecting sites of power and oppression may arguably still be oversimplified, it nevertheless highlights oppression within Black women's lived experiences compound one another. Additionally, King suggests class oppression under capitalism acts as a third layer of "jeopardy" that structures the condition of the U.S. Black women's existence.⁴ In her analysis, King suggests Black women were historically kept out of white, male-dominated labor unions and played a secondary role in unions created in response to white male union discrimination. Thus, King explains how classicism as a manifestation of capitalist exploitation was key in oppressing Black women. In this way, "Multiple Jeopardy," offers a critique of neoliberal ideological paradigms that would suggest individual Black women are responsible for their economic failures by highlighting how Black women are continually and systemically denied access to the resources to increase their value within capitalist structures.

Like King, the Combahee River Collective (CRC), argued a critique of the historical and systemic oppression of Black women under capitalism was a central tenant of a Black Feminist politic. In their "Black Feminist Statement," collective members, which included writers and scholars such as sisters Barbara and Beverly Smith, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Hull, write:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses...We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force (pg. 213).

Here, CRC lays bare how Black feminist politics uses Black women's lived experiences to directly critique and renounce neoliberal ideology. Black women's separation from the means of production within the labor force necessarily means they do not benefit from neoliberal economic and ideological policies. Rather, Black women's historical experience as commodities and laborers within capitalist systems positions them such that they are not intended to benefit from neoliberal capitalist systems due to what is arguably their low market value under a neoliberal framework. Thus, instead, their Black feminist politic calls for a socialist economic approach that would equally distribute capitalist wealth to all workers. This

⁴Interestingly King notes that Beal noted the economic marginalization of Black women but did not include it in her conceptualization, suggesting "perhaps she viewed class status as a particular consequence of racism, rather than an autonomous state of persecution" (p. 46).

Black feminist class analysis was key to the underlying foundation of CRC and a main part of what made it distinct from other collectives forming at the time, such as the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), which was not grounded in this same class analysis (Rodriguez, 2019; Taylor, 2017).

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) similarly outlines how the history of Black women as “specialized commodities” is reproduced under neoliberal policies that punish individuals for being bad neoliberal actors, such as systemic employment discrimination against Black women and the sustainment of underground economies that allow Black women’s bodies to be sold as sex workers. Further, Collins highlights how under neoliberal logic, Black women were punished and scapegoated for their use of welfare services, seen most prevalently in The Moynihan Report (1965), which essentially blamed single Black mothers for the Black community’s lack of upward mobility, and the Reagan administration deployment of the “welfare queen” trope to admonish social welfare supports. Critiquing this position from the perspective of Black Feminist Thought, Collins writes:

Assuming that Black poverty in the United States is passed on intergenerationally via the values that parents teach their children, dominant ideology suggests that Black children lack attention allegedly lavished on white, middle-Class children....Such a view diverts attention from political and economic inequities that increasingly characterize global capitalism.... Using images of bad Black mothers to explain Black economic disadvantage links gender ideology to explanations for extreme distributions of wealth that characterize American capitalism (p.84)

Collins’ mobilizes a Black Feminist analysis to reject neoliberal logics that would blame Black women for their own failings and inability to be economically successful. Collins uses a systemic and historically based analysis based on Black women’s lived experiences to argue Black upward mobility should not be placed on individual Black mothers, but rather the systemic and political inequities between Black and white communities under white supremacy. In other words, it is not that white women are better mothers, but rather, that white women are often given more access to material resources in the form of healthcare, education, and support networks that aid them in raising upwardly mobile children.

Scholars Roderick Ferguson and Grace Kyungwon Hong (2012) have also argued that using a woman of color and queer of color critique can be a useful lens for analyzing contradictions of raced and sexed subjects under neoliberalism. In *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*, Ferguson (2004)

argues that liberal ideologies, such as neoliberalism, “occludes the intersecting salience of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the forming of social practice” (pg. 4) and instead suggests a queer of color analysis presents “an understanding of nation and capital as the outcome of manifold intersections that contradict the idea of the liberal nation and capital as sites of resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation,” (pg. 3). Thus, Ferguson puts forth queer of color critique, which he positions as a direct outgrowth of Black and woman of color theorizing and queer theory, as an analytical framework to deconstruct how raced and sexualized subjects are framed under neoliberal ideologies.

Building on this, in the essay “The Sexual and Racial Contradictions of Neoliberalism,” Ferguson and Huang (2012) frame neoliberalism as a form of racial capital that governs social difference. In the essay, the authors note that the rise of neoliberalism, to redistribute wealth in favor of class power, disproportionately devalued historically marginalized communities and drained identity-based social movements of their systemic critique by reformulating them within a neoliberal framework. The authors then illustrate how scholars such as Ferguson, Chandan Reddy (2011), and Kara Keeling (2007) have deployed queer of color and women of color critical analysis to resist the neoliberalization of raced, gendered, and sexualized subjects.

Similarly, in her essay “Punks, Bull Daggers, and Welfare Queens,” Cathy Cohen (1997) draws on Black feminist theory and queer of color critique to suggest that the tactics used by this queer movement of the time, such as “mall invasions,” took for granted the differential and often unequal relationship between white and non-white people and sites of capitalism. Despite being an “attempted subversion,” Cohen highlights how positioning radical strategies of liberation within the consumer space of the mall limit queer activism to those good neoliberal subjects for whom the mall is a safe space.

Thus, in its early historical formation and development, Black feminist and, by extension, queer of color scholars outright rejected the acceptance of neoliberal logic as being compatible with Black feminist theory. Due to Black women’s historical positioning as commodities and laborers within capitalist systems, a Black feminist critique put forth the notion that Black women could not and were never meant to be good neoliberal subjects. Thus, in opposition to neoliberal logic that blamed Black women for their economic and class failures, Black feminism was mobilized as a tool to highlight the systemic way in which

institutions founded in white supremacy and patriarchy inhibited Black women from the self-reliant forms of capitalist, and political success neoliberalism encouraged. Instead, according to these Black feminist scholars, their historical devaluation and fungibility within society necessarily meant under neoliberalism, their market value as non-ideal neoliberal subjects⁵ left them continually disadvantaged. Therefore, Black feminist theory posited it likely would only be through systemic and socialist approaches to equity that Black women and femmes would move towards equity and liberation.

At the same time, it is also interesting to note the role of the academy in simultaneously helping to produce formalized structures of Black feminist theory and queer of color critique, and helping to ‘neoliberalize’ these theoretical frameworks. In his essay “The Neoliberal Co-Optation of Identity Politics: Geo-Political Situatedness as a Decolonial Discussion Partner,” Historian Jorge Juan Rodríguez V. suggests the transformation of higher education into corporate-driven neoliberal institutions marked by “the rising cost of higher education, defunding of state institutions, and increased prominence of private colleges and universities,” promoted an environment in which students, burdened by increasing debt, feel increased pressure to productive neoliberal subjects to prove their value, students and academics must constantly move to the next newest social issue. Thus, within the context of this neoliberal academy in the 1990’s identity-based frameworks of study taken up in response to social movements, such as Latin/x and Chicano studies, African American Studies, and Women’s Studies, were taken from their historical and systemic context and rearticulated as issues of representation. Particularly, Rodríguez notes how under the neoliberal academy, Black feminist framing of “identity politics,” as generative nature of lived experience to inform social critique, was transformed into a surface-level analysis of representation. This then leaves open the possibility that the formalization of Black feminist and queer of color theory within academic spaces left open the possibility for these theoretical frameworks to be neoliberalized, in part, by their rearticulation and reappropriation over time within this space.

⁵Ideal neo-liberal subjects being those closest to the means of production.

The Neoliberal Turn: Hip Hop Feminism to Digital Black Feminism

As Catherine Knight Steele (2021) notes, by the late 20th century, there is a marked shift in Black feminist's orientation towards Hip-hop feminism; around the same time Rodriguez argues for the complicity of the academy in the neoliberalization of certain aspects of Black feminist theory. With this turn, I suggest Hip-Hop feminism brought with it the new possibility of neoliberal strategies for the benefit of Black women. Hip-hop feminism, a term coined by writer and journalist Joan Morgan, that aims to describe "finding that balance about loving the [hip hop] music and the culture and really loving us as women and as Black women," (The Breakfast Club, 2018), especially the often patriarchal and misogynistic undertones found in hip hop music and culture. Morgan positions misogyny in hip-hop as a manifestation of cultural taboos within the Black community that stops Black men from expressing their feelings. Thus hip-hop feminism opted for an expression of Black feminist politics that was not defined by positive and negative images of Black womanhood and instead embraced "a feminism brave enough to fuck with grays," (Morgan, p. 59).

I contend that Hip-hop feminism also reoriented Black feminism's relationship to neoliberalism. As Morgan suggests in her book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A hip-hop feminist breaks it down*, "defining ourselves solely by our oppression denies us the very magic of who we are. My feminism simply refuses to give sexism and racism that much power," (60). In this way, Morgan's vision of hip-hop feminism embraces modern neoliberal ideas of self-empowerment as a way to own, as opposed to being owned by, oppression. In this way, Morgan is asking Black feminists of her time to move away from defining Black women's condition just by the sites of power and oppression that enclose them. Instead, her "feminism" seems to call for an agentic understanding of the ways Black women's lives are shaped by racism, sexism, and all the other -isms therein. Morgan encourages Black women to "boldly claim their commitment to empowerment" (pg.55). Again, leaning on the neoliberal logic of self-empowerment, Morgan presents a new-age vision of Black feminism that positions neoliberalism as a potential path through which Black women may, in fact, be able to overcome the barriers of sexism, racism, and classism, among other -isms.

Morgan contends her differing orientation to these neoliberal understandings of feminism stem from her generation's "feminist privilege" (pg. 59). Morgan explains, "The gains of the Feminist Movement (the effort of black, white, Latin, Asian, and Native American women) had tremendous impact on our lives—so much we often take it for granted. We walk through the world with a sense of entitlement that women of our mother's generation could not begin to fathom." The language deployed here by Morgan is eerily reminiscent of the language used to promote neoliberal, post-feminist logic (McRobbie, 2009). In this sense, a systemic approach to breaking down barriers to individual liberation is no longer necessary because, as Morgan may argue, those barriers were decimated by the Black and women of color feminists who have gone before her. Thus, this perception of "feminist privilege" opened up hip-hop feminism to the possibility of neoliberal pathways to success. A post-feminist take on Black feminism, if you will (McRobbie, 2004).

This increasingly "gray" relationship between Black women and neoliberal capitalism has continued within the current digital age. In *Digital Black Feminism*, rhetorician and communications studies scholar Catherine Knight Steele suggests that the development of web 2.0 and blogging not allowed Black women a new space within which to engage in public Black feminist intellectual production, but also led many contemporary digital Black feminists to renegotiate their relationship to systems of neoliberal capitalism. Steele argues that Black feminist bloggers use their agency in the blogosphere to engage in acts of self-definition and self-promotion. As Steele suggests, "agency lives in the messy gray area between being a key feature of Black feminist blogging principles and a feature of neoliberal individualism" and "signals Black women's ability to master and adopt a strategy for liberation that intentionally pulls at the most salient feature of neoliberal American culture, personal liberty, and individualism" (pg. 70). In this way, the relationship between digital Black feminists and neoliberalism that Steele describes is arguably more complex than past orientations of Black feminist thought to neoliberalism and capitalism.

Further, Steele argues this shift reflects the changing context of Black women's lived experiences, similar to those social and cultural changes, such as "feminist privileage" that Morgan suggests prompted the shift in Black feminist orientations within the context of hip-hop feminism. Within digital Black feminism, neoliberal individualism does not necessarily runs counter to, but can be a productive part of

Black feminist liberation. Digital Black feminists use their online platforms to engage in Black feminist intellectual production and as a way to brand themselves, build online audiences, and profit from their work. Steele argues Digital Black feminists draw on their agency and Black feminist principles of self-definition to demand that they be paid for their intellectual labor. Thus, in this framework of Black feminism, like Sadie Alexander suggested almost 100 years prior, capitalism does not need to be separate from pathways to liberation. As Steele explains:

Digital platforms provide a gray area of labor and profit. Black feminist contend with a digital market place that allow for individual agency and profit while being tied to corporitized structures that reproduce uneven power differentials. Digital Black feminists refuse to choose between branding and revolution. (p. 132-133)

In this way, digital Black feminism presents a notable divergence from earlier theorizing of Black feminist intellectuals within the context of American chattel slavery, advocacy organizations of racial uplift, the Marxist views of the CRC, and quare critiques of oppressive material conditions of class and capitalism. Within the digital age, Black feminist intellectuals simultaneously recognize the raced, gendered, and sexed oppression of Black women and femmes under capitalism, and at the same time still hold space for the fact that they deserve to be paid for their intellectual production to help achieve their liberation; an important if not necessary stance given the way Black women's intellectual production is often co-opted and appropriated online (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). However, as Steele suggests, the inherent messiness of these potentially conflicting orientations towards neoliberalism within the context of modern Black feminism presents potential limitations to the liberatory intentions of Black feminist theory.

In this way, Black feminism has seemingly moved away from its antagonistic relationship to neoliberalism over time. The perception that past gains in Black feminist social movements have left Black women less structurally oppressed in conjunction with new pathways to economic opportunity via digital technologies has left new-age Black feminist women open to the possibility that they can, in fact, be liberated through being good, neoliberal subjects. This intersection between modern manifestations of Black feminism, Black women's work, and neoliberal notions of success opens the possibility of melding these frameworks through media-based initiatives.

From Black Feminism(s) to Popular Black Feminism

The relationship between Black feminist theory and neoliberal capitalism is contentious but not static. Historically, Black feminist theory and thought, stemming from the lived experiences of Black women, have viewed institutions of capital as complicit in their continued raced, gendered, and sexual oppression. Neoliberal ideologies were seen as tools meant to obscure the intersecting and systemic ways capitalism shapes Black women and queer folk material conditions. However, shifts in culture and technology have shifted Black women's relationship to neoliberal capitalism, and in turn, Black feminist theorizing around neoliberal capitalism. As a result, we can now start to map how, at the right moment and under the right market conditions, Black feminism can draw on neoliberalism, and neoliberalism can draw on Black feminism.

Take, for example, Black woman writer and content creator Brittney Oliver's (2022) article for *Glamour Magazine* that asks us to consider what it means to be a Black woman "girl boss." The term, 'girl boss,' often attributed to Nasty Gal creator Sophia Amoruso, can arguably be called the millennial woman's version of "leaning in." Girl bosses are young self-sufficient entrepreneurs who use grit and tenacity to prove their worth as good neoliberal subjects in an attempt to climb the American corporate ladder. However, as Oliver notes, the idea of girl bossing is often attached to conceptions of whiteness, something not wholly unsurprising given how neoliberal models of individual success disproportionately distribute wealth towards white people. Oliver, then, wonders aloud what it looks like for Black women to "girl boss." Through conversations with Black woman entrepreneurs, Oliver highlights the role of digital media and visibility in allowing Black women to become girl bosses, the significance of 'representation,' of Black women "girl bosses" in mainstream media, and the importance of Black women educating themselves (and other Black women) on how to access and raise venture capital (VC) funding. As Morgan DeBaum, founder of *Blavity*, is quoted in the article saying, "investing in us decreases the diversity inequities in the venture capital world and makes their portfolio and business ultimately more successful has driven newfound interest in Black founders, male or female." Here, DeBaum, and by extension Oliver, transposes the language of diversity through neoliberal logics that ask us to prove our "value," as good capitalist subjects. The article turns Brown's (2005) claims that neoliberalism undermines liberal

politics' call for material equality on its head by using the lack of equity offered to Black people as a selling point to venture capitalists to increase their own market value. At the same time, Oliver notes that in their articulation of 'girl bossing,' Black women draw on Black feminist principles such as community accountability and an ethics of care (Collins, 2000) to help one another in their individual economic pursuits, writing "community is at the center of what Black girl bosses are working to achieve." In this way, neoliberalism is rearticulating Black feminist ideas such as Identity Politics and representation for their gain. However, at the same time, Black women are also rearticulating neoliberalism through a Black feminist lens.

I suggest this particular cultural and historical moment in the U.S., marked by digital media and economies of visibility, Black feminism, and popular media, can reproduce and rearticulate each other in a way they never have before. While Banet-Wesiers (2018) suggest that networked media has given rise to popular feminism, that trafficks in economies of visibility, or a focus on the individual and the body, I argue that what networked media did for Black feminism was create a new pathway for the creation of Black women to imagine themselves neoliberal subjects. However, in its Black feminist articulation, popular Black feminism does not necessarily traffick in economies of visibility, which can arguably harm Black women,⁶ but allows for the formation of economies of community support and access. Digital Black feminism shows the start of this new break, and Black girl bosses and #BuyBlack (#BuyfromBlackwomen) move these frameworks even closer together. In other words, in our contemporary moment, driven by new forms of media engagement, these two frameworks can not only co-exist but can overlap and, in the process, necessarily change each other. It is this idea that serves as the starting point for this project.

In the chapters that follow, I am interested in examining how Black feminism ideas, concepts, and aesthetics get taken up in popular media, something I argue is, in part, facilitated by networked media. I am interested in understanding what comes out the other side when we continually try to meld Black feminist politics and neoliberal frameworks on a mass scale. In this way, popular Black feminism, unlike the other manifestations of Black feminism(s) recalled above, is not a form of Black feminism, per se. Rather it is intellectual and artistic media production derived from the lived experiences of Black women,

⁶Scholars such as Moya Bailey (2021) and Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) have shown the visibility of Black women within networked media can open them up to increased forms of harm and misogynoir harassment.

femme, and queer folks. Rather, it is the commercial packaging of these ideas, politics, concepts, and beliefs within the mainstream media. And further, because we know this melding necessarily results in something new, I want to know the extent to which the neoliberalization of Black feminism in these different instances evacuates these politics of their radical, systemic potential.

Part 1

**The Promise & Struggles of Black Feminist
Practices in Journalism**

CHAPTER 2

Defining Black Feminist Journalism

“There must always be a remedy for wrong and injustice if we only know how to find it.”

- *Ida B. Wells*

As I under the bright lights, face shiny from what I presume is a mix of makeup and sweat, I crossed my legs and shifted back in my chair. I was at once both very aware of my body and simultaneously trying not to fidget too much and divert attention away from the person sitting across from me, making a very important point about the enduring emotional, physical, and economic sustainability of activism by queer people of color. Time for the next question. I begin: “I also want to talk about identity politics a bit—because with the election of Kamala Harris being the first woman, Black, and Asian Vice President and also here in Chicago with mayor Lori Lightfoot was the first Black woman, lesbian mayor a lot of people were really excited. However, a lot of the policies that they’ve actually enacted on the ground have actually harmed a lot of Black communities, LGBTQIA communities, communities of color... So what is your take on placing “identity politics” on understanding how people are actually going to support these communities?”

They reply: “That’s something I have trouble with too because, you know, I do think Black people, and Black trans people, Black queer people to the front, but it shouldn’t just be anyone... like I’ve said before, Black people and marginalized communities, we’re not a monolith, we’re not all gonna think the same, and so I think people, especially white liberal people, need to take a look and be like do I actually agree with this person or do I like them because they’re the ideal marginalized person I have in my mind...And that’s the thing with Lori Lightfoot because she is more local, and I can’t stand her...and that’s where the disconnect comes from. She very much played up the “I am a Black Lesbian, and vote for me,” but then when you look at her and look at what she’s done, she is very much a cop, and very much about the interests of capitalism and keeping capitalism thriving in Chicago, and I feel like a lot of people overlooked that because they were lazy and didn’t want to do their research.”

I try to sit with what has just been said... about what it exposes about the difference between being a Black woman, femme, or queer person and being a Black feminist. But I am also starting to feel pressed for time... we are starting to go over the allotted half hour. My next guest will be arriving soon. Also, Tati has to leave to get to work... something more important to their life than this interview they graciously agreed to take time for early in the morning. I quickly move on to the next question...

Above is an excerpt from my experience hosting “Know We Can,” a pilot for a magazine-style news show funded by a grant from OTV | Open Television. *Know We Can* was envisioned as a community-based news show meant to highlight the issues and events of importance to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities in Chicago. *Know We Can*, was modeled on research I had done for the past year and a half, interviewing journalists, editors, and publishers who actively engage intersectional or a Black

feminist praxis when creating news. From the outset, I knew *Know We Can* needed to be a collaborative effort amongst several women of color who could bring their varied perspectives and lived experiences to the table. For three months, I worked with a group of three women of color undergraduates at the large, midwestern university where I was completing my Ph.D. to come up with ideas for themes, guests, and interview questions. Before our first meeting, I gave each of the three women working with me an unpublished copy of my research to provide them with a basis for understanding how I wanted to approach this project. However, throughout this process, I was often surprised by how hard it would be to put this model I developed into practice. How the logistics of life, scheduling, and editing often made it hard to hold space for making sure I was actively engaging a Black feminist praxis in the way I had learned from my interlocutors.

Upon reflection, this moment highlights both the possibilities and the struggles of using a Black feminist praxis in news. Tati is a non-binary, masc person of color who works as the mutual-aid coordinator for Brave Space Alliance, the first Black-led, trans-led LGBTQIA+ center on the South Side of Chicago. All of our guests, like Tati, were Black women, femme, and/or queer folks. Centering their lived experiences was one of the main strategies my interlocutors practiced in operationalizing a Black feminist praxis in journalism: *Pragmatic Intersectionality* or giving representation to the lived experience of historically marginalized people. Tati's answer to this question in particular gave vocal consideration to the two other critical components of Black feminist journalism: *Acknowledging the heterogeneity within an identity community and providing a systemic analysis of an issue*: Lightfoot and Harris can not act as a stand-in for all Black women, femmes, and Lesbians; and the *importance of systemic analysis*: we can not understand them as public officials without looking at the harmful ways the policies they endorse impact communities of color. In this moment, I was engaging a Black feminist praxis in my news work.

At the same time, this moment also revealed my own shortcomings. In retrospect, my own lack of clarity and context around how Tati and I were deploying the word Identity Politics, in the popular neoliberal sense, vacated the conversation of a potential nuance around what the term could and should mean. As the interviewer, I could have taken more care to think about the *impact of this moment on our potential audience community* of Black, Indigenous people of color, and queer folks. In addition, I could

have taken more time to engage with Tati's response and dive deeper into the issue of power and politics as it relates to communities of color.

I arrived at this news praxis through a semi-structured, in-depth interview with 28 editors, journalists, and publishers who actively bring a Black feminist and/or intersectional lens to news production between March 2019 and January 2022.⁷ I chose participants for this study based on their publicly available reporting work that either explicitly or implicitly gave voice to Black feminist frameworks and the dynamic role of different peoples' identities and positionalities in their reporting. For instance, while outlets, such as *An Injustice!*, "a new intersectional publication, geared towards voices, values, and identities!" (Zuva Seven) and *Zora's Daughters*, co-hosted by two Black feminist anthropology (Alyssa James & Brendanne Tynes) explicitly expressed their Black feminist politic in the branding of their work, other outlets, such as R29's *Unbothered* (Ally Hickson & Chelsea Sanders), were more implicit but showed their Black feminist politic through their explicit focus on Black women and femmes.

Within this research, my definition of "news," was broadly defined as "content meant to inform" to allow flexibility in capturing the culturally and positionally situated ways news creators may think about and reimagine traditional news reporting. It is for this reason, in part, that I refrain from using the word 'journalist' as a blanket term to refer to the individuals I interviewed for this chapter. While all the interlocutors I spoke to engage in news work, not all refer to themselves as journalists. For some, this is because the nature of their news work is non-traditional; in other words, they do not focus on traditional "hard" news. For others, this decision was based on a rejection of traditional, mainstream journalistic norms and values. Thus, while it is important to recognize that my interviewees are doing news work, and several are professionally trained journalists and refer to themselves as such, to apply this as a blanket term would obscure these complexities.

These news outlets offer one way of thinking about incorporating Black feminist politics, ideas, and practices into popular media production. As intentional interventions into the current landscape of news and reporting, I argue these news outlets often slip between discourses existing within the mainstream public sphere and what Michael Warner (2002) terms counterpublics, communities or "publics" that are

⁷See Appendix Table 1 for full list of participants

defined by their tension with the mainstream public sphere, often (though not always) due to holding a subaltern identity in terms of race, gender, or sexuality. In other words, while these outlets regularly and actively engage with mainstream news audiences and discourses, their development is still embedded within counterpublics communities such as Black women and Black queer communities that are "defined by their tension with a larger public" and thus necessarily "are structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying" (Warner, 56).

However, while their position within these counterpublic is established, it is also permeable. While many of these news creators frame their work around marginalized communities, they are aware that their status as news and knowingly and willingly (though sometimes begrudgingly) engage in mainstream discourses and invite those who may not be part of this counterpublic sphere into their work. Thus, in their ability to move back and forth and in-between spaces built by historically marginalized communities and popular mainstream media, I was curious to know how these journalists, editors, and producers actively thought about bringing their understanding of Black feminism or intersectionality into these larger spaces of popular culture. Through interviews, I sought to understand why my interlocutors engaged in this work and, more specifically, operationally, what it means to bring a Black feminist framework and praxis into the space of news, especially given mainstream historical biases towards featuring the lives and concerns of white, middle-class Americans (Alamo & Hoynes, 2018; Entman, 1981; Gans, 1979; Heider, 2000). What does it mean to make Black feminist news? And further, how can it be commodified as a form of popular Black feminism within a larger public sphere?

In an earlier iteration of this chapter, I referred to this praxis as 'intersectional journalism' (Salahuddin, 2021). While this labeling is not necessarily wrong, I want to take a moment to problematize this framing. While some of my participants actively used "intersectionality" as a framework to both approach and brand their work, some participants raised issues with the use of this label. Their problem was not with intersectionality as an analytic itself but rather with what they felt was a popularization of the term that had flattened its meaning. One interview where this came through clearly was in my conversation with Carmen Phillips, a self-proclaimed Black feminist and the then interim Editor in Chief

at Autostraddle,⁸ a digital pop culture news outlet focused on issues of concern to the LGBTQIA+ community. Phillips, who pivoted to journalism after receiving her Ph.D. in American Studies, said that despite her resistance to using the word “intersectionality,” she doesn’t have a problem with the word itself. As Carmen explained:

I used to teach [intersectionality] when I did academia. I don’t use it as much in my day-to-day life...I think at least part of the reason I have started to refrain from it or move away from it is out of respect for Kimberlé Crenshaw. I think that Kimberlé Crenshaw has been very clear that she is unhappy with the way in which the word has been co-opted. And for me, recognizing that and recognizing her stated unhappiness with it, I think, is the first and foremost reason I use it mostly with people who know how to use it. I think one of the reasons that that happens, especially like it’s a lot to look at the ways in which pop culture has occurred, and I feel this occurs mainly with writers, people will be like, “Oh, this television show is so intersectional.” Um, what do you mean by that? How can a television show be intersectional? Because if we’re going to talk about intersectionality, we’re talking about the intersection of systems of oppression and how we engage with those systems of oppression; it is not about like saying this television show has three black women, so it’s intersectional television. No, that doesn’t make sense.

As Phillips and a few others I spoke to highlighted how the ‘popularization’ of the term ‘intersectionality’ through media and popular discourse meant that for them to use this term to define their work carries the inherent risk that *their* use of the word will be misunderstood. For Carmen, most of the interlocutors I spoke to for this project, intersectionality is an analytic tool to help them think about how positionality, sites of power, and systems of oppression shape people’s lives. Interlocutors feared that audiences would understand “intersectionality” as a matter of representation. Therein, I suggest, part of the active work of the journalist I spoke to is to actively engage Black feminist practices, including, at times intersectionality, in their reporting even if, to do this properly, ‘intersectionality’ as an analytical term must go unnamed. I read these resistances to explicitly use this term as a social and political stance that aims to push against what they see as popular culture’s devaluation of this term. However, for this reason, I do worry—in part—that my own use of this term as a framework to understand their work actively undermines this intention and further contributes to that which they are pushing against. Therefore, throughout these next two chapters, I refer to their work as ‘Black Feminist Journalism’ to

⁸At the time of writing, Phillips has now taken on the permanent position of Editor in Chief see: <https://www.autostraddle.com/author/c-p/>

signal that my interlocutors often invoke Black feminist theoretical frameworks and analytics, including but not limited to intersectionality, as a way to approach their news work.

In the following pages, I rely on my interlocutors' thoughts, experiences, and voices to outline how they operationalize Black feminism in their reporting practices and assess what stories to cover and report. I argue these news creators use a series of strategies and heuristics to think across marginalized communities in their reporting. In this way, their push against previous models of both mainstream and alternative news reporting that focused on or prioritized a singular community in their reporting practices.

What: The Intervention

Most participants founded or worked for their news organization out of frustration with existing mainstream and alternative news outlets and a sense that these existing news outlets were not accurately representing the breadth of historically marginalized peoples' lived experiences. Before creating her podcast, Raqiyah Mays, host and creator of *Real Black News Raqiyah Mays*, was a veteran journalist with over 15 years of experience working as a freelance journalist and doing on-air radio host for *WBLS-NY*. Her decision to create her own news podcast was born out of an increasing dissatisfaction working in mainstream news. Despite her repeated requests to her bosses for her own talk radio show where she could engage in news reporting, Mays said she kept getting denied. Mays recalled, "the feedback from the program director, a man, was sort of like, well, we already have our allotted time of talk programming," all of which, at the time, was occupied by older Black men. At the same time, the acquisition of the originally Black-owned radio station by a white-owned broadcasting company led to comments in editorial meetings, such as "don't get too black and militant because, you know, not only black folks listen to us." In this way, Mays felt that her perspective, as a Black person, was at stake in the company's new direction. Together, this lack of opportunity mixed with these comments led to an environment where there was no space for Raqiyah's perspective, as a Black woman, to be heard.

Similarly, Zuva Seven, a writer and a Black nonbinary woman, said as they started getting back into writing on Medium after a three-year hiatus, they often struggled to find places that fit their work:

I felt almost apologetic with the content I was writing, not to say that the publications weren't open to my work. I just felt that it didn't fit in because, let's say you have a feminist publication, they write that mostly from the view of white women. So then you have a story on feminism by me, and it's almost as if I have to apologize for the heaviness of the piece. Um, so I just thought that obviously, I'm not the only person going through that. So let me create a publication that houses specific stories like that, which explore things on the intersections of identity.

In this way, like Mays, Seven felt their voice and perspective were stifled by mainstream news. As Seven perceived it, because they were not the prototypical 'white' woman—the feminist news outlets they thought could be a place that understood her perspective did not. There was no space for work rooted in their own lived experience as a Black nonbinary person. These experiences led Seven to establish *An Injustice!*, a Medium blog turned webpage that specifically invites writing and pop culture commentary from an 'intersectional perspective,' which they understand to mean “seeing people as they are from the own individual perspective...due to the things that they've experienced in their lives and how they are treated in the world...seeing people for who they are versus who we want them to be.”

While Seven and Mays' frustrations grew from their experiences working in news and media spaces, others I spoke with said their discontent grew from their own experiences as news consumers. Andrea Butler, the Editor in Chief and founder of *Sesi Magazine*, a magazine that brands itself as “covering the Black Girl's mainstream,” said she initially came up with the concept for the outlet when she was a teenager:

I was actually 17 years old when I got the idea. I was a teenager who was obsessed with magazines. Like I couldn't go to a store without leaving with one. And I also had subscriptions to Seventeen and YM, and I was laying on my bedroom floor one day and had about six or so old back issues I was rereading, and I just thought to myself, “how come there's never anybody who looks like me on the cover,” and the one Black Girl they might have on the inside, maybe she doesn't have my hair texture or same skin tone. So those makeup and hair tips will not work for me....Also, it didn't feel like they were addressing things I was going through as a Black girl. So...a full sentence came across my mind that night that said, if nothing's changed, by the time I'm done with school, I'll start with myself.

Butler's love of magazines, and the dream of a magazine that spoke to the heterogeneous and complex experiences of Black girls, drove her future career path. After majoring in English in her undergraduate studies, Butler went on to get a masters in magazine journalism. While it would be another five years

after graduating from her master's program that Butler would officially launch *Sesi*, her path was carved by her formative observation: magazines for young girls do not speak to the multi-faceted experiences of young *Black* girls. Even the name “*Sesi*,” which means “sister” in the Sotho language, highlights the relatability and kinship between Butler as a Black woman and the Black girls who come to her magazine.

These experiences by Mays, Seven, and Butler highlight the complex and, at times, messy critique that Black feminist news creators levy at existing models of news editorial and practice. In one sense, their critique has long been leveraged against the mainstream media: It overly focuses on white, middle-class Americans' lives and ignores historically marginalized communities' perspectives and lived experiences. News is not a true reflection of reality but rather a representation of reality refracted through a particular perspective. (Lippman, 1964; Schudson, 1980). Despite the news media's claims of objectivity in reporting, true objectivity, or what Nagel (1986) terms ‘the view from nowhere,’ cannot be divorced from the subjective values in which news is constructed. One fundamental way traditional journalism has constructed an often singular ideological perspective is in the newsgathering processes. Historically, mainstream journalists received story suggestions from socially dominant white, patriarchal institutions that present a ‘top-down’ view of events, ignoring the perspective of marginalized communities (Tuchman, 1978). In addition, most journalists' sources for news outside of these institutions tended to be from similar racial and class backgrounds: white, middle-class, and usually male, limiting their engagement with more diverse communities (Gans, 1974). Herbert Gans (1974) argued that mainstream U.S. news ‘reflects a white male social order’ in that its valuation of race and sex are assimilatory — they praise minorities that exemplify assimilation into white, upper-middle-class culture and demonizing those who do not (Gans, 1979, p.61). Succeeding studies similarly argued that mainstream U.S. news organizations historically used appeals to ‘common sense’ narratives of the dominant, white heteronormative cultural ideology to structure representations of marginalized people (Alamo & Hoynes, 2018; Entman, 1981; Heider, 2000).

At the same time, in slightly different ways, these critiques also call attention to the limitations of what has historically been called “alternative” news markets to present news to encapsulate their lived experiences as Black women and queer individuals. These news counterpublics, such as the Black Press

(Fortenberry, 1974; Owen, 1996) or the Women's Press (Chambers, Steiner, & Flemming, 2004), have historically aimed to create news that speaks to the lived experiences of discrete, historically marginalized communities. However, in their effort to represent a whole identity group, many of these news organizations inadvertently reinforced traditional hegemonic hierarchies by prioritizing the perspective of the most socially acceptable within this group. For instance, the Black press historically centered a Black, middle-class, heteronormative, male perspective in their news stories, reinforcing traditional, hegemonic norms around class, gender, and sexuality (Greenwell, 2013). In her work on the representative possibilities of the Black Press to speak to the concerns of Black audiences, Catherine Squires (2002) suggests that despite how the Black press has been able to articulate the lived realities of Black Americans in the way most mainstream news outlets have not, "it is clear that no single genre of Black media can serve or reflect all Black people." Thus, Squires suggests, "Black-owned media are not immune to the problematic politics of identity, just as their white counterparts are not" (p. 69). In her critique, Squires specifically highlights Cathy Cohen's (1999) critique of the Black press' coverage (or lack of coverage) of Black queer communities impacted by the AIDS/HIV crisis. However, there are some notable exceptions. Black press magazine *Essence* was founded in 1970 to focus on the needs and concerns of Black women. While *Essence* historically dispelled many stereotypes surrounding Black women, it historically did not actively negate stereotypes around gendered roles and sexuality, potentially because the magazine was owned by men and targeted upscale, heterosexual Black women (Woodard & Mastin, 2005).

It was these dual shortcomings of mainstream news discourses and alternative news discourses that often prompted participants to create their own platforms and engage a Black feminist politic in their work—what interlocutors saw as a "lack" in existing news media prompted many of them to use their platforms to correct these limited narratives. Diamond Stylz, creator and co-host of the weekly politics and pop culture podcast *Marsha's Plate*, said that she founded her podcast, in part, out of frustration around the mainstream media's limited portrayal of the trans community. In talking about mainstream news outlet's coverage of the 2016 election, Diamond recalled:

Every time that they would talk to a person who was normally white...that was trans, they would always ask them about the bathroom. As a Black trans woman living in the south, coming up through poverty and dealing with real-life issues, I would always be

annoyed because the bathroom is the least of our issues in regards to what we need as trans folk. We care about housing like we care about health care, we care about work, the pay wage scam, we care about work discrimination...so many more things that affects us way more deeper than the bathroom.

Stylz's comment points to how the mainstream media's preoccupation with a singular aspect of trans identity, which arguably may be of greater concern to trans individuals who occupy other positions of privilege (i.e., whiteness, class privilege), erased her reality as a Black trans woman. For this reason, Stylz, along with her two other co-hosts, Mia Mix and Zahir, who are also Black trans people, used their platform to speak about the issues they saw impacting the Black and of color working-class trans community from their perspectives.

Like Stylz, Asa Todd, a social media professional, also began her news work to give voice to one particular aspect of Black women's lives that often go overlooked in media: their lack of safety. Telling me the story of how she and her co-host, Feminista Jones and Niki Irene, started their podcast, Asa recalled:

We are all really big fans of true crime and true crime podcasts, but we noticed that there weren't many that were... Not just focusing, but even highlighting missing Black girls and women. And because of the lack of coverage, particularly about Black girls, we decided that that was going to be our focus, because there are more high-profile cases of missing black girls.

Together, they founded the *Black Girl Missing* podcast, which looks at historical and contemporary instances of Black women and girls that have gone missing. To inform their reporting, like Stylz, Todd and her co-host, Feminista Jones and Niki Irene, draw on their own experiences as Black women. As Todd noted, "we take a look at these cases from both, the factual evidence that we have from news stories and sources that we're able to find. And also from a black feminist perspective and the perspective of just being a black woman in the world." In this way, interlocutors often drew on their own experiences as Black women, femme, and queer folk to identify and make a corrective to what they saw as overlooked experiences of these communities in existing news outlets.

This sentiment was echoed across most of the news creators I spoke to —something was lacking in existing mainstream (public) and alternative (counterpublic) news discourses. Their experiences as journalists in these spaces or news consumers led them to want to create their own news spaces that take

into account how news and current events impacted these unseen or less-seen communities. In this way, while the news work these creators engage in could be seen as a counterpublic, the nature of their work's intervention also demands that they engage with and within the existing mainstream news discourses. In other words, to critique the mainstream, they must be a part of and in conversation with popular mainstream news spaces. These outlets do not exist in a silo but rather are adding to a larger conversation in popular discourse.

One way this became abundantly clear was in our discussion of audiences. Drawing on what Eden Litt (2012) terms "imagined audiences," for those interlocutors who had actively thought about it, their "mental conceptualization of the people with whom [they were] communicating" were people very much like themselves: Black women, femme, and queer folks. In some cases, this imagined audience was extended generally to women of color, women, or communities of color. However, at the same time, many of them were aware, and in some cases, welcomed the breadth of their audience outside of these communities. Dr. Melissa Brown, a Black Feminist sociologist, and creator of Black Feminisms, a website that Black feminist scholarship and popular culture, said that even though her ideal readers are young Black women, "anyone can access the website," particularly, white people. As Brown noted, "sometimes the white people are the readers as well, which I think is really important as well. In light of the ways that Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name, these campaigns have been able to bring attention to what's going on with Black people, with a broader audience." In this way, Brown's work in the news and information space as a form of popular Black Feminism, potentially provided a space through which traditionally mainstream (read: white) audiences could come to understand Black Feminism as a theory, praxis, and lens through which to understand current and pop culture events. Similarly, Brendanne Tynes and Alyssa James, the co-hosts of *Zora's Daughters*, said they got an email from a Latino man who was a listener who said he was married to a white woman, and though he didn't expect their podcast to resonate with him, but it did. From his perspective, as Brendanne describes it:

He's learned a lot from us, especially about the field of anthropology, because he was so used to there being this kind of like fuddy, duddy, stodgy, old anthropologists who continued to kind of perpetuate these harmful notions around race. They don't talk about gender, right? They focus on whiteness, but they don't, they say they're not

focusing on whiteness, but they actually do. They focus on whiteness through an object, which is usually people of color...He said it was refreshing to hear it from a different vantage point.

In this way, these news creators' perspectives become part of a larger public discourse. Black feminist news creators engage these critiques through their own experiences within Black women, femme, and queer communities, and, as Zuva and Asa's comments more explicitly point to Black feminist praxis and analysis. The question then becomes: what is a Black feminist news praxis?

In the next section, I outline how interlocutors perceived themselves to be drawing on Black feminist frameworks in how they *report* on news events and how they evaluate the *newsworthiness* of potential news events. Together, I argue, these practices form the foundation of a Black feminist news praxis.

How: Black Feminism as a News Praxis

Drawing from the literature on news editorial, I suggest a Black feminist news praxis can be defined by the two key components of news editorial: reporting practices and news values. Thus, in the below sections, I outline how news creators' understanding of Black feminism and how their Black feminist praxis informed their approach to reporting and assessment of newsworthiness.

Black Feminist Reporting Practices

I argue that my interlocutors reporting practices, or how they approached reported on a story, relied on a series of strategies drawn from their own conceptions and understanding of a Black feminist praxis. Through these strategies, news creators aimed to move away from centering any singular identity or community in their reporting. Instead, participants focused on how a news event differentially impacted people based on their positionality at the intersection of multiple sites of power and oppression. Across interviews, news creators described five key analytical and rhetorical strategies they used in their reporting: focusing on the heterogeneity within an identity community, pragmatic intersectionality or relaying the lived experiences of marginalized peoples, focusing stories on marginalized communities, giving a systemic analysis of news events, and bringing their whole selves into their reporting. It is important to note that these tactics are not mutually exclusive, and many participants engaged in more than one of these practices simultaneously to produce Black feminist journalism. In the pages below, I will outline

these strategies, how news creators enacted them, and discuss their potential implications on traditional reporting practices.

Heterogeneity within an Identity Community

News creators drew on their Black feminist praxis in their news work to discuss how a news event impacted individuals within an identity community differentially based on their specific positionality. To do this, news creators put their own lived experiences in conversation with the lived experiences of others within their community and the differences therein. One clear example of this was the Back Talk Podcast, a pop culture, and entertainment podcast co-hosted by Julia Clemons and Kayla Lopez out of their home state of Florida. When talking about how they discuss pop culture news, especially as it relates to marginalized communities and communities of color, Clemons stated:

We talk about Black women that are from the hood or Black women that are single parents, or Black women who come from affluent neighborhoods who have been sheltered their whole life. They all deserve respect on one accord.

Clemons’s description of her and Lopes’ approach to news reporting makes one thing very clear: Black women’s experiences are not monolithic (Collins, 2000). Therefore, when they talk about how Black women within the larger narratives of popular culture, it is important for them to keep in mind all of the possible intersections and positionalities Black women may hold. This approach to reporting, in part, stems from Clemons and Lopes’ own differential experiences — though they both identify as Black women, they are also very different. As Clemons commented, “I’m like a single parent, and Kayla’s young, and she comes from a different cultural background than I do.”⁹ So we have different things to add.” In this way, Clemons and Lopes draw on the differences in their lived experiences as a reporting praxis to push against perpetuating the idea that there is a single, stereotypical way people engage with the world within any marginalized community.

Another news outlet that exemplified this approach to reporting was *Intersectional Media*, a podcast co-hosted by friends Shairina Brown and Sam Crabbe. Both avid pop culture enthusiasts, Brown and Crabbe, met in a Reddit fan forum where they bonded over their love (and support for) Jess Mariano,

⁹Julia is Black American and Kayla is Cape Verdean.

the bad-boy boyfriend on *Gilmore Girls* (WB, 2000-2007). Together, their love of pop culture, and extra time during lockdowns resulting from the Coronavirus global pandemic, led the pair to create a podcast in which they could discuss the intersection of people of color and pop culture news. Talking about what was “intersectional” about *Intersectional Media*, Brown recalled:

So I had taken the word obviously from intersectional feminism and how, you know, being, you can be black and a lesbian and how like those two things intersect and to make an experience that is totally unique...Like I'm Canadian, and so my experience as a Black woman being Canadian is totally different than a woman who was Black and from Africa or a woman who is Black and from America...like all of these things are totally different because of the constrictions of which we have and the intersectionalities in which we live in.

Then in talking about how this came up in a recent episode in which the pair discussed topics, Crabbe added:

Shairina and I share a lot of the same identities, but we also don't like there are differences sometimes in how we look at things, and I think that also affects how passionate we get about certain topics. Like there are topics that I feel really strongly about that she doesn't and vice versa...We'll come up with things where sometimes like we might not totally agree on something, and that's okay.

In other words, as Brown noted later on in our conversation, “Black people are not a monolith and that we are not all the same. And I feel like people don't necessarily take that in until they've listened to Black people speak.” To talk about “intersectional media,” or how people's unique positionalities shape their view of media, Brown and Crabbe draw on their own experiences and differences as Black women within different North American countries to shape how they talk about and engage with popular culture. Like Lopes and Clemons, they use their lived experiences and intersectionality as a Black feminist analytic to understand and frame media and popular culture for their listeners.

Chelsea Sanders, the Vice-President of Multicultural Brand Strategy and Development for Refinery29's *Unbothered*, the women's magazine's vertical specifically for Black women, and current lead co-host of *Go Off, Sis*, the *Unbothered* podcast, says she often invited multiple perspectives and even disagreement into the podcast discussion. According to *Unbothered* founder Alessandra (Ally) Hickson, in its initial iteration as an Instagram channel, *Unbothered* was born from conscientious hiring efforts by Neha Gandhi, former Refinery29's Senior Vice President of Strategy and Innovation, to bring Black

women into the predominantly white women's magazine's staff in various editorial positions. On top of the roles they were hired for, these women were then tasked with coming together, conceiving of, and pitching a new project for the platform that would focus specifically on the needs and concerns of Black women. In many ways, this set Unbothered up to be a collaboration amongst Black women, each of whom could draw on and put their lived experiences in conversation with one another to build the platform. A little over five years later, with Sanders freshly at the helm, the vertical has expanded to include a webpage, the *Go Off, Sis*, podcast, and live in-person events.

When crafting discussing topics on the podcast, Sanders says she often turns to her staff of “10 amazing Black women,” noting “the conversations and the creativity flows from our lived experiences.” She also often leaves space for the possibility of difference within these experiences:

You [Black women] don't get the chance to...disagree. I feel like we don't really argue on the podcast because, again, like, that's not really like us, but sometimes we don't agree...And I feel like a lot of times we don't get that privilege to be able to disagree and to be able to say like, hmmm, you know what, that's a good point. Here's another one. To be able to have...the chance and the grace to be able to explain something and to be able to say like, this is why I feel like this.

For Sanders, this “privilege” to disagree also came from her conception of Unbothered as a safe space for Black women. Due to hegemony, or as Sanders described it, “the way that majority rules, you keep other people fighting each other so that you're not focused on the actual problem,” it is counterproductive for Black women as a community to focus on intra-racial disagreement instead of focusing on larger issues systemic of racism and sexism. However, on *Go Off, Sis*, as a space specifically crafted by and for Black women, disagreement becomes a productive way to examine the varying positionalities that exist within Black woman communities:

You will, again, never hear me say anything bad about a Black woman in public ever. That's really hard because we do disagree, and we don't have the same experience. And we are not a monolith. And my experience as a 32-year-old, light-skinned Black girl from LA who went to Yale is very different than one of my Editors' experiences growing up in Maryland, being the first in her family to go to college and to also, you know, be married with a baby on the way. Those are two very different experiences. And sometimes they're not the same.

In this way, the podcast used disagreement as a generative way to analyze and discuss how different people's positionalities shape how they are impacted by and respond to events in the world around them. However, it is interesting to note that despite Sanders' intended or imagined audience, the podcast is still a public space. This slippage between offline and online public then that Sanders creates may also speak to the various ways Black feminist news creators understand their work to be engaging across public and counterpublic communities.

I argue this reporting praxis of focusing on the heterogeneity within identity communities engages a 'matrix of domination' analysis to locate and discuss Black women's various positionalities concerning a news event (Collins, 2000). In their approach to reporting, these news creators exemplify how, in their reporting, they are actively thinking about how someone's positionality at the intersection of multiple sites of power and oppression shapes their lived experiences and, in turn, how they would be impacted by or perceive different news and pop culture events.

Additionally, this strategy takes up what Patricia Hill Collins (1989) argues is the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims as a key tenant of Black Feminist Thought. As Collins argues, within a Black feminist praxis of knowledge creation, "new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community...connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge-validation process," (p. 763). Thus, this conversational approach to reporting practice takes up this practice by inviting news creators to call on their own identity as it relates to others and inviting disagreement, allowing for generative forms of knowledge formation, reporting, and discussion that give breadth to their news reporting analysis and perspective.

Pragmatic Intersectionality

Interlocutors also used a Black feminist praxis in their reporting by enacting what Patricia Hill Collins (2011) terms a pragmatist approach to intersectionality or showing social inequalities by simply relaying the lived experiences and social realities of people that hold intersectionality marginalized identities. As writer and sociologist Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom, the co-host of the *Hear To Slay* podcast, said, "academics didn't discover or create intersectionality, Black people, Black women did...it was retroactively

labeled and formalized. So, it's like just living, like what does that look like? Just in regular practice." Thus, in thinking about their reporting as a Black feminist praxis, Cotton and co-host, writer, and social commentator, Roxane Gay assume the audience's knowledge is "the knowledge of Black women" and use this as a starting point to talk about Black women's lived realities. For instance, Cotton said, they often avoid asking their guests the basic questions about being a Black woman in politics or Hollywood. Instead, they think of their Black women guests the same way they would any expert who is an expert on the craft as a whole. As Tressie noted, "the minute you let a Black woman do that, you get, I think, some of the most amazing stuff."

Ashton Lattimore, the Editor in Chief at *Prism*, a digital news outlet founded in 2019, because "the status quo media landscape wasn't reflecting enough of the truth—and it wasn't bringing us closer to our vision of collective liberation and justice" (Prism, 2021). *Prism* uses its reporting to focus on social justice oriented stories. Lattimore, a trained journalist, turned lawyer, turned once-again journalist, said her main reason for returning to journalism was to actively push against the "backlash to racial progress" signaled by the election of former President Donald Trump. At Prism, Lattimore says her editorial team "tend to try to report pieces, even center our commentary and analysis from the ground up." Expanding, Lattimore said this meant:

Thinking about stories from the framework, not of, who are the political players in this situation, and who's winning the day in Washington, but more, how are the stories, how are the things we're writing about impacting people in their everyday lives? How can we report on them in a way that centers around the impact that these things are having on them? So, the way that it shows up operationally is, certainly, in the sources that we choose to talk to.

One example of this Lattimore highlighted was a story Prism senior reporter Tina Vásquez wrote on the sterilization of women in an ICE detention center in Georgia through gynecological surgery without their informed consent. Speaking about the article entitled "Detained women report they were inexplicably sent to doctor accused of sterilization," which sent shockwaves through the American popular consciousness when it was first published in September of 2020, Lattimore noted:

That reporting is really kind of where we live as an outlet—featuring the voices of those women themselves, who are, you know, women who are in immigrant detention. They're not usually folks who are featured prominently in news reporting, but it was their story,

and really taking what they had to say and reckoning with it. Even if it was, you know, not, not super comfortable.

In this way, Lattimore and her team at Prism, like Cottom and Gay, call into question who is an “expert.” While news outlets have typically turned to individuals and institutions in positions of power, such as police and legislators, in their reporting praxis, pragmatic intersectionality privileges people as experts in their own experiences. In this instance, Vásquez’s reliance on undocumented migrant women to tell their own stories opened up a new framework through which the American public could understand how the intersection of racism, sexism, class, and nationality shaped these women’s lived experiences.

Alyssa James and Brendanne Tynes, who I have now mentioned a few times in this chapter, similarly drew on both their professional and educational training to center lived experiences in their work. James and Tynes met as doctoral students in Columbia University’s Anthropology department. For their podcast, *Zora’s Daughters*, named for the “radical possibility” that they could be the daughters of Black feminist writer and anthropologist Zora Neil Hurston and bring her work to this generation, the pair uses their training as ethnographers to approach their discussions of news and culture. Talking about the synergy between their chosen profession and their podcasting work, James said:

I think what’s also helpful is that we are anthropologists.... we ground our theory in stories. We can just see what’s going on and then think, all right. I think what we always recognize, both as anthropologists and Black feminists, is that theory always emerges from experience. So we can always find something that’s related, but, in the end,... The black women’s lived experiences it’s the wellspring from which theory emerges.

Further, she added:

Black feminism, as Brendan said, as an epistemology or a way of looking at the world, I think it’s, for me, a particular practice that relates to centering lived experiences, which is often something that people don’t, um, don’t value as, as legitimate knowledge because it’s not objective. Um, and I think it’s also being able to pay attention to the realm of the personal and the private and the interpersonal.

For James and Tynes, their Black feminist reporting praxis was necessarily informed by their anthropological praxis. Being anthropologists, particularly Black feminist anthropologists, their training as researchers and their epistemological view as Black feminists kept leading them back to the notion that we must root our understanding of the world in lived experiences. Thus, in discussions on their podcast,

the pair use their own and others' lived experiences to guide, ground, and frame larger social, political, and pop culture issues and events. In this way, pragmatic intersectionality, as a reporting praxis, allowed news creators to reframe how they thought about approaching and discussing current events. The questions of who do we talk to?, and how do we show impact? shifted from traditional understandings of “expertise” and quantifiable data patterns to community experience and impact.

Centering or uplifting marginalized communities

In conjunction with focusing on people's lived experiences, news creators often chose to specifically center on historically marginalized communities when crafting their news analysis. For instance, when thinking about how she went about engaging a Black feminist praxis in her work, Brown stated:

My Black feminist praxis is one centered on Black women and LGBTQ people. I do not care about Black cishet¹⁰ men; it's just not my ministry. If they want to go do Black feminist work by all means they can do that, but I'm very centered on Black women, Black LGBTQ people, because what I've noticed, once again, online is that these other spaces that Black people congregate to have conversations just do not uplift these groups. So the example I can pick, say the clubhouse app, which just launched recently, but once black people came to the app, Black cishet people kind of monopolize the types of conversations that are going on there...And I'm just very not interested.

Brown's observation that most popular discourses around Blackness often left out Black women, femme, and queer folks, played a large role in shaping how she approached the content in her blog. In framing her reporting she often thinks about approaching stories in ways that specifically prioritize these communities.

Similarly, Sunnive Brydum, the editorial director of *Yes! Magazine*, asked *Yes!* writers to be more intersectional in their approach to reporting by asking them to explicitly address “how historically marginalized communities are impacted by [a] given issue.” *Yes!*, a solutions journalism outlet, has always aimed to address solutions to community-based issues, privileging the perspective of community members in their reporting. However, according to Brydum, the outlet has intentionally become more ‘intersectional’ in its reporting focus in the past few years, especially as its editorial team has increasingly gotten younger and more racially diverse. When reporting on community solutions, Brydum and her team always try to highlight the solutions coming out of historically marginalized communities. For instance,

¹⁰Cisgender and heterosexual

Brydum noted a trend in their reporting that highlighted how “new” solutions were often extrapolated from communities of color:

If it’s an environmental story, it’s not going to just be about environmental science, it’s going to be about, you know, we’ll point to Native, Indigenous leadership and say you, you know, look. There’s kind of a recurring theme in a lot of our coverage of, “Oh, this trendy thing that a lot of folks think is new is actually ancient.” And here are, you know, indigenous folks across the world who’ve been practicing this forever. Or even in our ecological civilization issue, right, we had a piece from Leah Penniman talking about, Ifa divination, right? And how to connect with the earth in a way that for many white folks is like, wow, this is new. And she’s like, no, this is literally, this is our history. Our ancestors have been doing this forever.

In this way, by specifically and explicitly centering and uplifting marginalized communities in their reporting, Brydum asks both the staff writers and freelancers at Yes! to call attention to how white communities, and potentially their white audiences, often overlook the work, lives, and experiences of historically marginalized individuals. However, Brydum notes for many of the writers she works with, especially the freelancers, this is not the way they are used to approaching reporting. As Brydum notes:

We do a fair amount of hand-holding... pointing folks in the right direction. like “here, maybe go talk to this person, maybe go get this perspective and see, see where your reporting leads you.” ...We try not to say, “Oh, here’s, here’s the answer. Just drop this text in instead.” It’s like, go talk to these folks, ask questions, maybe like this and see what the reporting produces, because it may be something different than what you thought or what that particular scientific report said was that that’s probably true, but there’s always a deeper story.

Thus, by guiding and helping writers to approach solutions writing through the lens of engaging with marginalized communities, Brydum helps reporters at Yes! to reveal and expose solutions in their reporting they may otherwise have not seen.

In her approach to reporting, Stylz said she not only thinks about how a news event impacts marginalized communities but how *the most* marginalized community or, as she said, “the least among us,” in a particular situation are impacted. Talking about her reporting praxis, Stylz noted:

We’ve been talking about Alabama and how 25 Republican white men are making decisions about women in Alabama’s bodies. And that can trigger something that happens on a national level if it gets up to the Supreme Court. So when we talk about that particular thing, normally, we are thinking about cisgender heterosexual, straight women, right? Because if you’re making babies, clearly, you are either bi or straight at some point. So in those conversations...If you just are focused on that one demographic, you’re

not thinking about that trans men can be impregnated...So when I'm talking about abortion and reproductive justice, I'm not just thinking about the cis heterosexual woman. I'm thinking about the trans man, I'm thinking about all of the assigned female at birth people... So when I'm thinking about that as reporting it on my show, my perspective is going to be much more in-depth and well-rounded compared to somebody who is not thinking about a trans man.

By focusing on the most marginalized when reporting on politics and current events, Stylz aims to expose the varying and potentially unforeseen ways policy and legislation differentially impact people across the country. Stylz's reporting practices directly calls upon the Black feminist assertion by the Combahee River Collective (1977) and Kimberlé Crnshaw (1989) that in the struggle for social, political, and legal liberation, we must focus on the most marginalized or 'the least among us' because their freedom would require the destruction of all systems of oppression. By focusing on how the 'least among us' in news reporting, Stylz then asks us to consider all the ways sites of power come to bear and impact not just more privileged groups within society but differentially impact people based on their positionality across communities.

Systemic Analysis of News Events

In their reporting, the news creators I spoke to talked about news events from a systemic perspective. In other words, instead of reducing news events to 'objective' straightforward facts, they often contextualized what happened within a larger network of institutions and sites of power. Further, as opposed to historical news media models, which prioritize the individual in their news-making process, these news creators focus on how multiple systems of oppression impact how events happen or are experienced (Gans, 1974). For instance, Todd said when she and her co-host are reporting on contemporary and historical instances of Black women and girls who have gone missing:

We aren't just looking at it from the individual standpoint. We are also looking at it from how the girls have gone missing, and the events that led up to it, and the events that came afterward from a systemic type of viewpoint. So, we're looking at the systems that contribute to why Black girls are going missing ...there is less coverage of them, why they're less likely to be found, and how that is affecting future cases of Black girls going missing and why...What are those factors that led to it?

Reporting for Todd and her co-host goes beyond the individual event or person to focus on how different systems of oppression came to bear on how an event transpired or its impact. To be clear, it is

not that Todd and her co-host don't talk about the individual, but it is not only about the individual person. Rather, their reporting analysis focuses on what larger structures lead to what happened to this individual and thinks through how we attend to those structures so that what happened to one person does not happen to another.

Clarissa Brooks, an independent journalist, said that when she approaches reporting, especially on investigative stories, she engages in power mapping, a technique she learned from her experiences in activist spaces. Describing the concept of power mapping, Brooks defined it as “an organizing skill and it is literally just naming, who are your enemies? Who are your allies? Who are the people in the middle?” However, she noted how she has adapted it for journalism looks a bit different. Often she will map out the media organizations, institutions, and communities connected to an incident. Power mapping is often part of Brooks' pre-reporting process before she pitches a story to a news outlet. During our conversation, Brooks described what this looks like for an upcoming piece she was working on about Rayshard Brooks, an unarmed Black man murdered by an Atlanta Police Officer after someone called the police on him for falling asleep in his car in a Wendy's Parking lot (Ortiz, 2021). Brooks explained:

The Rayshard Brooks piece, it's been reported on pretty heavily in Atlanta, but mainly by like white women, and I know those reporters probably are not going to go full storm with that piece, but I know they probably have names, contacts, people that I can connect with. And so writing down those people, and then I do another kind of bubble of my neighborhood, my connection to the shooting, Rayshard's family, and the community organizing bubble, which talks about who's advocating for Rayshard, who are people that can talk to. Then I do like a smaller bubble of directly impacted people who may not be, you know, seen as important, but maybe have a firsthand account, know a contact, or who had some sort of understanding of the situation that probably hasn't been reported on yet.

Through power mapping, Brooks can identify the larger systems of power and institutions that surrounded Rayshard Brooks' shooting. In addition, power mapping also helped Brooks identify what particular aspect of the story may still be under or unreported. In this way, by looking at the event not just as a singular incident but as one point within a larger network of structures, Brooks can speak more broadly to the role of larger systems of oppression in perpetuating and allowing for the murder of unarmed Black men, like Brooks.

This systematic approach allowed the news creators I talked to provide what they felt was important social, political, and historical context around an issue or news event they were reporting on. The reporting practice of looking at the news through a systemic lens underscores the idea that events in the world do not happen in a vacuum. Often, they happen, either directly or indirectly, because people in positions of power have made choices that shape people's existence. In turn, people respond with the materials and resources allotted to them.

However, thinking about how to frame this analysis was not always easy. When I spoke to Andrea González-Ramírez, she was a staff writer for GEN, a medium publication “focused on politics, power, and culture”¹¹ (GEN, 2022). González-Ramírez, who is from Puerto Rico, is interested in writing stories about issues that impact women and communities of color, and the fact that her editors knew and invited this about her work is what drew González-Ramírez to GEN:

I'm coming to journalism as a young woman who identifies as a feminist, who comes from a colony of the United States, and that obviously has influenced a lot of like how I view power. And someone who is more interested in talking about people and communities and systemic issues than she is on whatever palace intrigue is going on between people in power.

However, for González-Ramírez, figuring out how to best give that context was hard, especially given GEN's wide readership. As she noted, “A lot of times boils down to the question of “we” like, in a headline, like “we are shocked by this,” and it's the question usually of, okay, who is the we? Who do I have to explain these power structures to?” One way González-Ramírez has gone about answering this question is by allowing the larger social and historical context to drive the story. For instance, in talking about how she navigated her reporting on a story about the passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and the legal impact of Ginsberg's death, particularly on abortion rights, González-Ramírez said her reporting was driven by “this is the thing that you need to know, and this is why you should care about this thing” Expanding, González-Ramírez added:

What the thing means, like in practical terms, like the story was about Planned Parenthood v. Casey, which is this case from '92, which basically like...poked a massive hole in Roe v Wade...it was kind of explaining like, you know, this case that you may never hear

¹¹González-Ramírez has since left GEN and is working for The Cut, similarly reporting on “subjects surrounding communities of color, with a focus on sexism, racism, classism, and other systems of power.” (González-Ramírez, n.d.)

about, kind of like, you know, presented all this extra requirements and that's what has a lot of oldest judges to do whatever they want. And then that also means that they could just keep using the term "undue burden." They keep changing that to the point where nothing presents an undue burden to women....I think in this one, I talk mostly with like... professors instead of advocates, because I, I thought it was like, if we're gonna talk about this then we're gonna need, like the context and like the historical record at some point, right? To just deconstruct what it means and why it matters and why it's urgent. And the reason why it was urgent was because Amy Coney Barret was about to be confirmed and she had kind of endorsed the idea, but like no one had really further explored what it would mean.

Using techniques like letting context lead a story, power mapping, and talking about news events beyond the individual allowed, the news creators I spoke to frame their stories to enable their audiences to see the larger picture. It is a reporting practice that underscores a Black feminist and critical race focus on the way people's material realities are often shaped by larger, unseen sites of power and oppression.

The Self in Reporting

Finally, another critical Black feminist praxis, and arguably the most controversial reporting practice, at least in terms of traditional journalistic norms, that interlocutors relied on was to bring their whole selves into their reporting. While in several of the reporting practices I have described above, news creators hinted at this idea of relying on their own lived experience to frame their reporting praxis, for others, this intention was more explicit. One person who did this often was Danielle Moodie, host of the news and politics podcast WokeAF. Moodie's reporting, first on SiriusXM radio and now in podcasting, grew out of her political work and advocacy around marriage equality legislation. In her advocacy work as a Black queer woman, Moodie began to recognize the power of the media to change minds:

I wanted to figure out the best way to affect a broad range of change, like, you know, to be a proponent for progressive issues like LGBTQ equality, racial justice, social justice, environmental justice...how do you do that?... You need to have a megaphone and, you know, throughout that time of being on the front lines for marriage equality and just LGBTQ equality in general, realizing that, you know, I'm fairly savvy at this, right?... And so, throughout that time [I] started my first podcast.

Just as Moodie's advocacy work was connected to her positionality and identity, so is her news work. In talking about her approach to reporting, Moodie often highlighted that she brings all of who she is into her stories and interviews. As Moodie explained, "Showing up as your complete and total self is in of itself, like understanding the intersections that we all come from and that we embody, right? And

those experiences matter. And there's no way to turn off that lens, you know, through what you see the world," While Moodie consciously did not use the word "intersectionality" in her work, this is what being intersectional or engaging an intersectional praxis means to her: understanding and acknowledging how her own lived experiences epistemologically shaped her approach to news and reporting and putting that positionality front and center for her audiences. For Moodie, this often meant bringing her own experiences into the conversation:

I had a friend on [WokeAF] who just opened an apothecary, and we're talking about healing, and we're talking about ritual, self-care, and grounding ourselves...I find that over the past year, especially during this pandemic, that they were more Black people that are grounding themselves in these practices. And so in conversation, this is a friend that I've had for, you know, over a decade, I bring in, you know, parts of my own journey, right? Like I have, I started meditating several months ago. Uh, you know, at least twice a day, uh, to, to center myself. I talk about, you know, my own bouts of depression and grief and sadness...Like, those are things that I bring, you know, to the show because I know that other people are struggling. Other people are going through things as well. And I want people to feel like they can bring their full self to where they go, right? Like how, how successful can you be at a job if you're leaving half of yourself at home, right?

In this way, Moodie actively claims that part of good reporting comes from acknowledging one's own attachment to their reporting by bringing her own story and journey into her reporting.

Like Moodie, Seven also noted that in their writing they actively resist the urge to hide pieces of themselves:

So basically, when I started writing, I would always, I would kind of...how do I say this? I would pad what I wanted to say to say it as nicely as possible... just to not upset white people or anyone's views on my piece. But I think that's kind of indicative of how I have to enter the world in that I'm constantly apologizing for who I am. So I feel like in regards to our writing, especially marginalized voices, we instinctively want to package our work into something that's palatable for the wider audience because this is what they accept, and this is what works. But in reality, if we have to be honest about being uncomfortable because other people should not be comfortable while we're in pain, if that makes sense. So we have to all be uncomfortable, live in it, and then figure out what to do. So personally, I believe that, especially if you're a marginalized person, if you're not making people angry with your work, then you're not being as honest as you can be.

In this way, Seven's desire to bring themselves and their experiences into their work as a Black nonbinary woman stems from what they feel is a stifling of their identity in more traditional news and writing spaces. To Seven, hiding themselves to make others comfortable is a hegemonic move that allows others to make her

complicit in her continual oppression. Thus within *An Injustice!* they use their experiences with racism, sexism, and homophobia to call out and highlight these instances as they exist in the world. Similarly, Phillips said part of her Black feminist praxis is bringing other Black women and queer writers into the space of *Autostraddle*, so they can then lend their experiences to their reporting as well. As an editor, she encourages her writers to bring themselves and their experiences into their writing. As she notes:

Part of being a Black feminist in this space is recognizing that my job is to also look for who is not in any space I'm inhabiting and lifting them up into it, um, that it's making sure that me as a black voice is not the only black voice or the sole black voice in a room or in a space. So that is a large part. It is thinking about, again, first of all, other black people, other black women, other Black queer people, how am I lifting them up into a space, but also who is not in the space beyond them. Who are, well, who else do we need to be talking to that we are not hearing from right now? Um, that is the first part.

In turn, a part of *Autostraddle's* efforts towards “disinvesting in whiteness in [their] leadership” is uplifting the voices of color on their staff. Phillips recalled, “We had hit a situation where our writers are like 80% people of color and our editor staff was 90% white.” Thus, as a part of this effort, Phillips encourages her writers, and especially the writers of color, to bring their “voices” into their reporting so the outlet can more fully account for the experiences of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) as it relates to media and popular culture.

A Blak Feminist Critique of Objectivity

As I alluded to before, this reporting praxis, in particular, may arguably be the most controversial intervention of a Black feminist reporting praxis because it directly calls into question the utility of traditional journalistic objectivity. For instance, despite being a veteran journalist, Mays often refers to herself as a “former journalist” due to how journalistic practices in the U.S. are tied up in ideas of objectivity and detachment. As Phillips suggested, in talking about her editorial practice discussed above:

For me, one of the biggest qualities we're trying to bring out is you're trying to bring people's whole selves. What I mean by that is we want people not to feel that they need to bring kind of a universal standard voice. I think what you'll find when you read a lot of magazines, or in general, a lot of media pieces of journalism, is this idea of an impartial voice or an impartial writer. We do not believe in that...I think that's the first thing I look for, and the first thing I try and encourage is like, how would you say this? You don't have to say it in this neutral way, how are you saying if that is specific to you?

In this way, Phillips calls attention to how objectivity or ‘impartiality’ works in opposition to her Black feminist reporting praxis at Autostraddle.

Additionally, other interlocutors similarly questioned the utility of objectivity as a standard of news reporting in talking about how they engaged Black feminism into their reporting. Talking about Prism’s view of objectivity, Lattimore said:

As an outlet, I feel like we just reject the notion of objectivity in the way that it’s been defined throughout most of the media. The way we’ve seen it defined for a really long time is this idea that in order to be considered fair or objective, you need to give equal weight to both sides of every argument and stake out a position in the exact middle and make no kind of judgment as to the rightness or wrongness of either side. And the way that most frequently shows up in a lot of news outlets is to stake out a middle position between white supremacy and justice and call that objective. We think that’s bad and wrong, and we’re not going to do it. So we don’t. We don’t think that kind of journalism reflects and honors the power that storytelling can... And we also don’t think it’s accurate, which is I think is something that gets really lost in a lot of these conversations. I think if I’m in service of being objective outlets, treat race and gender as kind of side sub-issues to the real story, which is about politics or it’s about business. I think you’re actually reporting on those things wrong if you’re not putting race and gender at the center of your analysis.

For Lattimore, objectivity, as it is often operationalized in reporting, did not make journalism more fair or equitable but rather masked systemic inequities. As Lattimore suggests equating white supremacy to racial, social, or gender justice was not impartial, but rather an inaccurate implication that these two things, which occupy highly unequal relationships to power, can be equated. In addition, Lattimore saw objectivity as a cover that allowed journalists to not fully consider the role of race and gender, or racism and sexism, in influencing everyday events.

In our conversation, Brooks also called attention to how objectivity can be used to move away from care towards subjects and events in reporting:

My first national piece was with Teen Vogue. I wrote about sexual violence at HBCUs, and in that piece, it was an op-ed, so it was truly just based on my own experience. I learned pretty quickly that objectivity wasn’t something that I really cared about when I came up to the fact that...There was a lot of humanity lacking in journalism, specifically beat reporting, right? Like if you’re a crime reporter, you’ve got to listen to the scanners, you got to go off police records, you got to do open records requests. And a lot of that just didn’t feel human to me. So much of organizing is about relationships and community. And I just quickly realized that there are other ways to do investigative reporting that

keep humanity, that allow people to speak about their experiences instead of relying on institutions to tell the stories.

While this being an op-ed piece meant the outlet she was writing did not require her to be objective, the experience showed Brooks what can be uncovered when objectivity is pushed aside, namely the humanity of the people and communities she is writing about. In other words, Brooks felt approaching a story “objectively” often led reporters to quantify and objectify people’s experiences. Thus, employing pragmatic intersectionality as a reporting praxis, in part, allowed Brooks and others to center the humanity of people and lived experiences in their reporting.

These critiques of objectivity often stem from these news creators’ own experiences working in the news while being a part of a marginalized community. Brydum began to question the utility of objectivity in news reporting during her experience covering the Pulse shooting massacre, where a terrorist gunman murdered 49 people and injured 53 others at an LGBTQIA+ nightclub in Orlando, Florida (Brydum, 2016). As a member of the queer community covering the attack, Brydum became increasingly aware of the way her own positionality in how she approached reporting on the story:

I was actually in Philadelphia when the shooting happened, there was a Philly trans health conference, and at 2:00 AM Eastern that day, I had been in a gay bar with my friends dancing, celebrating, existing, and so I really could resonate with that feeling of like finding sanctuary in a gay bar and finding your people...As a white woman, right, I couldn’t necessarily, right... a lot of the folks who died there were Latinx, were Afro Caribbean, so I couldn’t relate to that piece, right? But I knew what it felt like to shouldn’t have that space feel really important and really foundational to your identity. Then when I landed there, media row was just getting set up. We started to see the circus, right? It’s just people jockeying for the best live shot, trying to decide if the best live shot is of like this boarded up club or the hospital where people are fighting for their lives. When I got there, there were still bodies inside the club. So, and I saw a lot, a lot of other media, um, as, as survivors slowly started to return and started to engage with media, everyone asks them the same questions, and it was always asking them to relive their trauma. Right? It was always, what did you do when the bullets started flying? Who did you think about? Like, you know, what did you, you know, what was going through your head? And to me, like those weren’t the important questions...Their community is just shattered, and it felt really insensitive and just not particularly journalistically useful to know like what was going through someone’s head when bullets started flying past them. So the questions I have for folks were more about if they had lost someone? What their memories of that person were? What was the first time they went to Pulse? What were their favorite memories with this person who they had lost?

Brydum's own experiences as a part of the queer community shaped how she understood what happened and informed her reporting practice. Her positionality allowed her to see the inhumanity of how most mainstream news outlets were discussing what happened; namely, they were focused on the facts and not the trauma of the victims. Thus, like Brooks, Brydum, chose to approach the story in a more humanistic way to illuminate and attend to how those involved in the incident were responding and feeling after the destruction of what was once a safe space for many QTPOC.

As interlocutors noted, drawing on personal insights in mainstream news is seen as opening a story up to the possibility of bias. However, for the news creators to speak to their lived experiences did not invite bias but rather new expertise and insight. However, some interlocutors claimed, the pervasive rhetoric of objectivity in journalism often stifled personal insights; in order to maintain a white, male, and heteronormative discourse in news reporting. As Brydum recalled:

What I had witnessed suggested to me that objectivity was a concept largely created by like cis white men in power in newsrooms...I had encountered folks who would be like, I, as a person, shouldn't report on other queer people because I might be biased, and I'm like, well, but we let white men report about white men all the time. That's literally what journalism has been, with some notable exceptions.

In this way, these critiques of objectivity call our attention to how 'objectivity' as a foundational function of news has historically not made reporting fairer, but rather allowed pervasive values of whiteness and maleness go unchallenged. Thus, through engaging these Black feminist reporting practices, interlocutors actively pushed against objectivity towards what they saw as a more equitable and inclusive approach to news reporting.

Black Feminist News Values

The process through which journalists determine what occurrences are worthy of becoming news is termed Gatekeeping. Gatekeeping theory was introduced in journalism studies by David Manning White (1950) in his study of news editor 'Mr. Gates' decisions of whether to turn an event on the wire service into a news item. White concluded gatekeeping was highly subjective, based on what appeals to an individual editor. However, subsequent studies found that once a journalist pitches a story or a story appears on the wire, whether it becomes news relies on collective decision-making across multiple

gatekeepers (Clayman & Reiser, 1998; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). These gatekeepers typically assess newsworthiness based on whether a story encompasses specific news values. Studies have identified several new values, including frequency, unambiguity, cultural relevance, novelty, eliteness, extreme valence, entertainment, surprise, and timeliness (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). However, understandings of newsworthiness are also shaped by larger newsroom routines, corporate interests, and the social institutions and ideological values surrounding a news organization (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Several news creators I spoke to discussed many traditional journalistic news values they use to determine newsworthiness, such as timeliness, novelty, celebrity, and informational (Harcup & O'Neill 2017). However, in addition to these, interviewees also mentioned what I term 'news principles,' a set of principles or value-driven questions they asked themselves to guide their news selection practices. These news principles were often directly related to interlocutors' understanding of intersectionality and their Black feminist praxis. Overall, I identified seven news principles across my interviews that news creators used to help them in determining newsworthiness.

Defining News Principles

Is this event relevant to and across marginalized communities?

Often, news creators were concerned with covering news events that clearly impacted marginalized communities. Depending on their focus, some news creators focused on covering stories that centered on a particular historically marginalized communities, such as the queer community, the Black community, or the Black women community. For instance, as an LGBTQIA+-focused outlet, Phillips said *Autostraddle* is mainly looking to cover pop culture issues that center queer communities, and "If we covered straight news, it is usually because it is a feminist issue that we feel is very important." However, within these specific communities, news creators were also interested in addressing how events differentially impacted people within these larger communities. So, on *Black Feminisms*, Brown said she is often covering current event and pop culture issues that could directly impact and center "Black women and Black LGBTQ people."

Tanya Christian, a news and politics editor for *Essence Magazine*, said she is often trying to cover stories that reach across Black and Black women communities. Despite some of the historical critiques of the *Essence* mentioned earlier in this chapter, over the past decade, the magazine has taken actionable steps in expanding how it discusses issues impacting Black women communities. One notable example is the magazine's March/April 2022 "Black Women in Hollywood" issue, the cover of which featured a picture of actress Niecy Nash and her wife, Jessica Betts. It was the first time a same-sex couple had been featured on the magazine's cover (Lucas, 2022; Harris, 2022). In response to the cover's historic debut, Nash posted on Instagram, "Our prayer is that we contribute to normalizing loving who you love out loud! We hope you find your voice and stand in your truth...Thank you @essence for your fearlessness with having us on your HERSTORY making cover! 🙏" (Nash, 2022). In this way, *Essence* and its writers have been working to be more expansive in thinking about Black women's different positionalities.

As a part of this, Christian says in her stories, she uses intersectionality as an analytic to think "beyond race and gender...those like little nuances that clearly separate black people." Christian often draws on her own experiences as a Black, West Indian, woman and how it differently shapes her experience of the world compared to Black American women. When reporting on a story, Christian says she often tries to think through "how does this impact, Black women? How does this impact the Black community? What are we seeing that Black people should be mindful?" Thus, in her evaluation of stories and how she is framing them, she is actively attending to if and how a story is having an impact across Black women communities.

Similarly, Stylz said when she and her co-host brainstorm topics, she is often pushing them to think of how an issue reaches across communities: If you come in and say, 'Ooh, I want to talk about Anorexia, ' okay, we can talk about Anorexia, but how does that affect Trans folks? How does that affect Black folks? How does it affect women? How does that affect all the people who are in all of those identities?

In this way, Stylz is looking to cover stories that are not just affecting a singular community, but rather issues and events that have an impact across communities, and then thinking through how these different communities are impacted.

Conversely, some creators said that because centering marginalized communities was a news value for them, they would simultaneously stay away from stories that centered and focused on whiteness, especially white men. One of the clearest examples of this came from Sanders, who said, in no uncertain terms, *Go Off, Sis* was not interested in having on white guests. As she put it:

We're never going to center a white opinion or gaze. That is not what we're interested in. That's not what we're invested in, and that's not the podcast. I'm sure it's lovely. And I'm sure there are moments for conversations to be in conversation with our allies and to bring those. That's not what this is. That's not what *Go off, Sis*, is.

In this way, as interlocutors searched for potential news stories, part of their reporting praxis was rejecting an ideological frame that privileged whiteness and maleness in determining newsworthiness, and focusing on stories that centered marginalized communities, whose needs and concerns often do not get represented in existing journalistic outlets.

How does this push against pervasive (inaccurate) mainstream news narratives?

Additionally, in evaluating potential news stories, news creators often chose stories that would push against pervasive inaccurate, misleading, racist, or sexist mainstream news narratives about marginalized people. For instance, Todd recalled an episode where she and her co-hosts discussed the disappearance and murder of 12-year old Georgia Lee Moses in 1977. Moses' case had gained mainstream news coverage mainly due to theories around its potential connection with the disappearance of Jon Bennett Ramsey, a young white girl who became one of America's most infamous and publicized kidnappings. In the original coverage of Moses' story, Asa said she and her co-hosts noticed:

People didn't pay attention to it or dismiss the case because they figured she was, she just ran away, or she was with a man or her boyfriend or something like... She was not being looked at as a child.

Media and journalism scholars such as Rebecca Wanzo (2009) and Ava Greenwell (2020) have previously noted how mainstream news has historically dismissed and adultified Black women and girls who go missing, often positioning them as unsympathetic figures. This phenomenon, often referred to as "Missing White Girl Syndrome," was not lost upon Todd and her co-host (Moody, Dorries, Blackwell, & Sutton, 2008; Sommers, 2016). Therefore, in their coverage of Moses, Todd and her co-host gave Moses'

story the care and attention it deserved and made sure to highlight the fact that she was, in fact, a child and was not to blame for her disappearance.

Similarly, in her cover of Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, González-Ramírez said one thing that it was important for her to reframe the narrative that the country's current issues were new developments under the Trump administration:

Lots of liberals and a lot of media are like, “Oh, the way Trump treated Puerto Rico,”... I’m like, yeah, and Obama before him and, you know, Bush and Clinton, and you can keep going until 1898. So having that perspective too is just, you know, uh, just...I think asking, asking questions of what’s missing and, and push it back to sometimes when, when you see coverage, and you’re like, Oh, actually, you know, like, that may, you know, it’s not a full story.

In both of these instances, González-Ramírez and Todd used their personal experiences as a Puerto Rican woman and Black woman, respectively, to identify persistent gaps and oversights in mainstream news coverage. They then took to their platforms to present a different narrative framing around these particular events.

Does this push the cultural conversation forward or offer a new perspective?

Stylz said when she and her co-host are picking news stories, they aim to “pick topics that make us question us.” Continuing, Stylz notes they often ask themselves: “Are we in agreement? Is there something that we are not sure about? Is there something that we know other people are struggling with in regards to this subject? Can we give a better education on it?” Similarly, other news creators I spoke to said they would often cover a story if they could present a perspective on the issue that pushed past the dominant discourse, in either public or counterpublic discourse communities, to present a new and unique insight. For instance, Seven said, “we’re particularly interested in, unique perspectives,” Giving me an example, they noted:

There was one [article] it’s called “why black people don’t go camping,” by a writer called Nikki. And she basically does a critical analysis of why black people don’t go camping beyond the obvious: it’s outdoors. And she links all this research to back up claims. And it’s one of those pieces whereas a Black person you read it, you read the title and you’re like, “yeah, we don’t go camping.” And then you read the content, and you’re like, “Oh, this is why we don’t go camping.” But it also brings outsiders into our viewpoint, which I thought was really interesting.

For Seven, this piece on the history of Black people and camping, which contextualized Black peoples' aversions to camping within the racist histories of Black people being harassed outdoors and in the woods, offered a perspective on a common narrative that they felt most Black people, including themselves, were unfamiliar with. When I asked them what they meant by "brings outsiders into our viewpoint," Seven said, "I can't really speak for white people, but I don't think they've ever sat down and thought, like, why don't Black people go camping?" In this way, as Seven saw it, the story pushed white people to think about an issue they, previously, may not have had to contend with. In this way, the story allowed *An Injustice!* to offer new insights for Black counterpublic and mainstream public conversations at the intersection of Black people and camping.

In some cases, not being able to offer a new perspective led news creators to choose not to cover an incident. James and Tynes also often spoke about how they were mainly interested in discussing those news events they felt they could "contribute" something to. Tynes noted:

We do have kind of a filter of just like...what do we feel like we're actually versed to have a critique on because there's also other conversations...because of yesterday was Trans Day of Visibility, and so certain if you want to specify even more like Black trans Twitter is having a conversation about, you know, what does it mean to be visible as a trans person? As opposed to being accepted or race or things like that? And that's not something that like we, as two Black cis women, can have a conversation about, right? Like we would have to invite someone and give them the platform to talk about it. And we just nod and say, "mmmhmmm yeah, girl," or, you know, we just not have that conversation.

In this instance, not being able to contribute to the larger cultural conversation around Blackness and Trans day of visibility led James and Tynes to decide not to discuss it on their podcast. It was not that they did not think the story was not newsworthy, but rather, they realized as two cis Black women, they did not have the experience or cultural competence to contribute to the conversation in what they felt was a productive way. Like James and Tynes, other news creators I spoke to brought up this point and similarly noted if they did want to have the conversation, they would invite someone into the conversation whose specific lived experience would allow them the expertise to speak on the topic in question. It is also important to note here that their understanding of "expert" in this instance was not someone who studied these communities but was in and a part of these communities.

Can this story offer something of service to our audience?

Often the news creators I spoke to were looking to cover stories and topics that they thought would be helpful or directly “of service to” marginalized communities. Chelsea Sanders said that when picking guests to bring onto *Go Off, Sis*, she is often looking to speak with celebrities and community members that can offer something to the Black women communities that she aims to speak to:

I think about is, does this person has a perspective on this topic? And do they have something again that they can share that will be of service to our audience? That’s always how I’m thinking about everything, is this person going to be of service to our audience right now? You know, Tracee Ellis Ross, the episode loosely..., we knew it was about money. And so we’re like, who’s, who’s boss and just like doing real shit, and like showing us what it means to live and work and just do amazing stuff in like the corporate space, Tracee Ellis Ross. Like not only is she obviously named, she’s built her entire company very successfully at this point Pattern to be in Ulta to be in all these stores and to now she’s, you know, the global ambassador for Ulta.

Through the example of Tracie Ellis Ross, Sanders aimed to demonstrate how she thinks about evaluating the ‘newsworthy’ value any potential guest on the show can provide. As Sanders noted in our conversation, part of the booking process for any news show is about promotion. Publicists and PR agencies often pitch their clients for interviews across news outlets, particularly if they have something coming out to promote, such as a new movie, album, or business venture. However, in addition to who may be *available* based on promotional availability, Sanders is only interested in extending her platform to those who will also be of service to Black women based on the experiential knowledge they can offer. In this way, Sanders saw Ross as a newsworthy guest because of what she could provide listeners in terms of her business experience and acumen.

In other cases, news creators also mentioned that being of service to their community meant giving audiences actionable tools and information they could use to engage in political and social justice. Ashton Lattimore said *Prism* will do pieces in which they will “literally just point to resources.” As an example, she noted:

We published a piece I think it was either yesterday or today, and the way that we chose to come at this was a little bit different—so not just focusing on mutual aid groups that are trying to pull together resources for people in the immediate near term...but also pointing people toward, um, mutual aid groups and organizations that are fighting for long-term solutions to some of the underlying problems that have been revealed or

exacerbated by what's happening in Texas right now. So things like housing insecurity, food insecurity that are really, really bad, and there are acute needs in this moment, but which also we're kind of preexisting areas of inequity and injustice that they're working to combat.

The piece Lattimore was referring to is entitled “Beyond disaster relief, these Texas mutual aid networks are meeting people’s long-term needs.” The article, written by *Prism* features staff reporter Tamar Sarai Davis, directly highlighted local Texas organizations and coalitions that had been and were continuing to address issues such as houselessness, food insecurity, and Prison conditions in the wake of the snowstorm that hit the state in mid-February 2020, leaving more than 70 Texans and left at least 40 million people with power across the state (Davis, 2020). For *Prism*, what was newsworthy was not the fact that there was a deep freeze but rather the systemic inequities the deep freeze exposed within the state and the local organizations that stepped up to address these issues. Thus, *Prism* focused on making their readers aware of these resources so that they could be accessed by those in Texas who needed them (provided they still had access to the internet) and by people outside of Texas who wished to help support those in need.

Is there a deeper conversation here?

Mia (Mimi) Thornton is a university student from Liverpool in the United Kingdom. Mia started her podcast, also named *Go Off, Sis*, with her friend Rachel Duncan to create a platform to call attention to people’s work, ideas, and thoughts in Northern UK, especially those from historically marginalized communities. As two women of color in the U.K., Thornton said she and Duncan wanted to “be able to let these people have a space to provide information, stories, anything that they’ve done and for people to know about it.” Thornton said they were often looking to go “beyond the surface of what it actually was, it was kind of digging deeper.”

Specifically, Thornton referenced a past episode where she and Duncan discussed a British celebrity who was charged with making colorist tweets. For the episode, Thornton and Duncan, two light-skinned Black women, invited three guests: two dark-skinned Black women, and one dark-skinned Black man. Talking about their approach to the issue, Mia said they used the episode to think more critically about colorism and accountability:

If this person's tweeting, you know, colorist tweets, but people are now saying, "oh, they're not like that," why?... Has this person been uplifting Black women...like throughout their life? Or have they been like still putting them [Black women] down? Like these tweets from years ago, so it was very kind of like, I don't want to say like an investigation, but it was nice to kind of...yeah, dig deeper into something and not just have a back and forth conversation. It was like allowing people to express themselves and talk about how things have made them feel, which I think is really, really important.

Thus, Thornton and Duncan used the conversational and discussion space of the podcast to explore British pop culture in more depth. Beyond the incident itself, Thornton and Duncan were interested in exploring what the incident meant about how colorism manifests in the U.K. and how that differently impacted people depending on their skin tone, ethnicity, and gender.

Tressie Mcmillan Cottom similarly noted that on *Hear to Slay*, she and Roxanne Gay are interested in covering stories that are more "evergreen," in that they allow them to look past a particular incident or moment into a larger discussion:

We are not trying to be like a timely new show, but usually, in some popular media story, tends to be a way to pull out the more evergreen story, and so we look at that... If everybody today is arguing about whatever Kanye West just did, is it really about what he just did? Or is it about this weird thing about whatever the Kardashians have built? Now that's more evergreen, right? And we'll go, okay, yeah, we did kind of want to talk about the crazy Kanye News, but okay, we don't want to pack it to that story. What's Evergreen in that? And can we talk about it, you know, both in a smart way but in an approachable way?

In this way, in their coverage of popular culture, Cottom and Gay often talk about a news incident or event through the lens of the larger societal issue or preoccupation it may speak to. In part — for Cottom and Gay— this decision is practical. Due to the release schedule of the podcast, it is hard to cover stories in a timely manner since the podcast is released weekly; by the time an episode is released, the news cycle may have moved on from a particular story. But also, through approaching their news coverage from the perspective of stories that offer "evergreen" elements, the pair can present their audiences with deeper and more thoughtful ways to think about a news story beyond the facts of who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Like Cottom and Gaye, Clemons and Lopes often approach coverage of news and current events by looking to those moments in popular culture that they can expand into a deeper and more fruitful conversation. As the pair noted in the below exchange:

Lopes: Usually, if something happens in the news or could be, sometimes like a funny story that broke on Twitter or whatever it is, we always try to make it a bigger conversation...Like the day before we record, we'll always say, okay, how can we make this a bigger conversation? Like for example, what was the, I think...what was it you like the last few weeks we did...I forget what happened. I think it was Beyoncé...

Clemons: Oh yeah, how we were talking about the Beyoncé Homecoming, and you were saying...we can talk about, you know, work ethic and, you know, tying in like working hard and then giving back, and shining a light on like where you came from, and you know, Black culture and you know...tying it all together.

In this way, when assessing newsworthiness, the news creators I spoke to were often interested in expanding upon the contemporary news discourse in publics and counterpublics. Further, for all three of the news creators mentioned above, it was interesting to note how the medium of podcasting specifically both informed and allowed for this specific approach to news praxis— highlighting the larger connection between the digital form and reporting within a Black feminist news praxis.

What impact will telling this story have on marginalized communities?

Morgan Johnson is the publisher of *The TRiiBE*, a Black Chicago-focused digital-native news outlet. Johnson said at *The TRiiBE* they often “think about what is going to be the ripple effect that happens once this story hits the community.” For this reason, Johnson said that *The TRiiBE* deliberately decided not to cover rapper Kanye West saying slavery was a choice on TMZ in 2018, despite him being a Black Chicago rapper with strong ties to the city’s historically Black Southside (TMZ, 2018). Morgan recalled:

We thought, what is the community impact of this that young Black kids are going to read and say those words over and over and over again? I don’t even want that to be a thing. I don’t want that to be something that they read in a hundred years from now. I don’t even want that to be something that is documented as a way of thinking amongst our community because he’s not really amongst our community.

In this way, despite what would appear to be the “newsworthiness” of this story due to its focus on a cultural icon from Black Chicago, an even more important filter of newsworthiness for Johnson was

impact. She was not interested in covering any stories that she felt would be hurtful or damaging to the Black Chicago communities her work aims to uplift.

In this same vein, other news creators were also concerned with the impact of their coverage on individual listeners and people. For instance, Ana DeShawn, creator and host of the podcast radio show, *Anna Deshawn and the Q-crew*, said she “[does her] best to be about the impacts and how that can impact somebody personally.” Similarly, Melissa Brown said she often does not engage in direct critiques of people on her podcast. Brown said, as an academic, she felt if she was going to critique someone or something someone, it was going to be in an academic article, not on Twitter or her blog. Brown recalled in a piece she did on Black women and twerking in popular culture, she mentioned an arguably problematic instance of Miley Cyrus twerking at the VMA’s but she “didn’t really critique Miley Cyrus.” When I asked her why this was, Brown said, “in general, even when I tried to address something negative, I don’t like to actually center the negative aspect of it.” For Brown, this was largely because she felt the text-based mediums she used did not always allow for the nuanced and extended discussion she thought these critiques warranted.

Andrea González-Ramírez, said she hopes her reporting will also have an impact on a legislative level in a way that will be helpful to marginalized communities. Talking about a piece she did on domestic violence against women in Puerto Rico, she noted:

I think it was like the type of story where I dunno it was like a topic that mattered, and I was able to, to get like sources that were so generous with their time. And, even though it was pretty heartbreaking to report, also, like when I see the final product and see the policy changes that have happened since then, it’s just like, okay, so we did good work here. We did like tangible work. Cause I don’t know, sometimes in this line of business, like you feel like you’re just putting stuff out there and you’re like, who cares?

In this way, while she knew it was not possible with every story she covered, González-Ramírez did hope that the stories she chose to report on could have some larger impact on social or public policies that would actionably improve the lives of marginalized communities on a systemic level.

Will this story inflict [more] trauma on marginalized communities?

In a similar vein, news creators were also often concerned with whether their coverage of a particular story would trigger trauma within Black and other marginalized communities. As Johnson stated plainly, “If it’s retraumatizing the community, then we’re not going to do it.”

Raqiyah Mays recalled how she edited an interview with a Sacramento-based activist about protests related to the shooting of Stefan Clark, a Black man shot by Sacramento police in his grandmother’s backyard after they mistook his phone for a gun (Mays, 2019). In discussing the way she edited the interview, Mays said she was mindful of the potentially traumatic impact on her community of Black listeners:

I did the interview with Tanya Faison... but there was a portion of it I did take out. And it was going down that trauma porn lane... She talked about all the Black men that had gotten killed after Stefan Clark, which is important. But what I took out was her breaking blow by blow of how they were killed and what happened. We don’t need to know that! And then they shot him, and then the body, and then they broke his legs...no! You’re not gonna do that on my show. I need the details, I need the information, I need that kind of stuff, and the uplifting part is there are still people fighting back and pushing back.

In this way, while Mays wanted to highlight the anti-racist activism work being done on the ground in Sacramento in the wake of this shooting; but she was also conscious of the traumatic impact gratuitously describing violence against Black people by police could have on the Black viewers on her show—some of whom may have had their own traumatic experiences with police violence. For this reason, she focused on what she saw as the newsworthy parts of the story: what happened and how the Black community is fighting against it, not the traumatic violence.

Echoing this sentiment, Brown said that in her writing on *Black Feminisms*, she is always wary of covering stories that can trigger Black trauma. Recalling her decision not to cover a prevalent pop culture discussion in 2019 when Atlanta rapper T.I. openly stated on a podcast that he attends his then 18-year-old daughter, Dejay’s, annual gynecology appointments to make sure she was still a “virgin,” or more specifically, that her hymen was still in-tact.¹² The incident led to several cultural discussions across

¹²The interview originally aired on the “Ladies Like Us,” podcast, hosted by two women of color Nazanin Mandi Pimental and Nadia Moham. According to a BuzzFeed article from November, 2019, the podcast hosts subsequently removed the episode from their podcasting channel. Pimental and Moham also released a statement on Instagram that said they regretted

social media and news outlets about the difference between having an intact hymen and virginity, the policing of Black women and girls' bodies, especially by Black men, and respectability politics. However, Brown said:

If I write a whole essay about how inappropriate it is for T.I. to treat his daughter the way that he does, and how do you end that? How do you bring hope? Right? Like the truth is, I don't know if there's any hope because so many Black girls have been through that, it's kind of the norm and the Black nuclear family that the Black father abuses his daughters in that way. I do think that Black grown women can remember and feel that pain, but unfortunately, I do not have any solutions. My solution is get that bad father out of your life, don't rely on him financially; you don't need that man around. But that's my solution. That might not be the solution at a systemic level. And because I don't even have the solutions at the systemic level, I don't even want to begin the conversation because I don't want to start a conversation that I can't offer resolution to.

Thus, if Brown was going to cover an issue that would potentially trigger trauma for the Black women within her audience community, she also needed to offer them a form of resolve or healing. As a Black woman raised in a conservative, Christian community in the South, Brown was hyper-sensitive to the pervasiveness of these forms of abuses against Black girls by their fathers in the name of respectability, and did not want her coverage to trigger this trauma. In other words, something's newsworthiness was impacted by if it induced trauma for trauma's sake. For her, a news event that could trigger trauma only rose to the level of newsworthy if, in the same breath, she could offer a larger, systemic solution to the ongoing problem.

For Zuva Seven, turning away from trauma also allows her as a Black writer to turn to other, more generative, and uplifting stories. As they noted:

I think particularly as Black writers, um, you will find that the only times you really get commissioned a lot of black history month, and particularly, there is this voyeurism where people are only interested in seeing you hurt, particularly as Black women. And you'll see, even in media where you will seldom find a movie about a Black woman just living and enjoying life. The trauma that happens is that she walks out with her hair flat ironed, and then it rains. You will never get that. It'll have to be something so brutal. So I wanted to sway away from that and just write beyond what was pigeonholed for me.

not pushing back more on the rappers statements and "the comments that were made and the reaction that followed are not in any way a reflection of our personal views on the topic. We support and love Women and feel that their bodies are theirs to do as they wish."

By focusing her standard of newsworthiness away from Black women's trauma, Seven opened her writing on *An Injustice!* up to other types of stories that centered on Black women's joy. In this way, in focusing away from trauma, these news creators actively pushed against historically pervasive news narratives that constantly represented Black people's lived experiences through the lens of traumatic incidents and negative stereotypes that reinforced the pervasive narrative that Black people's lives can be reduced to crime, murder, poverty, and incarceration (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dixon, 2017; Wood, 2002).

Taken together, this Black feminist news praxis, which consists of Black feminist reporting practices and news principles, employs news creators' own understanding of Black feminist theories and frameworks to inform their approach to news reporting and assessments of newsworthiness. Across these practices, the news creators aimed to highlight what they perceived as some of the negative and monolithic ways in which mainstream and alternative news media outlets had traditionally approached reporting on historically marginalized communities. Thus, interlocutors used their praxis as a corrective that decentered singular narratives and pushed against pervasive stereotypes.

It is also important to note the role of digital media and mediums in shaping these news reporting practices and news principles. Several of the reporting practices I mentioned, such as discussing the heterogeneity within an identity community and giving a systemic analysis of news events, are, in part, enabled by the discursive medium of podcasting employed by many of the news creators I spoke to. Podcasting allowed creators to ground their reporting in discussions where they could bring in multiple guests to engage in a conversation through which they could draw on their different lived experiences to actively think through how a news event may impact people differently based on positionality. Further, as a medium that invites long-form discussion, podcasts also allow news creators to engage in longer, contextual discussions of news events. For this reason, I suggest that despite the breadth of mediums employed by the news creators I spoke to, podcasting was the most common. To be clear, here, I do not mean to suggest that a Black feminist news praxis can *only* be engaged through podcasting. However, it is important to highlight the synergy between the kind of practices a Black feminist news praxis calls for and the affordances of the podcasting medium.

Black Feminist Gatekeeping

As I noted above, a Black feminist news praxis defined by my interlocutors often pushes to decenter any singular perspective in reporting. Another critical way interlocutors decentered a singular perspective in their reporting was through including audiences in their gatekeeping practices. Almost all of the newsmakers interviewed for this study mentioned how story ideas, pitches, and suggestions from the community are a key component of their gatekeeping practices. As Johnson put it, “It’s a way to keep us honest in our mission we haven’t seen other than, in the comment section, real dialogue happening between the community and the newsroom.” Like Johnson, many interlocutors solicited potential news stories from audiences directly through community meetings, audience surveys, and pitches, or indirectly through comments and other social media posts. For instance, Tanya Christian recalled:

I like reading the comments sometimes because they think it’s helpful to get an idea of what our readers are thinking. I wrote a story where I got doctor’s advice about what to do if you think you might have the coronavirus...and the instructions that we’ve been given have always been stay-at-home quarantine. Don’t go anywhere for 14 days, and I am someone who’s not married, who doesn’t have kids, who have zero responsibilities. I have a decent enough job where I can use a service like Instacart...What I didn’t think about was what a woman brought up, and she said, ‘I’m a single mother. I have four kids, and I am on SNAP¹³ benefits. Instacart these places don’t take SNAP benefits. If I were to get coronavirus, I would still have to go to the supermarket.’ And she’s right like you like because you get this virus does it mean everything shuts down when you’re a Black woman at the head of your household. I wouldn’t have considered if I hadn’t read the comments. It’s hard to consider everyone’s circumstances, but they raise very valid points, and I appreciate social media for that. It’s instant feedback.

Christian illustrates how using the affordances of new media to involve a community of Black women in her gatekeeping practices allowed her to correct for the potentially limited perspective and to show how this participatory gatekeeping helped her to enact intersectional news praxis, in that it allowed her audience member to focus the story on a more diverse and complex understanding of Black women’s lived realities than her original article may have offered. Further, this example may point to how *Essence Magazine*’s editorial practices, more broadly, are becoming more intersectional through the use of new media tools.

¹³SNAP stands for The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the largest federal food assistance program for low income families. See: <https://www.benefits.gov/benefit/361>

Similarly, Chelsea Sanders of *Go Off, Sis* said they often use their audience as a “testing ground” to determine what news and pop culture stories they should turn their attention to. Talking about the show’s coverage of the Netflix show *Bridgerton*, Sanders recalled:

We did a piece, like three months ago, maybe two months ago on *Bridgerton*, and sort of examining again, this like idea of colorism and this colorblind casting, and it popped off, and it started a conversation that we weren’t even aware of that we didn’t even know that our audience was interested in when it came to casting...so a lot of the times our audience helps us to figure out what it is that’s on their mind, and that’s in their heart. And I think again like they do a lot of this helpful sort of like source work with us because we are able to really like have these conversations with them and post, and be in conversation and, and respond and give feedback and say like, “Oh, that’s actually a really good point.” Or like, “you know what that is coming. Like, let’s have a little bit more conversation about it.”

In this way, these audience responses turned Sanders and her staff’s attention to the fact that there was potentially more opportunity to cover pop culture stories that spoke to issues of race and casting in Hollywood. Thus, for Sanders and the *Unbothered* team, like Christian or Johnson, their understanding of where they should be looking for potential stories to let through the metaphorical gate is often driven by their audience community.

This practice mirrors what journalism scholars often refer to as engaged or participatory journalism, a model by which news users and readers become active members of the news creation and gatekeeping process (Domingo et al., 2008; Singer et al., 2011). However, unlike the intervention of participatory journalism into the mainstream news media, I argue that Black feminist news creation is inherently participatory because it is grounded in a worldview rooted in community accountability. Collins and Bilge (2016) suggest that an intersectional praxis often calls on practitioners and activists to engage in their work through community accountability—or listening to those from within marginalized communities. The authors note that this approach to community address and organizing can often allow us to level new critiques against sites of neoliberal capitalism and self-interest. In this way, community accountability, as a Black feminist praxis, is integral to how Black feminist news creators engage in the gatekeeping process.

In enacting participatory gatekeeping, participants emphasized the importance of social media, especially Twitter, in helping them to know and understand the news and topics of interest and concern to their audiences. When I asked DeShawn about where she finds news, the answer was almost immediate,

“Oh, it’s easy, what’s poppin’ on social media. What about people talking about what’s trending?” Mays said as a part of her news gatekeeping process: *[I] be scrolling through Twitter. I’m constantly saving stories. Constantly putting them into a file throughout the week...I’m constantly looking and scrolling through like, ‘oh, so this indigenous tribe paid for the funerals of the victims of the Alabama hurricane. I want to lift up that story that no one’s talking about.*

Similarly, Shairina Brown noted when looking for stories for *Intersectional Media*: *Most of the time, I honestly go to Twitter, and I look at what’s trending, and I’m like, okay, well, why is it trending? And what are people saying? And like, then I start analyzing why people are saying what they’re saying, and then that tells me like, Oh, is this a good topic for intersexual media or not?* Most of the other news creators I spoke to cited Twitter, specifically, as a key space to identify relevant issues to the audience communities they are addressing. I suggest that Twitter was the obvious source for news for many interlocutors due to pre-existing conversations surrounding Blackness and Black feminism that often circulate on Twitter, particularly Black Twitter.

While there is no one definition of Black Twitter, scholars such as Andre Brock (2012, 2020) Meredith Clark (2014, 2015) often described Black Twitter as a network of self-selected Black users on Twitter who use the platforms to discuss issues of common social and cultural significance from a culturally Black perspective. In other words, Black Twitter is a culturally-bound discursive space within the larger Twitter network, meaning not every Black Twitter user is part of Black Twitter. As Andre Brock suggests (2020), Black Twitter provides a digital space for Black people to discuss topics of cultural importance on a mass audience scale that previously were limited to select physical spaces such as barbershops, beauty salons, or churches that those outside of the Black community were not privy to. While Rodrick Graham and Sean Smith (2014) argue that due to its networked connections, Black Twitter constitutes a counterpublic, the public-facing nature of Black Twitter, as well as its discoverability through hashtags, often means conversations on Black Twitter can influence national debates and narratives around how Black culture and representations of Blackness in media (Clark, 2014; Jackson & Welles, 2016).

Writers and scholars such as Sherri Williams (2015), Tara Conley (2017), Monique Liston (2017), Sarah Jackson (2016), Feminista Jones (2019), Moya Bailey (2021), and Catherine Knight Steele (2021),

and Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin (2022), have also shown how Black women and femmes employ the broader networks of Black Twitter to publically discuss their lived experiences as a manifestation of Black feminist thought. In *Reclaiming Our Space*, activist, writer, and influencer Feminista Jones (2019) argues that Black women and femmes have used Twitter to create hashtags that engage Black feminist knowledge production by building community and discussing Black women's specific social location. Further, media scholar Tara Conley (2017) argues these Black feminist hashtags are a form of becoming, in which Black women to rupture hegemonic understandings of Black womanhood. Thus, as Sarah Jackson, Brooke Foucault Welles, Moya Bailey argue in their book *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (2020), these conversations draw attention to the intersectional dimensions of Black women's lives, buttressing dominant, hegemonic narratives of what it means to be a Black woman. In this way, Black Twitter was as a natural and fertile space through which news creators could identify what issues and events Black women, femme, and queer folk were concerned about and wanted to know more about.

This turn towards Twitter as a source of Black feminist gatekeeping also extended beyond the bounds of the U.S.. When I asked Thornton where she looks for news, she said, "I think one main thing is like...I think you guys have it in America, like Black Twitter?..." she continued:

So like, what's popping on like the timeline, like what are people talking about? Like, cause nine times out of 10, like every week there's some kind of scandal, and like, everyone's like going crazy over some things. Sometimes it's stupid things, sometimes it's like, Oh, this is actually like, yeah, this is really interesting. So I think that plays a big part.

In this way, Black Twitter not only acted as a space of community interest and information for those news creators inside of the U.S. but represented a global network through which news creators could find topics and information clearly of interest to marginalized communities. As Meredith Clark suggests, Black Twitter often acts as a news counterpublic through which Black communities can speak to news and popular culture events through the lens of their lived experiences. I suggest that Black feminist news creators then mine these spaces to bring these counterpublic conversations into mainstream news discourses.

Further, for some of the news creators I spoke to, the idea of drawing on social ‘media’ Black counterpublic discourses as a source of news extended beyond Twitter to other “Black enclaves.” For instance, Alyssa James said she and Tynes often look to Black Twitter for stories, but also spaces such as “Black Instagram.” James also noted, “we have an intern now, so she sends us things that are happening on TikTok...she’s Gen Z, and neither of us are on TikTok.” In this way, drawing on Black feminist notions of community accountability, the news creators I spoke to turn to Black social media counterpublics as a way of seeing what topic of issue or concern to their audiences would be interested in them covering and then use this as the basis of their gatekeeping practice. However, once these events and discussions are identified, the news creators then evaluate these potential stories based on their news principles. Then, if they choose to report on them, news creators would try to add layers of accuracy and nuance through their Black feminist reporting praxis.

Selling Black Feminist Journalism

As a form of popular Black feminism, Black feminists new creators often need to figure out ways to commodify and sell their work to mass audiences. I suggest that as a value-driven praxis, Black feminist journalism may face more barriers to traditional news business models, such as advertising, built on dominant, neoliberal logic and require giving up some amount of editorial autonomy to make a profit. At the same time, if a ‘business model’ facilitates an entity’s value creation, employing a Black feminist praxis in news creation may also bring about new understandings of ‘value’ (Zott, Amit, & Massa, 2011).

Struggles of Black Feminist Journalism within Capitalist Commodification

The news creators I spoke to used various business models to monetize their work. This included traditional business models such as advertising and subscriptions, as well as less traditional business models such as network support platforms, non-profit fundraising, and grant funding. However, several news creators I spoke to said it was often hard to find consistent advertising support for their work.

Like traditional magazine advertising business models, *Sesi* sells subscriptions to its magazine and offers slots to advertisers. For Andrea Butler, this was just the standard practice for selling magazines

that she learned in journalism school. However, Butler, told me monetizing the magazine, especially through advertising revenue, has been harder than she initially thought:

I was like, yeah...I can do this, I can get advertisers...First of all, why wouldn't they when Black people spend a whole lot of money and we're the only magazine for Black teen girls, on the newsstand? So that is not how it worked out. So even, even in the past two years ago, when I left living social, for example, to do the magazine full time, I still had my own apartment. I've since had to come back home because rent is super high and...I just don't have it. So...when I left, I was like, "Oh yeah, so I'm gonna have, all day now, so I'll be able to set -up meetings, they're going to be like, yes, of course, we get some nos, but then we'll get some yes, of course, I'm gonna get some 'no's but then I'll get some "yes'".... No, no, no. Like I said, right now, like we've had sporadic advertisers here and there. Um, but like I said earlier, KiKi Curly's the one that stuck with us, but that's just one, and I... we love them, and we appreciate them oh so much, but we do need more to supplement.

Butler attributes this struggle to find advertisers to a couple of reasons. For one, as the only person on staff at her news outlet, it was hard for her to find the time to produce editorial content and pitch to advertisers. Second, she thinks advertisers no longer see print media as lucrative and therefore do not want to invest in her print magazine, despite her own anecdotal evidence that 98% of her subscribers order the print version of the magazine instead of the digital version. Butler argued, "I think this conception, people just don't want to pay for something they think they can get for free...that's the biggest thing...Like there was one company that literally wrote me an email and said, 'print is dead.'"

Stylez said *Marsha's Plate* also offered advertising space but often struggled to capitalize on ad sales.

As Stylz noted:

We do advertisements, but because we're a small podcast, we are, we're not at the level where tons of advertisers are coming to us and saying, 'oh my God, can we get an ad'? So we do sell ad space, but we haven't. Probably in our whole time, we probably have four, and we've been almost two years in, but we don't have a big audience. We get about, hmmm...about 4,000 views a week. And so when I did my research about ads, they start to count it like 10,000. It's just a whole algorithm of what the value, how they deem the value of your audience based on the size and that kind of deal. So we haven't got to that level yet.

Stylz, like Butler and many of the other news creators I spoke to, were small, upstart news outlets still building their audiences and listeners. Larger advertisers often did not see them and their audiences as monetizable and therefore did not see them as valuable. Thus, because Black feminist news outlets often

did not have the backing of larger business institutions, it was hard for Black feminist news creators to get advertisers, who are used only to investing in large, mainstream news platforms, to invest in their work.

Some of the news creators I spoke to also attributed the specific lack of institutional support for Black feminist journalism to the persistent role of racism and sexism in the media industry. Cottom suggested:

Nobody wants to take the risk on the thing they don't understand, and they generally just don't understand us... It's the old school racism and sexism, but I mean, like how the racism and the sexism plays out is that...we talk about it as risk, like there isn't a big market here. We don't know if this will translate to the dominant market...Yeah, we'll talk about it as a risk, but it's the same old, same old just with this veneer of like investment in the market built-in.

In this way, Black feminist news creators' often explicit focus on race and gender in news events acts as an additional barrier to structural investment and amplification by making their content appear less marketable to mainstream (white) audiences. Drawing similar parallels for advertising in women and feminist publications, Carmen Phillips noted:

Historically speaking, the way that advertising works is that ad sales are for who advertisers see as an 'ideal consumer.' What they're usually trying to sell, particularly for women, is stuff that is largely based around the interests and needs of straight women. And by that, we do mean things that are body modifying, things that are surrounded by how to get or keep or win a man, none of which applies to our audience...So that is part of what's happening in terms of sexism. Women statistically make less than men, so they have less disposable income. Our website caters to women and to trans people who make less than cis people, um, who have again less disposable income. That means that our audience is not as much interest to advertisers. The way that that also works in terms of homophobia and the way effects sexism is that when you have advertisements who are interested in queer and gay audiences, they are mostly interested in reaching gay men. There's kind of a famous saying of like double income, which is like, you know, two gay men who live together, who don't have a family, but make a lot of money because they are cisgender men compared to the rest of society. They have a massive amount of expendable income that is not as easily seen in queer women's communities, and advertisers have a hard time seeing it. So that is part of the reason that we have struggled for advertising.

For this reason, *Autostraddle* often relied on other funding models such as subscriptions and donor funding to supplement the cost of their work. Cottom and Phillips' comments highlight the critical role of race, gender, and class as modifiers in upholding modern hierarchies of capital accumulation (Robinson, 2000). By specifically focusing on events that highlight systemic issues impacting historically

marginalized communities, Black feminist news creators' work seems to move away from what advertisers presume "ideal" customers would want. As a result, their investment in a Black feminist praxis pushes their news work away from neoliberal ideas of commodification that would attract greater advertising and investment.

Many interlocutors also said that while they are open to having advertisers on their outlets, their work's value and ethics-driven nature often makes them hesitant to align themselves with advertisers who may not align with these tenants. Nickecia Alder founded *Black Girl Fly Mag* during the second year of her doctoral program. At the time, she was researching the intersection of Black women and media and thinking about how negative, stereotypical portrayals of Black women in popular media can negatively impact Black women's identity and mental health. As a result of this research, she founded *Black Girl Fly Mag* to use Black feminist praxis to combat these negative and limited stereotypes of Black women she often saw portrayed in mainstream news. Alder said, for her, approaching this news work through a Black feminist praxis meant "this level of like really trying to understand and interrogate systems of oppression that, um, kind of overlap and intersect because of those intersecting identities...and so thinking about things like racism, sexism, homophobia, and all this sort of phobias that, um, kind of go along with that." For this reason, she is often very stringent about what companies she allows to advertise on her platform:

Different brands might reach out to us for different reasons, whether wanting to do placement or do ads...we try to tread lightly in terms of like...making sure that any brands that are not sort of aligned with the things that we value. So there have been times when things have not aligned in that way, and so we would opt out of publishing a story that would feature a particular product or brand or something like that.

Similarly, as Danielle Moodie said of her news work:

My work needs to be aligned with my life. Right?... Like there is not an aspect of my life that isn't about seeking justice, that isn't about telling the truth. So I will not work with companies, entities, and outlets that are not aligned with my mission and my vision for how the world should be. Right? Um, and some can say that I am a purist, but like, I want to, I want to feel good about what I'm doing. Right?

This lack of value-alignment led Moodie to leave the radio network that previously hosted her show and move to her current podcasting platform, which advertises itself as a "destination for the underrepresented

voice” (DCP Entertainment, 2022). In both cases, news creators’ comments underscore how the values that drive these news creators’ practices can also make it harder for them to engage with capitalist-driven corporations who often prioritize profit over people. In other words, because of larger social or political imperatives that drive their news outlet’s editorial direction, they believe their advertisers should also align with these values.

For this reason, James and Tynes said they tried, as much as possible, to avoid engaging with advertisers and instead subsidized the cost of their podcast through live speaking events and grant funding. As the pair remarked during our conversation:

James: I listened to a lot of podcasts...And I find that as soon as podcasts get popular, get really popular, they start advertising. It becomes their main source of income. That’s actually the major one that I’ve noticed is once it becomes, ”I’ve quit my day job, and this is my full-time job now, ” it just changes the podcast. It just becomes...I mean, the production value may be better, but there’s something that isn’t as authentic about it anymore. And for me, I think us just having a conversation on our podcast and not having to be like, and now a break to advertise ’ritual’..

Tynes: I think it would take away from the podcast. Not only that, but I mean, we are like, we talk about anti-capitalism all the time.... It would be kind of, yeah,...I’ll, I’ll go as far to say it would be hypocritical to then be like, we get our main source of income from, from advertising, these, these capitalist companies.

Thus, for James and Tynes, more so than a wariness around partnering with a particular advertiser or brand, their anti-capitalist politics, drawn from their Black feminist praxis, made them feel that it would be inauthentic to partnerships with larger, capitalist-driven corporations.

Some news creators also noted ethical barriers to implementing business models such as paywalls or subscriptions that would require audiences to pay for news. As James said, “part of what’s Black feminist about our podcast is not just that we say we’re Black feminists and we read Black feminist work, but that we aim for it to be accessible to as many people as possible,” in this way, cutting off the accessibility of their work would go against this part of their Black feminist praxis. In other words, if news and information that could aid marginalized communities is a common good, news creators saw moral and ethical barriers to limiting access to this information. Morgan Johnson also noted:

We need the news in order to uphold democracy, and we can't rely on people to pay for it because it's just legacy media kind of dropped the ball, and they gave out internet articles for free, and now no one wants to pay for it.

Johnson's comment highlights how our historical understanding of the news as a common good in the United States often makes it less feasible for smaller and less well-known news organizations to expect audiences to pay for their product.

Capitalizing on Capital

However, it is also important to note that not all of the news creators I spoke to struggled to monetize their work. A handful of these news creators successfully procured platform sponsorships and advertising deals. However, in most cases, the platform or creator built off some pre-existing capital. For instance, because *Go Off, Sis* developed from the larger Refinery29 platform, Sanders often found herself with a fair amount of latitude and control in her advertising partnerships. For instance, one of the platform's major sponsors is a larger, international corporation, that had some public issues around racial equity within their company. When I asked Sanders about this, she said:

I always say if you want Chelsea, you're going to get Chelsea. So be prepared for Chelsea. And I say that about Unbothered all the time. If you want to work with Unbothered, you're going to get Unbothered. You're not going to get a watered-down version of that because what you asked for was Unbothered, you've called on us Black women, we always respond. So that's what I'm saying...We're going to show up as ourselves because that's what you wanted originally. And that is really hugely important for us, for any sponsor that we ever work with...We're never apologizing for that. And so if that's what you want, this isn't the space for you, and that's fine too.

As a result, Sanders said she has "said no to advertisers for that specifically." Additionally, she added that the team they work with for their large corporate sponsor, mentioned above, is about 70% Black women. She also noted that their editorial review is highly limited:

They certainly have thoughts there, you know, their input is certainly valued. It is... suggestions, and we consider them as such. One of the things that was really important to us was the ability for us to say the n-word in the show. And one of the women who is not Black had a question and was like, "I'm nervous about it. Like, I just want to do my due diligence because I'm hearing it, and I, I don't know if that's something that you guys want, you know, or that we want." And I said you know what, I appreciate you flagging this. It's staying. That's the end of the conversation. And she said, fair enough, never asked me about it again. And that was it.

While she did not say it directly, I suspect being attached to a large, pre-existing brand is a large part of what enabled Sanders and her team to be so forthright with larger corporations about their values and positions. Since they had a proven market behind them, despite potential “concerns” advertisers may have, Unbothered’s pre-existing capital allows advertisers to see the monetary value of tapping into their market.

Similarly, due to their pre-existing social capital, Cottom and Gay could land what Cottom calls a “white boy deal,” with a podcasting network that gave them free rein and editorial oversight in their work. Cotton said they would not have accepted anything less:

We weren’t going to do it if we were going to have to do it under the auspices of like...we talked to a couple of those media companies who kind of wanted to fit in, you know, a podcast product into their overarching media portfolio. But that would mean, you know, sounding like some of their other projects or working with their in-house staff on content and whatever. And that was just not attractive to us.

Additionally, she added:

Roxanne and I both say, listen, we have day jobs, right? We didn’t need this to build a career. We quite literally wanted to contribute something to the culture that we would also enjoy creating. That was it. And we said if we have worked hard and if we cannot get a deal that will give us control, then we wouldn’t do it.

So instead, they held out until they got a sponsorship that would allow them to engage in their praxis as they saw fit. However, Cotton was also very cognizant of the fact that not every Black woman or Black feminist news creator would get this kind of opportunity:

We are very deliberate about the fact that we’re some of the few Black women at this level of podcasting who have been given the economic resources to shape a show from beginning to end. Have complete creative control and the resources to do it, how we want to do it. And we use that really responsibly.

In this way, Cottom directly attributes her ability to navigate the funding challenges others faced to the existing social and economic capital she and Gay had amassed.

Building Community Capital

Due to the struggles to square Black feminist approaches to journalism with pre-existing capitalist models of commodification, many news creators relied heavily on community-based practices of fundraising and amplification to sustain their work. I term these community-based approaches to sustainability ‘community capital,’ a sustainability strategy that draws on Black feminist principles of community accountability, pushing news creators to be beholden and accountable to the larger communities within which they are embedded. Phillips noted how *Autostraddle*’s community-based approach to sustainability was part of their feminist praxis:

Our business model is one that is a little bit out of the box...it’s a business model that is focused on community. Um, *Autostraddle* is 87% reader-funded, and last year, ended up being 90% reader-funded. And so our first business model is reflective of our readership because they are our number one investments....pleasing and challenging them because also you can’t just cow-tow to that. You have to also be willing to challenge that and help people grow. So are we helping our readership become better people...I think that’s also something that uniquely feminist, being community-minded, as opposed to being something that we just did for the highest clicks.

In this way, *Autostraddle*’s commitment to its QTPOC community is what grounds its business model. Since *Autostraddle*’s work is rooted in a feminist praxis, and in Phillips’ case specifically, a Black feminist praxis that values community over prevalent metrics of capital, they choose to make their sustainability dependent on engaging with their community. *Autostraddle* only survives by continually engaging community support. And while Phillips notes this community orientation is not the same as “cow-towing” to their community, community is still placed squarely at the heart of *Autostraddle* reporting praxis.

Other participants amassed community capital through individual donations and crowdfunding through platforms such as Patreon and PayPal. Mays said she uses Patron donations to cover most of her overhead, and while it is not her main priority, she can often count on her community to give:

I haven’t even put a lot of energy into my Patreon page...Everyone that I ask gives, every single person that I ask gives, but I don’t have the capacity to do it...I know that if I just dedicated myself and I went and said, I’m going to email 50 people, 70, 80% of them would go and give, but I think have not made the time.

In this way, Mays knows she can count on her community to help sustain and support her work. If her audience community did not appreciate her work, they would not actively invest in her platform. Mays' comment also highlights how small community-funded donations, while seemingly minor, can accumulate quickly.

Beyond relying on their audiences for direct economic support, news creators also tapped into their community as a means of accessing different types of capital. For instance, Stylz relies on a larger community of Black queer and trans podcasters, which she describes as “a conglomerate of podcasts that have, a Blacks feminist, trans-inclusive approach to politics and the world” to help promote and sustain her platform:

Having the community of other people and other podcasts that have your community spirit and your thought process in regards to how to network with each other is really, really important in the success of your pocket. There's podcasters who are not doing the numbers that we are doing, and they've been around much longer, and the reason why we are successful in the way that we do is because of the communities.

Sanders similarly said *Go Off, Sis* will often collaborate with other Black women content creators. For instance, Sanders recalled she and her team had Sylvia Beam and Scotty Obell, the hosts of Netflix's *Okay, Now Listen* podcast on the *Go Off, Sis* podcast, to discuss Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Unlike Sanders, and her co-host Danielle Cadet, who both went to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Beam and Obell both went to HBCUs and could lend a different perspective to the conversation. Looking at this experience, Sanders suggested:

I think in a lot of ways we get caught up in, again, the traditional media, like only one can win, and that like, you have to compete as podcasters in the space to do well. In the way that you would have like, you know, like a Teen Vogue or a Refinery 29, like can't win in the same space. And I think that's a very antiquated understanding of media. And I think we're coming to a place I hope where like Black, one Black girls will just take over podcasts again. It'll be our thing.

Talking about her experience then, working with Beam and Obell, Sanders noted:

There's such opportunity for like, cross-pollination. Like hugely so...I think for me, it exposed us to a different audience and vice versa because the *Okay, Now Listen* audience is similar to Unbothered's, but they're not circles. Right? And I think that's also really cool to be able to say Hey, like this, *Okay, Now Listen*, audience is now, you know, seeing another kind of black girlhood that's maybe a little bit different than like Sylvia

and Scotty's; and our Go Off, Sis audience is seeing a different presentation of Black womanhood with, *Okay, Now Listen*.

In this way, like Stylz, Sander tapped into a larger network of Black women content creators to gain and share capital for her own platform. As Diamond suggested, "A donation isn't just monetary. Sometimes a donation is a donating of your network....You might not have any money, but [say] "hey, y'all need to go listen to this podcast, they are doing amazing work.Boom." For these news creators, embedding themselves within a larger network of Black women, femmes, and queer folk who did similar work did not breed competition but only stood to broaden their own community, and thus, their access to potential sources of capital through these communities. In this way, the concept of building community and community accountability was a critical tenant of Black feminist news work. As both Sanders and Hickson before her noted, through a Black feminist lens of community accountability, Black women show up for each other and support each other. As Hickson said, "Black women celebrate other Black women. They show up for other Black women. If we show that this page is made for and by Black women in this office, other Black women will want to be a part of it."

This prioritization of and investment in marginalized communities as an alternative way to build capital when traditional neoliberal frameworks do not work also speaks to a key goal many of these news creators had for their outlet: to build community. Many news creators noted that they hoped to form a community around the work they produced. As Thornton said, "the whole thing is that we wanted to build a community, and the best way to do dyes, to have conversations with people." Similarly, Brydum noted, "At *Yes!*, because so many of our solutions are rooted in community," they also want their work to be community-oriented. Thus for Brydum, the biggest difference between *Yes!* and other places she had worked as a journalist was " privileging the perspectives of community members and of people who have experienced harm," she continued:

When I'm working with a new journalist who hasn't written for *Yes!* they'll send me their source list, and it's like four nonprofit heads. And I'm like, this is nice. Tell me who's benefited from the program. Where are you going to talk to them? Cause that's why I actually want to hear from and these other, you know, talking points are fine. But what I really want to know is like, how does this impact the people who are living it? Because if the goal is to identify something that might make one particular problem

better, then I want to actually hear from the people who are supposed to allegedly be benefiting from it.

In this way, outlets like *Yes!*'s investment in and commitment also allows them to tap into this community, which encourages their continued community support.

Reimagining 'value' and 'success': Content over clicks & engagement over likes

Since news creators often had to reimagine how they went about accumulating capital and sustainability, they often had to redefine what it meant to 'successfully' create news outside of neoliberal, entrepreneurial frameworks that privilege profit maximization. In this case, interlocutors often imagined success within a Black feminist framework, prioritizing the creation of non-hegemonic counter-narratives and community accountability. Here, I do not mean to suggest that interlocutors completely ignored metrics. However, I want to emphasize along these more traditional, neoliberal notions of success lay other ways to assess success, often defined by a person's Black feminist praxis and the mission of their work. For instance, Mays noted:

I'm not going to do a show, which a lot of media does, which is: Will the people like it? Are we going to get listeners? Are we going to get ratings?... So you begin to do these things that you don't necessarily agree with because of a fear...Fear of losing my job or losing this and losing that because I didn't get enough clicks. F*ck that...Like, no! I feel you build your movement by finding like minds. You don't go out and change people's minds. And I'm here to do that. I'm here to speak my mind and put it out there and show what I'm doing and find like minds that are like, "oh my God, somebody that's just like me.

In this way, Mays' platform is not driven by profit but by her message. Mays' ability to inform and be accountable to her community defined her success, not her ability to make money.

Similarly, like Mays, Phillips noted one of the key things she looks for in a story at *Autostraddle* is "is it making people's lives better and are people connecting to it, or people finding beauty in it or pain in it or any of those feelings that we want them to be able to feel." González-Ramírez, in talking about her coverage of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, said:

The success of the story is like how a community takes it. I wrote this essay, Early January of last year because the year opened with earthquakes back home, and no one was talking about it, and I got pissed. I was like, "I want to write about it." And I was having a conversation with my editor, and she was like, yeah, you should write it...The

story did well, like better than some of my stories have done before, but it did not do like, you know, record-breaking numbers, even though I thought it was like really good, like a really good essay. I was very proud of what I'd written, but the response from people from the Island and people from my community and that stuff to me made it valuable. It's just like, you know, the, "I see you" part of it can be so important when you are not that represented.

In their work, González-Ramírez and Phillips specifically valued and prioritized their work in accordance with how it helped and impacted the marginalized communities that engage with their work. When news creators are validated in their goal to give voice to how news events impact marginalized communities, this, in and of itself, becomes a form of value. This value could come in the form of mass feedback from community members or individual feedback. As Butler stated, "I don't measure success based on money, cause then I'd be like, we suck, but what I will measure the success on is the feedback that we get from readers and the feedback we get from the parents." Recalling a recent moment where the lack of monetary success had her questioning her work, Butler told me:

I was having one of those days like, Oh my gosh...what am I doing?...and then I got this direct message...This mom shared this picture of her daughter with *Sesi*, they had ordered some back issues while they waited for their subscription to start, and she was holding the magazine, and then, the daughter posted a picture on our own social media also. And then the mom sent me a direct message and said, "I just wanted you to know that I'm so glad you started this magazine. Just watching her go through the magazine to see people like her made tears in my eyes. It's something that I wanted so badly as a teenager," and so she was just like, "you are appreciated." I was like, "Oh my God, you don't know how much I needed this today.

In this way, for Butler, the value produced by the knowledge that she was providing a resource and something that resonated with Black women and girls superseded and, in many ways, made up for her lack of confidence in the magazine's monetary success. Similar, Deshawn said for her success means:

How many people are watching? How many people shared it? Did someone text me and said, "hey, that was a really good show, I really got a lot out of it" ...About seven, eight years ago, I attended a sister circle, and it was one of those changing moments, like a milestone in your life, because it ...posed the question "what does success mean to you?" and at that time, success would have been money, success would have meant some type of dollar amount second something or they want to get something like that... But after attending that, my definition of success has completely changed. It's not about the money.

As an extension of this, audience engagement was another key way several participants assessed value. Sanders said that she measures success “qualitatively, not quantitatively.” To Sanders, this meant the qualitative feedback she got from her audience community of Black women. For instance, Sanders said despite receiving high praise from her co-workers after *Go Off, Sis* won AdWeek’s 2020 podcast of the year in 2020, what meant more to her was a DM from a Black woman listener who resonated with Sanders sharing on the podcast about the guilt she felt for going to a PWI over an HBCU. “I printed it out,” Sanders said about the email, “like genuinely I did, I don’t even have a printer, I went to FedEx and...anyway. And just like, that is like, it’s giving me, I just like, I don’t know. There’s just like, nothing like that.”

In this way, new creators overcame their struggles to market and commodify Black feminist journalism within a neoliberal market by turning to the community. Like the Black girl boss, they rearticulate their neoliberally informed entrepreneurship goals by turning to community and community support as another site of capital building. Here I do not mean to suggest participants didn’t want or deserve to be compensated for their labor, but rather that they understood value through means outside of neoliberal capitalist definitions of “value.” For them, capital did not necessarily need to come in the form of money but also came in the form of other types of non-monetary support such as a listen, a share, or moving email or DM that let these news creators know the news work they were engaging in that let them know the work they were doing was truly having an impact on Black and of color women, femme, and queer communities.

The Utility of Black Feminist Journalism

Black feminist news creators use the affordances and tools of digital media to bring Black feminist practices into news reporting as a critique of existing public (mainstream) and counterpublic (alternative) discourses whose singular ideological approach to the reporting of news has historically ignored the lived experiences of intersectionality marginalized peoples, such as Black and of color women, femme, and queer folks. Through speaking to the heterogeneity within an identity group, pragmatically relaying the lived realities of marginalized peoples, centering Black women, femmes, and queer folks in their reporting, giving a systemic analysis of news events, and bringing their own lived experiences into their reporting,

these news creators actively draw on Black feminist practices as a way to decenter any singular community in their reporting. Further, mirroring critiques from journalism scholars such as Lewis Raven Wallace (2019) and David Mindich (2000), these practices highlight the potential harms of news objectivity in revealing how it helps sustain hegemonic, white heteronormative perspectives in reporting. These fusing of journalistic praxis and a Black feminist praxis illustrate how journalism can be more inclusive in its news selection and gatekeeping practices, bringing us closer to what Gans (2011) terms ‘multiperspectival’ news, which speaks from a ‘bottom up’ perspective. By entering multiple identities in their news-making practices, uplifting values that protect and actively try not to harm any marginalized peoples, and actively incorporating ethics of community accountability into their gatekeeping practices, intersectional news praxis outlines a new model of ethical and inclusive journalistic practices. A Black feminist praxis of journalism also centers on community accountability and promotes gatekeeping practices that foster trust with the communities they speak to. Interlocutors often used the affordances of the internet and new media to accurately incorporate and reflect their intersectional audiences’ concerns, cares, and lived realities in their reporting.

However, despite the neoliberal entrepreneurial spirit of these news creators, the logic of capital and political economy interact with historical racism and sexism in online production in new and distinct ways (Christian et al., 2020; McMillan Cottom, 2020). Black feminist news creators face several barriers to monetizing their work through paywalls and advertising, in part, due to the value-based nature of their work as well as the racist and sexist assumptions of those with the economic and social capital to amplify their work and the value-driven nature of their news praxis. As a result, these news creators often find new ways to build capital and imagine value, often rooted in a Black feminist ethos of community accountability, mirroring Christian et al.(2020) assertion of the value of community in spreading intersectional work online.

While the detailed description of news praxis offered by my interlocutor throughout this chapter offers a generative foundation for thinking about the overlap of news and Black feminism, these findings are based on what news creators said they did but do not show us the production of Black feminist journalism in practice (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Robinson & Metzler, 2016). Thus, in the next chapter, I take a

deeper dive into Black feminist news production through an ethnography with one specific news outlet:

The TRiiBe.

CHAPTER 3

A Black Feminist New Production Praxis

The Pool Players.

Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

-“ We Real Cool,” Gwendolyn Brooks

“The development of self-defined Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities, is a vital component in the war for Black liberation,” - Audre Lorde. Black folks don’t get humanized in any type of way, and that’s our role as journalists is to humanize the blacks’ story because no one else is going to do that. Black people are reacting to a system that was set up against them from the beginning...So there’s nothing left for us to do but to tell our own story. -Tiffany Walden, *The TRiiBE* Editor-in-Chief

* Editorial Meeting August 5th, 2020:

The meeting starts slowly as the team filters into the zoom room. Meeting members include both of The TRiiBE’s co-founders Morgan and Tiffany, as well as the show’s producer Tonia and host, Rome J. Morgan immediately takes charge of the meeting, asking everyone about their various roles and responsibilities for their first broadcast tomorrow. Morgan tells me that they don’t really have a structure

or process for developing the show yet, “it always just feels like we’re diving off a cliff.” I take this to mean that production is both open and experimental at this stage — they bootstrap everything, get innovative, and make do with what they can.

Morgan tells me this first TRiiBE TV show will mainly focus on arts and culture, but they hope to launch a news show soon. She says they decided to create TRiiBE TV after noticing a lack of local and community news outlets on YouTube that produced original content. Thus, the goal of TRiiBE TV would be to create original, accessible content for social media, specifically on a platform that saw high engagement from young, Black people in their community. Focusing on arts and culture was also a way to show a side of Black Chicago outside of the violence often portrayed on the mainstream news.

They want to name the show “We Real Cool” as an homage to the poem by Black Chicago native and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks. They plan to talk to her estate tomorrow to find out if they can use the name. Morgan says they technically didn’t have to reach out for permission, but they did so out of respect for her family and for her legacy.

We move to a discussion of which current events stories to mention at the top of the show [a segment that will later be titled the Rome J. Report]. Morgan shared a video from Twitter of Chicagoans singing a version of Stevie Wonder’s “Happy Birthday,” but instead of “happy birthday Lori,” they sing “fuck your birthday Lori.” Everyone laughed and agreed the clip was entertaining.

The clip prompted a discussion of censorship: should “fuck you” be bleeped out? Rome said he thought they should leave the word in to give the viewers the full effect of the clip, especially given that social media is not beholden to the same FCC guidelines as broadcast. But Morgan wonders aloud if this will set a precedent when editing other segments. As a compromise, Tiffany suggests they bleep out the actual word but font the word fuck, so the audience has a full understanding of what was said. Tiffany comments that she would love to treat their show as a premium cable network and not censor themselves. Still, Morgan fears this may label their content as “adult,” leaving them to negotiate how they would later deal with more child-friendly programming. As a final point, Morgan remarks that mainstream news is constantly showing images traumatizing of black death and never feels the need to censor that content... so what would it mean for them, a Black community facing news outlet, to censor the word fuck.

...We also discuss a segment Rome is preparing on Chicago pro-Black and anti-racist protest music. They discuss using YouTube’s playlist feature to embed the songs within the episode. As Rome reads off his list of potential songs and artists, Morgan tells him he needs to put more Black women on the list.

Over the next ten months working with *The TRiiBE*, a digital news and media platform, and *TRiiBE TV*, *The TRiiBE*’s live streaming vertical,¹⁴ I would sit through many of these editorial and production meetings. As these meetings progressed, *The TRiiBE TV* team continued to negotiate what the digital production processes looks like for them as a small, independent news organization that explicitly aims to dismantle the trauma of mainstream news’ depictions of Black Chicago. Like in this initial meeting, concerns around the community, care, and the inclusion of Black women and femmes in reporting were continually infused into larger conversations about digital technology usages and practices, revealing a distinct Black feminist approach to creating digital news.

¹⁴A news vertical is a grouping of specific content by subject (i.e., technology, sports, business) or medium (i.e., broadcast, digital, print).

Building on my findings from Chapter 2, in this chapter I employ ethnographic methods of digital participant-observation and interviews to explore how one such Black feminist news outlet, *The TRiiBE*, developed a distinctly Black feminist approach to digital production. In other words, the findings in this chapter develop an understanding of Black feminist production based on the practices I observed my interlocutors engage in.

Since the turn of the century, several newsroom ethnographies have attempted to map the impact of digital technologies on newsroom gatekeeping, production, and workflow (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2004; Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Lawson-Borders, 2003; Nelson, 2018; Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Usher, 2014). As Singer (2008) argues, qualitative ethnography is particularly adept in the study of technological shifts in the newsroom, or “newsroom convergence,” because it allows journalism scholars to examine “not just causes or effects, not just products or practices, but also the processes that underlie them, the perceptions that drive and are driven by them, and the people who have always been at the heart of the journalistic enterprise” (p. 169). Thus, in this chapter, I draw on ethnographic field notes and interviews with select staff members to explicate the distinct ways digital technologies are employed to drive production at *The TRiiBE*. However, unlike many previous studies, which focus on traditional news outlets, especially those transitioning from traditional print or broadcast production to online production, this study focuses on a digital-native, independent news organization that employs digital technology to engage Black feminist practices in news production.

While working at *The TRiiBE*, I observed that the reporting on *The TRiiBE.com* and the production on *TRiiBE TV*, like Brooks’ poem, are firmly grounded in constructing narratives that center Black self-definition and agency. As Sociologist Eve Ewing suggests, “We Real Cool,” uses poetry to illustrate a self-definitional perspective of Chicago’s Black male youth. Ewing writes that Brooks “was passing a pool hall one afternoon and saw a group of young boys inside. She said, ‘Instead of asking myself, ‘Why aren’t they in school?’ I asked, ‘I wonder how they feel about themselves.’” It is this sort of question, with its attention to agency, self-definition, and community, that *The TRiiBE* often asks. *The TRiiBE* uses digital production to construct news that depicts Black Chicagoans in ways that are authentic to these communities. To do this, I argue *The TRiiBE*’s enacts reporting and production policies and

operationalizes digital technologies in distinct ways that espouse a Black feminist political orientation. I argue that *The TRiiBE* does this in three key ways: (1) engaging production practices and using the affordances of digital media to enact a Black feminist politics of care — both in an orientation towards individual self-care and an organization-wide orientation towards radical ethics of community care in reporting on Black communities; (2) Using the affordances of digital media to incorporate the voices and perspectives of Black women, femmes, and queer individuals into their reporting; and (3) Bootstrapping digital production as an expression of Black feminist self-definition and agency.

Defining the Research Site: *The TRiiBE*

The TRiiBE is a small, community-based digital news and culture outlet covering news and events impacting the Black Chicago community. *The TRiiBE* was founded in 2017 by friends Morgan Elise Johnson and Tiffany Walden. Tiffany grew up in the predominantly Black, working-class North Lawndale neighborhood on Chicago's Westside; Morgan was raised in Chicago's mostly Black and Hispanic North suburb but grew up attending predominantly white schools. The pair met as undergraduate students at Northwestern University. Despite their different upbringings, Johnson and Walden bonded over their interest in media-making from their distinct perspective of Black women. While still in college, they would often have long conversations about the news media's depictions of Black Chicago, with Morgan questioning the journalistic practices and news values Tiffany was learning about at Medill, Northwestern's Journalism School:

I'm like, "Well, why is the news so violent?" And [Tiffany]'s like, "Well, if it bleeds, it leads." And I'm like, "What? What? That is how journalists are crafting narratives? If it bleeds, it leads? Because we know it was going to get people's attention? We know that it's going to drive our ratings? Really?... Now the news was on our phones 24/7, and the news was on Facebook and in all of our social channels. I would be noticing Tiffany and my other friends scrolling through Facebook and whatnot to see if people who they knew had died. It would be a news article saying five people got shot on the west side of Chicago, and then Tiffany would be scrolling through to see on her Facebook feed if anybody knew this person if anybody's making any comments about knowing about the person who died. That's when I really realized that something very toxic is happening with the way that we consume news and journalists have the power to change this.

After gaining post-graduate work experience in different parts of the country, with Tiffany pursuing a career in journalism in Florida and Morgan pursuing a career in documentary film production in Michigan

and Washington, D.C., the pair decided to return to Chicago to work together to build their own news platform. Finally, at the end of 2016, after a year of freelance reporting, re-adjusting to the city, and failed partnerships with Black men who refused to give them ownership over their content, Tiffany and Morgan decided to build a web page. Morgan picked the name The Tribe, which for financial reasons that will be explained later, became *The TRiiBE* to denote just that: a tribe, a community. As Morgan said, “We want community. We’re trying to build community. We’re going to call it *The TRiiBE*.”

I first became aware of *The TRiiBE* in 2019 while in the process of identifying Black feminist news outlets for my graduate research. While *The TRiiBE*’s reporting undeniably focused on the Black community in Chicago, their articles also paid particular attention to the dynamics of gender and sexuality within this community. I contacted Morgan via an email introduction by my graduate advisor, who knew Morgan from his research with Chicago media-makers. I invited and subsequently interviewed Morgan to participate in my study on Black feminist journalism. However, I realized the critical intervention an ethnographic approach could offer in more deeply understanding Black feminist and intersectional news production practices. I immediately thought of *The TRiiBE* as a partner for this project due to our co-location in Chicago.

In July of 2020, I emailed Morgan to see if she would be open to me working with *The TRiiBE* and observing their production and editorial processes as a part of my dissertation work. I offered to contribute unpaid production support to the organization in exchange for this access, drawing on my own five years of experience working for a mainstream national news organization. In our correspondence, Morgan let me know that *The TRiiBE* was in the process of launching a digital news streaming vertical on YouTube called *TRiiBE TV* and agreed to let me observe and assist with production as a participant-observant as a part of my research. I subsequently attended my first *TRiiBE TV* editorial meeting on the video conferencing platform Zoom ahead of the first episode of their flagship arts and culture news show, “We Real Chicago,” a month later in August 2020.

Over the next ten months, I would continue to attend these weekly pitch meetings, in addition to weekly production run-throughs and broadcasts on Streamyard, a digital live streaming studio that allows multiple individuals who are not co-located to co-produce a live stream. Sitting “backstage” on

Streamyard, a feature of the platform that lets everyone involved in the live streaming broadcast interact without being on-screen, allowed me to observe the team members' interactions with each other during the show through body language and the messages using the platform's private messaging feature. I also communicated with the team through *The TRiiBE* TV channel on *The TRiiBE*'s Slack, a business messaging platform. During these meetings, I observed interactions between the staff and wrote field notes regarding my observations and experiences. I also participated in these meetings as a production assistant and researcher — pitching stories, brainstorming show ideas, giving feedback, writing show recaps for *The TRiiBE* website, and offering support on production and research tasks as assigned.

TRiiBE TV is produced by a small subset of *The TRiiBE*'s overall staff. *TRiiBE TV* staff consisted of four staff members: Morgan (and sometimes Tiffany) is the show's Executive Producer, providing big-picture feedback on the show's structure and editorial vision. Tonia is the show's producer, overseeing the individual show segments and interviews. Robin is the show's graphic designer, producing the graphical elements for the live stream. Finally, Rome J. is the show's host.

After two months of working with *TRiiBE TV*, I realized that to understand the full scope of *The TRiiBE*'s production practices, I would also need access to moments where I could observe the organization's larger production and editorial practices. When I expressed my desire for more access to Morgan, she and Tiffany began allowing me to attend their daily team meetings on Mondays, when the staff pitched new ideas and projects. In addition, Tiffany added me to two more of *The TRiiBE*'s slack channels: "All Team," which is for full staff communication, and "The Culture," where Tiffany posted the site's newest content. During these staff meetings, I was also invited to assist on special projects, including *The TRiiBE*'s Black Summer Uprisings Package, a multi-media package on the uprising across the city in the summer of 2020, and *The TRiiBE Guide*, an annual themed magazine that *The TRiiBE* releases annually. Morgan also invited me to sit in on workshops offered to the staff on production and reporting practices given by Morgan and Tiffany. I acted as a participant-observant during these interactions, taking notes on my experiences and observations and adding my thoughts and opinions when appropriate. In addition, after approximately eight months of this participant-observant work, I

conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with key staff members, in which I used my field notes to frame questions about editorial and production processes.

In the following sections, I outline the three key ways I observed *The TRiiBE* espouse a Black feminist praxis in their reporting and production processes. In the first section, I discuss how *The TRiiBE* staff applied a Black feminist politics of care both within the organization and in their written and production reporting when telling stories centered on Black and brown communities. In the second section, I illustrate how in their leadership, Tiffany and Morgan actively push for the inclusion of Black women, femmes, and queer individuals in their reporting and production of stories about the Black community as an intentional intersectional reporting practice. In the third section, I discuss *The TRiiBE*'s development of digital production practices as stemming from a Black feminist orientation towards bootstrapping digital production. However, I also note the distinct limitation of these production processes, which are reliant on third-party platforms. I conclude this chapter by considering my overall findings and my methodological limitations.

Constructing News Through A Black feminist Politic of Care

Organizational Self-Care as a Politics of Resistance

TRiiBE Staff Daily Check-in, October 26th, 2020:

I open my computer and search frantically through the Slack chat logs and old emails to find The TRiiBE zoom meeting link. While I have been working with TRiiBE TV for a few months now, this is the first time I have been invited to join in the full staff's Monday check-in meeting. After working with the organization for some time, I realized that if I were going to understand more about how their production processes worked, I would need to observe the full scope of their editorial and distribution process outside of just TRiiBE TV. After bringing my concerns to Morgan, the co-Founder and Creative Director of The TRiiBE, my main contact at the organization thus far, she and Tiffany, the organization's other co-Founder and EIC, decided to let me sit in on their daily team meetings once a week, every Monday.

Morgan starts the meeting off with a check-in to see how everyone is doing. It makes sense. Over the past few months, this all-Black staff of journalists covered the disproportionately harsh impact of a global pandemic on Black and Brown communities in Chicago and the continual uprising across the city in response to Police murders of unarmed Black men and women across the country. While The TRiiBE staff are reporters, they are also a part of and among the Black Chicago community — they are not exempt from the turbulent conditions they are reporting on.

Morgan begins the check-in. She says that she feels pretty down and tired today, especially given the weather — today is the first snow of the season. She passed it to another staff member, who says he is tired and having a slow start to his Monday.

Next, another staff member admits they had a particularly hard weekend after finding out multiple family members had been diagnosed with COVID-19. As they speak, tears start to well up in her eyes as the harsh realities of the pandemic and what it could mean for their family settles on them. They confess to everyone that they had originally planned to message this information to the rest of the staff in Slack but ultimately are glad Morgan had opened up space in the check-in — it gave them the room to sit with their feelings and experience an emotional release. They had not yet had the opportunity to cry about the situation. Tiffany asks this staff member if they want to take the rest of the day off to process what they are going through, but they decline, noting that “writing is my escape.”

In an attempt to support the staff member, Morgan says that a family friend of hers had also recently been diagnosed with COVID, noting how if many of us were unaffected in the first wave, this second wave might be when we all see the virus hitting more close to home. She told the staff to take all the necessary precautions to protect ourselves during this time or those who have the privilege to.

The check-in continues. Rome says he recently gave up a regular job out of precaution around COVID. Morgan said she was happy about the precaution Rome was taking. Tonia talks about feeling emotionally drained after receiving some hard news over the weekend and finding a balance between looking at the news and not looking at the news to avoid feeling overwhelmed. A third staff member discusses feelings of personal exhaustion from attending, watching, and covering the uprisings all summer. Each disclosure is met with words of reassurance, support, and gratitude from Tiffany and Morgan.

Check-ins like these became a regular occurrence at *The TRiiBE*'s weekly pitch meetings. Having previously worked at a large national news outlet, I found this initial check-in session striking — I had never seen such a welcoming of raw emotional processing offered to employees. More than just telling employees to take care of themselves, this organizational-wide practice of conducting regular check-ins created a space of emotional healing in which staff members could process their simultaneous positionality as both journalists reporting on trauma and Black people experiencing this same trauma. I suggest these check-ins articulate an orientation to self-care. However, unlike popular neoliberal conceptions of self-care that focus on maintaining one's appearance and taking sole responsibility for one's well-being, this expression of self-care pulls on a Black feminist tradition of radical self-love and healing (Michaeli, 2017).

Black feminists scholars such as Audre Lorde (1984), June Jordan (1995), and Patricia Hill Collins (2005) have long advocated for a Black feminist politic based on care and love both towards oneself and one's community. Collins (1989) posits an ethics of caring that centers on expressiveness, empathy, and emotion are foundational to Black feminist epistemic and knowledge-creation. In other words, engaging a Black feminist praxis would approach knowledge creation, in this case through reporting and production, with the acknowledgment that both emotion and empathy are valid lenses through which to frame news. This politics of care acts as a form of political resistance against oppressive hegemonic systems

of domination that actively repress Black women's expressions of pleasure and love towards other Black people, Black women, and Black Children (Collins, 2019; Lorde, 1984; Jordan, 2003; Morgan, 2015).

Jennifer Nash (2013) identifies two fundamental conceptions of Black feminist care practices. The first is a politics of love-oriented towards the self as a form of self-care and self-definition that compels Black women to fully embrace themselves as a form of political resistance (Nash, 2013). The second is the formation of political communities rooted in a radical ethic of care, in which a community is formed by a shared affect of care towards one another. In the following sections, I outline how *The TRiiBE* implemented both of these Black feminist practices of care: First, *The TRiiBE*'s organizational practices exhibited a Black feminist ethics of self-care through check-ins, concentrating on mental health, and leaning away from stories of trauma to help their all-Black staff to resist oppressive forces inevitably brought about for Black journalists reporting on Black trauma. Second, *The TRiiBE*'s reporting and production practices express a radical ethics of care towards the Black communities they reported on by approaching their stories with empathy and actively paying attention to the questions, language, and framing used to tell these stories.

Check-ins and the Politics of Organizational Healing

One of the many ways organizational self-care was enacted at *The TRiiBE* was through regular check-ins, such as the one described above. Sociologist Jennifer Richardson (2018) suggests Black women and other marginalized students can use healing circles to address the symbolic impact of media violence. Richardson positions the healing circles as both an individual form of release and a collective act of political resistance that uses pleasure, writing:

In order to produce true social transformation and strive for a radical notion of collective freedom, we must pay attention not only to our political/ideological positions, but also to our individual and collective practices of self-care and healing—practices that are themselves deeply political. Pedagogies and praxis in the Black feminist tradition that are accountable to oppressed communities must take a serious look at healing, balance, and self-care as powerful forms of resistance to hegemonic cultures and structures. (p.282).

In this way, the healing circle can be framed as a Black feminist praxis that engages the community and personal accountability to collectively and actively resist trauma.

While not explicitly a healing circle, I argue the check-ins practiced at *The TRiiBE* can be positioned as part of a larger Black feminist “healing politic” that Richardson argues for. Drawing on Joan Morgan’s *Pleasure Politics* (2015), Richardson defines “healing politics” as a Black feminist praxis that utilizes methods of affirming such as pleasure and self-care to resist hegemonic oppression. By creating a space to acknowledge in which employees can affirm their emotions, *The TRiiBE* creates a production environment that privileges healing politics and self-care-oriented practices of love-politics as a way to resist the traumatic forces that necessarily weigh on Black community journalists. Thus, the impact of giving employees a space to cry and process their work both as individuals and a collective represents a Black feminist political position that moves self-care away from the material and towards the embrace of the self as a means of resistance.

Tiffany and Morgan also invited *The TRiiBE* staff to check in with one another after particularly emotional or traumatic events. As the trial of Derick Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer who murdered George Floyd, came to a close, Tiffany messaged the team, telling everyone to “take care of themselves” and telling them that they would all check in with each other later [See image 1]. In follow-up messages, Tiffany revealed her own emotional reactions to the trial’s guilty verdict, opening up a space for the rest of the staff to do the same. Connecting these practices of healing and self-care to production practices. As Morgan later told me:

[Checking in] is so important. And a lot of it is giving ourselves permission to feel. We are taking on some of the hardest questions that society has to deal with on a daily basis and putting ourselves sometimes in harmful environments. I attended some protests last year and brought my nephew with me. And there was a point where we had to get out, because I was like, ” Well, I don’t want anything to happen to my nephew.” But all of that takes a mental toll on me. And I think as journalists we’re told or we’re conditioned to just believe that we have to be there; it’s our duty to be there. And if we’re not there, we’re not doing our jobs, we’ve failed in some way. But we need to just give ourselves some space to feel things. All of these social issues affect us too...Some of it is just guiding by if we’re having our Zoom meetings and we’re talking, you could hear it in people’s voices of just the dilapidation in their voice. And sometimes it comes through in the stories, missing deadlines or writing and words can have energy too. And there’ll be a shift and it’ll be getting the best stories out of that right now. like, ”I’m not.”

In this way, because Tiffany and Morgan, as Black women, are attentive to the potential traumas their staff faces in the world, they actively invite them to engage in healing and self-care within *The TRiiBE*. In this way, through its Black feminist praxis, *The TRiiBE* is not only a site of work but a site of care for its employees. As Morgan explains, her staff needs to be at their mental and emotional peak for production to occur. Through these check-ins, Morgan and Tiffany facilitate a space where this necessary emotional healing can manifest itself.



Image 1:

Tiffany & Morgan guide their staff in response to the trial of Derek Chauvin trial verdict

Tonia also reflected on this connection between self-care and organizational values in our interview, citing these check-in practices as one of the key things that distinguished her experience at *The TRiiBE* from previous experiences as a journalist:

I feel like I have bad boss PTSD sometimes. So the people that I worked for at the Herald weren't the best bosses, and something that really is good to me about Tiffany and Morgan is they're so encouraging, and they actually really care about your mental health and wellbeing. And I don't feel like I've ever really gotten that from anybody that I worked with before that was in a managerial position....I think it's been helpful because I'm like they're not ignoring what we're all going through, and they're talking about it in a way that can help us. Like just giving us the floor to talk through things, if we want to talk...I've never worked somewhere where people have really cared that deeply about my mental health....It's different when it's your people because it's a thing we don't have to necessarily explain because we all know it. So I just think it is good to have that, and it's hard to write these stories sometimes with all of what's going on and not do a check-in with yourself to see if you're okay.

Tonia also noted that many of her prior negative newsroom experiences occurred while working under other Black women supervisors. So what was the difference between these previous experiences working for Black women and her current experience working under Tiffany and Morgan? This was the first time she had worked for Black women who had autonomy in running their newsroom. In Tonia's previous work experiences, the Black women she worked for were still enacting policies within large corporations, often topped by white men. In this way, Tiffany and Morgan's distinct approach to newsroom organization as Black women through a politics of self-care and healing allowed Tonia to engage with reporting and production in a way that strengthened her as a person, as well as her work and skills as a journalist.

Building Mental Health into Production Schedules

These care practices also extended into the news production process. For instance, during the week of the United States 2020 Presidential election Tiffany and Morgan gave their staff off, calling it a "mental health week." The possibility of the re-election of Donald Trump was emotionally overwhelming for many Americans, especially those from marginalized communities who felt personally threatened and attacked by the President's rhetoric and policies. Thus, this mental health week was introduced to allow their staff to step away from this potentially traumatic news and engage in self-care and healing.

In our interviews, Tiffany and Morgan recognized this suspended production schedule, as a form of care, stops their employees from getting burnt out. In talking about the importance of these mental health policies, Morgan noted, "we just have to make a choice to rest." Similarly, Tiffany said, "We don't want to see our staff burnt out because it's terrible, and it's hard to bounce back from that. I still haven't bounced back from the burnout that I felt or the trauma that came with not having enough money to sustain myself. So yeah, we're very big on making sure that everybody is okay because you can't work if you're not mentally okay."

The TRiiBE's digital nature is, in part, what allows for this policy. Unlike a regularly scheduled news broadcast or daily newspaper, the online production practices *The TRiiBE* employs allow them the flexibility *not* to produce news. The change in the temporality of news production in a digital news environment enables *The TRiiBE's* production schedule to ebb and flow as articles are assigned, filed, and finished. Further, even though *TRiiBE TV* is a weekly scheduled show, the independent nature of the

broadcast means they are not beholden to a particular production schedule. During my research with *The TRiiBE*, *TRiiBE TV* broadcasts were suspended twice—the show ceased production first in January 2021 to reflect on the first five months of production and rebrand and refocus the show, and then again in May 2020¹ to redirect all of the team’s energy towards *The TRiiBE Guide*. These breaks from production ensured the small team *TRiiBE TV* depended on was not overworked or overburdened. As Morgan commented, “We need a break. And these social issues are still going to be here when we get back.” This view of digital production as allowing one to “step away” from work lies in direct contrast to other digital newsroom ethnographies, which have found the transition to digital technologies in traditional newsrooms often leads to an increase in the “speed of work” (Brannon, 2008; Quandt, 2008). As these scholars note, in other newsrooms, the disappearing nature of deadlines due to online production, often left journalists hyper-aware of the immediacy of their work: articles, especially on breaking news stories, could be published at any time. However, through invoking a Black feminist politics of care, Tiffany and Morgan expose how digital media production not only affords immediacy but can also afford time and rest when necessary.

Leaning Away from Trauma

Finally, one last way organizational self-care manifested itself at *The TRiiBE* was in how they instructed their staff to deal with images of Black and brown death and trauma. As noted in Chapter 2, Black feminist news creators often view trauma, or rather, not inflicting trauma on marginalized communities as a key news principle in assessing newsworthiness; this was undoubtedly true for *The TRiiBE*. As Morgan said at our first meeting, mainstream news often airs images of Black and brown death and trauma in ways that feel indiscriminate. Further, she noted that individual journalists reporting on these incidents are often expected to repeatedly watch these videos to inform their reporting, giving little consideration to the impact of viewing these videos on Black reporters. Morgan, however, did not want *The TRiiBE* staff to be similarly desensitized to watching and reporting on Black and Brown trauma. On March 29th, 2021, 13-year-old Adam Toledo was shot and killed by Chicago Police Officers in an alleyway of Little Village, a predominantly Mexican community on Chicago’s Southwest Side. Initial police reports and comments by Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot suggested that Police shot Toledo after he

engaged them in an “armed confrontation” (Garcia, 2021, Grossman, 2021). However, police body-worn camera footage of the incident subsequently showed Toledo was facing the officers with his hands raised when he was shot. When the video of the shooting was released, Tiffany messaged the staff, letting everyone know that the video had been released but that they should not feel compelled to watch it [See image 2]. This note from Tiffany again reflects an expression of care towards her staff and organization.

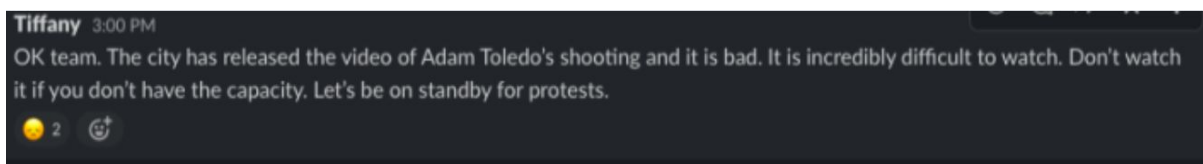


Image 2:

Tiffany’s Slack Message to the team after CPD released the video of Adame Toledo Shooting

In giving the team the explicit option of not watching the video, Tiffany allowed them not to experience trauma. Tiffany allowed them to put themselves and their healing above traditional journalistic practices.

Reporting Through A Radical Ethics of Care

Interviewing through care

[EXCERPT] Interviewing Workshop February 19th, 2021:

I saw in Slack that they were holding an interviewing workshop for their writers and thought it would be a good opportunity to learn more about their approach to interviewing guests.

*I enter the zoom meeting right at 12:30 when the meeting is supposed to start. A screen shared google slide on the screen reads: **Interviewing the Master Class: How to get the most out of an interview.***

Morgan says she wanted to do a class on interviewing because documentary and video interviewing require different techniques than traditional print interviewing that she wants the editorial staff to get acquainted with. She adds, “with these platforms like Twitter and Instagram, the algorithms are promoting video interviews more,” so she wants to focus on video components for the print profiles as well.

Morgan starts by saying, “we are in this age of trying to build trust with the Black community, and want to be aware that each interviewee will have a different relationship with the media.” For this reason, at the outset of each interview, Morgan tells us it’s important to get a sense of a guests’ media literacy and let them know who The TRiiBE is, especially as a Black-centered news publication. Morgan instructs them to start interviews by getting a sense of how guests get their news information and what sources of news they rely on to inform their communication style. This will allow them to get a sense of the guest’s understanding of what the interview will be like. Morgan says it is important for the staff to make clear to each guest why the interview is important for the larger community. She also notes the importance of being clear on their intentions for the final interview —letting interviewees know how and where the piece will be distributed.

Dovetailing this, Morgan emphasizes the importance of building trust with each interviewee. She recalls an experience a few years ago when she produced a documentary for The TRiiBE about the trauma of gun violence in the Chicago community. Before she started filming the interviews, she made a point to build trust with the interviewees so they would feel comfortable opening up about these very personal and emotional experiences with her.

Morgan also emphasizes the importance of emotionality in the video, noting “emotion needs to show up in an interview in order for it to read.”

Both Morgan and Tiffany tell us it’s important to find creative ways to engage people. For instance, Tiffany recalls when she and Morgan had Black interviewees read the names of rock bands as a fun opener for an interview about a rock festival taking place in this predominantly Black community. They did this to make interviewees feel comfortable and build trust with them before asking them harder, more serious questions. The pair recalled that when they first started approaching people for interviews, no one wanted to talk to them because they said, “You with the news? nah, they lookin’ for me.” This fun opener was a way to relax people and ease them into the interview. Morgan says she used to tell people, “I will edit this interview, and I won’t have you lookin’ crazy.” Tiffany says it also speaks to the importance of meeting people where they are in terms of voice and language. Talk to people in the way they feel comfortable and the importance of not code-switching or using “professional white language.”

To end the workshop, we engage in a critical viewing activity. Morgan asks us if we had seen Gayle King’s interview with Azriel Cleary and Joycelyn Savage as a part of CBS News’ reporting on the abuse allegations against R.Kelly. At the time, Clary and Savage were both living with and dating Kelly, despite objections from their parents, who claimed they were victims of Kelly’s predatory nature, having started relationships with him when they were minors. We all watch the clip together on Zoom.

After watching the interview, Morgan asks, “Now thinking about what we just learned in storytelling and interview... well, I have my thoughts on Gayle and how she conducted herself... but what would you want to get out of the interview if we did it as The TRiiBE?”

Matt says that he would have tried to find out more about what happened in the house and what their experience was like on the inside — is there anything criminal going on? Tiffany said asking these questions may also require researching the law around abuse in Illinois to determine if any laws were broken.

“In terms of setting the mood, Tonia, what would you do?” asks Morgan. Tonia responds by saying she would be inclined to make the women comfortable by asking them light questions about R. Kelly first, such as why they love him or their first dates with him, because they looked defensive the whole interview. Tonia’s comment acknowledges that they love him and that less judgemental questions may allow them to open up more. Morgan says that the space felt like a studio (it was a hotel), but as a documentarian, her practice is to do interviews in small places with as little as possible because big lights can make them uncomfortable. Morgan also mentions it was reported that during the interview, R. Kelly was close enough to hear what was said and would cough or make noises in response to their answers, “I know it took a lot for them to land that interview but you’ve got to try to mitigate that circumstance” says Morgan.

Tonia comments that when the interview slowed down for a moment, Azriel burst into tears, which she says changed the interview tone. Adding to this, Morgan says she thinks Gayle’s tone needed to be softer, especially speaking to women who are victims, so you want to be softer, relatable, and listen to them. To her, Gayle came off as judgemental. “If they are already taking the question the wrong way, it’s the wrong time to ask the question,” Morgan comments. Later she adds, “When she started crying, show some empathy and get her some tissue... Oprah would have given her some tissue,” Tiffany responds. Rome laughs. Morgan also notes they can tell people it’s okay to take a break and give people agency to help them be comfortable...

I find this comparison to traditional mainstream news is fascinating. It highlights the limitations of broadcast news’ focus on sensationalism and time constraints, as highlighted by the idea of what we didn’t

see or didn't have time to see. Can you prioritize sensation, stick to a broadcast time structure, and still make room for empathy in reporting? As a counter, what TRiiBE seems to do is emphasize taking care of their interviewees both in terms of taking care of their emotions and how they portray and distribute their stories.

Throughout the interviewing workshop, Tiffany and Morgan continually emphasized the importance of building trust with the Black people and communities they report. Tiffany and Morgan encourage their reporters to build this trust through expressions of care: building a rapport and familiarity with interviewees, showing empathy for whatever traumas the interviewee has experienced, and expressing concern for how the individual will be represented once the interview is released. These expressions of care are fundamental to how *The TRiiBE* as an organization trains its reporters to think about journalistic practices. To be a good journalist, you must approach the people and communities you report on through a framework of care that centers on empathy and emotion. If care is not present, trust can not be built, and if trust can not be built, you can not tell the full story. This care can also be read as an act of reciprocity — to get interviewees to entrust them with their stories, they promise to treat their stories with care. In this way, this conception of trust as care parallels recent calls from journalism scholars such as Rachel Moran and Efrat Nechushtai (2022), who conceptualize trust as a key component through which reporting is made possible. However, in this case, the desire to build trust does not stem not only from the desire to engage in news work but also the desire to provide for a community.

It is this lack of care in traditional mainstream news, and specifically King's interview with Clary and Savage, that *The TRiiBE* positions their production practices against. The majority of the reporter's critiques of the King's interview center on her seeming lack of empathy for these women, who are arguably under the control of a sexual predator. The fact that King did not try to find out more about the women's perspective of Kelly, offer them tissues when they cried, or empower them with the agency to prioritize their comfort all point to an observed lack of care for the women.¹⁵ This interview exemplified the absence of care which *The TRiiBE* aims not to replicate in their reporting. In this way, reporting on the

¹⁵It is important to note here that due to the time constraints of broadcast news, interviews such as these are often heavily edited to fit specific time parameters. This leaves open the possibility that potential moments of care were cut for more sensational moments.

community through an affect of care is a foundational part of *The TRiiBE*'s approach to production and reporting.

In our interview, Tiffany connected this community care-oriented approach to reporting to a Black woman politics of care. When I asked Tiffany what unique perspective she thought she and Morgan brought to *The TRiiBE* as Black women, she noted two distinctions — that they are a Black community focused outlet in a white, male dominated industry, and that compared to Black men, their work is more rooted in community care. As Tiffany commented:

Black men aren't necessarily trying to do things for the community. Black men are very much about uplifting themselves and themselves being the person with power because black men are stripped for power in so many different places. So everything about their success is about them building power for themselves first.

Comparatively, she told me:

[Black women] had to take care of our communities our whole lives. We're born into taking care of our community. My entire community growing up were women. I was raised by black women. My entire neighborhood was matriarchal...The moms were still the base. They were the foundation of my neighborhood and my life, and everything. So from Africa, pre-colonial days to now, it's just, women are, have been, we've always taken care of our community and nurtured our community and put our community first because everything about us is that we want to see the culture as a whole thrive. And we want to see Black people as a whole win...For us, we can't be successful solo. You're not successful if your neighbor is still struggling and not successful if the people in your community is struggling. *The TRiiBE* can't be successful if our writers are struggling. So it's like, how do we work to make sure that our writers aren't struggling? Do you understand how to do taxes? Do you understand how to organize your workday so that you're productive.

In this way, against the neoliberal logic of self-uplift Tiffany sees permeating Black male communities, Tiffany places her political orientation as a Black woman as one rooted in care — care for her community that she reports on, care for her community children, care for her staff. Echoing Tiffany's statements, Collins (2019) suggests within Black communities, compared to Black men, Black women's political and advocacy work has always been community-oriented — centered on community care and mothering. Collins writes:

In a world that devalues Black lives, to defend the lives of Black youth and aim to give those lives hope is an act of radical resistance. In this sense, contemporary expressions

of mother work that invoke these deep cultural roots bring a more politicized notion of care to political projects (Collins, 2019, p. 168).

Tiffany's particular orientation towards community care in reporting stems directly from this Black feminist standpoint. As Tiffany notes, her orientation towards centering the community is not just rooted in her Blackness, it is rooted in her Black womanness and epistemic that values collective care and advocacy. In the following sections, I illustrate how this Black feminist orientation towards community care manifested itself in *The TRiiBE*'s reporting work and *TRiiBE TV*'s production practices.

Reporting through care

In the alleyway facing 24th Street between Spaulding and Sawyer avenues lies a memorial embellished with veladoras next to some lilies and white balloons tied to a pole. Across the street is Farragut Career Academy High School. Surrounding it all is the Little Village neighborhood, otherwise known as La Villita.

On April 5, the Little Village neighborhood gathered in a vigil to collectively mourn and remember the life of 13-year-old Adam Toledo. Through tears, community leaders spoke of the pain of losing a loved one to police violence again. One speaker reminded the community of the 43 college students in Mexico who went missing at the behest of Mexican police six years ago. Toledo, too, was a student. He was a seventh grader at Gary Elementary.

"[La Villita] is like a family," said 23-year-old Kristian Armendariz, a resident of Little Village and member of the Little Village Community Council. "Every neighbor looks out for each other in any way they can. That's how I feel with Adam. This happened in my neighborhood. Man, that's family. That could have been my 13-year-old cousin." (Garcia, 2021)

The above excerpt is from *The TRiiBE* freelance journalist Kelly Garcia's reporting on the shooting of Adam Toledo. To me, what's most striking is the lens of empathy through which Garcia approaches the story. Instead of framing the story around the shooting itself or the release of the video, Garcia's story focuses on the community-based healing actions and activism in response to the shooting. Garcia starts the article by speaking of the care from Adam's community in the wake of his shooting, outlining the many ways official institutions and mainstream news outlets have shifted blame for the murder away from CPD. She comments that Mayor Lightfoot's claim that she would find and hold the adult who "putting a gun into the hands" of Toledo responsible for the shooting "actively shifts responsibility and blame away from the police officer that killed him." In this way, Garcia's reporting centers on the emotional healing of the community while actively questioning the systems of power responsible for the shooting

and calling out the ways they are aiming to evade accountability. This orientation towards an ethics of care in reporting was highly visible during my time with *The TRiiBE* as the team worked towards producing two large editorial projects: The Black Summer Uprisings Package and *The TRiiBE Guide*.

“The Black Summer Uprisings” package published on *The TRiiBE*’s website in December 2020 consisted of a collection of articles, a graphic map, and an interactive timeline entitled “The People Rose Up: A Black Summer 2020 Timeline,” that examined the series of anti-Black racism protests in Chicago over the summer of 2020. The project had many goals, among them were to provide important information and takeaways to the public about the uprisings, create specificity and distinction around the various organizations involved in the protest actions, and archive what took place for future generations. Talking about this last goal in our interview Morgan said:

I’m always thinking about my granddaughter, my great-granddaughter, and my great-great-granddaughter. What do they need to know? When you look at anybody else’s coverage, you go to the Tribune or whatever, it’s going to be difficult to search for the narratives to get a full picture of what last summer was. You’re going to see a bunch of individual articles, and some of them, did some interesting things like dating the articles a certain way..but I just didn’t see anything comprehensive...So, we really felt like this needed to be a package. Like one place people could go when they’re just looking back on this moment in history and [thinking], what happened Summer 2020. There’s one place that they can go to get a big picture idea of what happened in summer 2020.

Embedded in each of these stated goals is a sense of care: care towards the community in providing necessary information, care towards activists in honoring their specific platforms instead of reporting on them through a general lens, and care towards the future generations that will need this information.

In their approach to *The TRiiBE Guide*, an annual themed print magazine *The TRiiBE* publishes, the team similarly exhibited care in how they chose to report on stories and what they chose not to report. “The 2021 TRiiBE Guide” theme was originally centered on Black and Indigenous Chicago history. This theme was selected because, as Morgan explained, “it is just where we are.” I took this to mean it reflected this moment in which the U.S. is reckoning with their racist past of American Chattel slavery and Native genocide — though she never fully elaborated. The Guide, published on Juneteenth 2021, features landmark maps from different periods, profiles of historical figures, timelines of historic events, and a syllabus of Black and Indigenous books and films. To ensure their editorial reflected an accurate historical

depiction of Black and brown Chicago, *The TRiiBE* created an advisory board consisting of Black, brown, and Indigenous historians, archivists, and community leaders. Like Black feminist gatekeeping discussed in Chapter 2, I suggest that this decision to let this advisory board lead their editorial direction manifests a Black feminist ethics of care through community accountability. In this instance, Tiffany and Morgan held themselves accountable to the communities and the historical narratives they were attempting to report on by leaning on elders and advisors from within these communities to make sure they were telling these stories accurately and with the respect and care they deserved.

This expression of community accountability was also demonstrated through Tiffany's editorial decision to shift the guide's focus from Black and Indigenous Chicago history to Black Chicago history, with an acknowledgment of Indigenous history. *The TRiiBE*'s full-time staff and regular freelancers are almost all Black, leaving a limited knowledge of Indigenous culture and history. To make up for this, *The TRiiBE* team tried tirelessly to recruit Indigenous reporters, historians, and experts to write and consult for the publication. These attempts were mostly unsuccessful due to their own limited networks and the limited capacity of the Indigenous reporters they could not find to take on new projects. Tiffany was also concerned that their own research on Chicago's Indigenous history, from publicly accessible records and archives, mainly centered on colonial-focused war narratives, which she intentionally did not want to focus on. Engaging the news principle of *community impact*, Tiffany was concerned about the impact this focus on this violence would have on Indigenous communities and in perpetuating stereotypes that link Native communities to violence. Finally, after almost two months of searching, the team connected with a man named Jonathan, a member of Chicago's native Potawatomi tribe, who offered to help with the guide in a consultant capacity. However, after meeting with Johnathan, Tiffany realized that he could not provide enough information to fill the gaps in their archive and switched the guide's focus. In the team meeting following this decision, Tiffany said she didn't think it was possible to tell enough Indigenous history in the time they had left and give justice to their stories, and she didn't want to mislead people into thinking the guide was fully representative of Indigenous history when it wasn't. In Tiffany's editorial decision to not speak on an Indigenous history whose stories she could not confidently honor, she demonstrated care

through community accountability. However, in this instance, accountability meant not speaking for or over those within the community whom she did not have the proper tools to speak for.

Producing through care on TRiiBE TV

Constructing Questions Through care.

In the production of *TRiiBE TV*, Tiffany and Morgan also exhibited an orientation toward care in their role as executive producers. This was often made visible by how interview questions were crafted and framed. During the production run-through of an episode of *TRiiBE TV* dedicated to the music and legacy of rapper DMX, who was in a coma after a reported heart attack,¹⁶ Tiffany attempted to produce the segment around DMX's addiction in a way that centered on empathy. After listening to the initial script read of the segment, Tiffany's first note to Rome was to describe DMX's voice and lyrics in his introduction to the topic, emphasizing their distinctiveness. As Tiffany talked about the fact that DMX was without oxygen for 30 minutes, I could hear the emotion well-up her voice. She was visibly pained by the thought of this potential loss of life. As she returned to giving Rome notes, Tiffany said she wanted him to approach this opening segment like they did with the passing of Herb Kent a few weeks earlier — she wanted him to keep it personal. In this way, as Tiffany thought about how to produce the segment, her focus was always on how to humanize DMX. He was a rapper and a celebrity, but also a human being. Thus, by focusing on his voice and the personal aspects of who he was, Tiffany continually centered the conversation around holding empathy for a person who lost their life. As she made clear to Rome, she did not want to discuss his condition with detached objectivity — she wanted to make it personal. In other words, like many of the Black feminist journalists discussed in Chapter 2, she removed objectivity to reveal humanity.

Meanwhile, Tonia asked for guidance on how to phrase questions about the rapper's addiction. Tiffany responded, "I don't want to do too much about the addiction; I don't want to frame it around that." Instead, Tiffany said she wanted to focus the conversations on the free concert pop-up concerts the rapper gave in cities across the U.S. and what it says about him that he was so connected to the

¹⁶Early reports suggested the heart attack may have been brought on by a drug overdose, but given this information did not come from the family, Tiffany chose not to report it. (Minsker and Yoo, 2021)

Black community. Tiffany suggested they reframe the question about addiction to focus on mental health and the increasing instances of Black male rappers using drugs to self-medicate. As Tiffany edited, Rome relayed a story about DMX's having a cigarette unknowingly laced with crack when he was 14 years old, "How do you come back from that?" Rome asked aloud.

Original question: *We know that over the span of his career, DMX has struggled with drug addiction. He's never hidden that from us. What does that say about him as a person to share those parts of himself?*

Copy Edit:

We see these same conversations happen all the time in Chicago with rappers like JuiceWrlld and Fredo Santana, who died from accidental overdoses, and G Herbo with his PTSD from street violence, and then Kanye West with his public mental health journey.

Precise: In light of what's going on with DMX, how should the music industry, consumers, and fans have these hard conversations about addiction and mental health?

In her approach to producing the conversation around DMX, Tiffany refocused the conversation on care for struggling Black men instead of sensationalizing drug addiction. While the initial question asked guests to make a judgment on DMX's based on his struggle with addiction, the second iteration of the question asked the guest to talk about the importance of industry conversations about mental health and addiction as a larger issue within the rap community. In this way, by shifting the focus of the question away from drug addiction, which can bring about responses of shame and judgment, and towards his care for the community and mental health.

Speaking/Writing Through Care.

In production, Tiffany and Morgan put a great amount of care into the language *TRiiBE TV* used to describe the peoples and communities they discussed. During the production run-through for a *TRiiBE TV* segment on intersectional storytelling featuring guest Elijah McKinnon, the Co-founder (with Aymar Jean Christian) & Executive Director of OTV| Open Television, a Chicago-based online distribution

platform for “intersectional television, film and video art” (OTV, 2021), much attention was given to the most respectful way to speak about both OTV’s work and McKinnon. In the original script, the artists supported by the OTV platform were described as “intersectional.” However, Morgan said she felt like identifying these creators as intersectional was “skating around the issue,” or in other words, that by merely describing them as intersectional, they were not being direct enough about the communities they were describing. Instead, she suggested calling these creators Black and queer-identifying, highlighting these creators’ positionality and identity communities more directly. Someone also suggested referring to the creators as Black, femme, and LGBTQ-identifying. As the conversations continued, Morgan told the team it was important to have these discussions about proper and respectful language when talking to and about guests.

In the conversation, Morgan brought up and actively called attention to the importance of using McKinnon’s proper pronouns, which are they/them. Morgan was adamant that everyone should be aware and respectful of addressing guests by their correct and preferred pronouns. Morgan suggested to Rome that if he accidentally misgenders or used the wrong pronouns when referring to McKinnon during the broadcast, to apologize on camera and correct himself or just call Elijah by name to avoid the issue. To help Rome remember the proper pronouns, Tonia put McKinnon’s pronouns in the script in red. As the read continued, Rome uses the wrong pronoun, eventually leading Rome to decide that the most respectful way to approach the language in the segment would be to refer to McKinnon by name. This attention to the language in the segment is both striking and critical. Mainstream news outlets have often been criticized for not paying proper attention to the language they use to refer to trans and non-binary individuals (Brooks, 2017). Thus, *The TRiBE*’s intentionality in discuss individuals from queer and of color communities demonstrates an ethics of care in the way it fully affirms and honors their stated positionality and lived experiences of intersectional peoples within the Black community. It is production practices based on a recognition of non-hegemonic forms of knowledge and ways of being.

Language was often a topic of conversation in both reporting and production at *The TRiBE*. As Tiffany and Morgan both noted, they wanted to use language that reflected the natural conversational tone of the Black community. In other words, they did not want their journalists to code-switch. As

a result, during many *TRiiBE TV* broadcasts, Rome and show guests conversed in AAVE [African American Vernacular English] or Black English, a dialect of Standard American English often spoken in Black communities and rooted in a history of slavery and Black diasporic culture (Jordan, 1995). Speaking about why this was so important to their production practices, Morgan noted:

We've all been institutionalized in a way. I've grown up in predominantly white institutions so I've been taught to present myself a certain way in public and in front of white people. And then I go home and present myself in a completely different way. So journalists are taught the same thing, they go to these schools, and they learn how to write in a certain voice, and they strip themselves of their own voice because they're told that it's unprofessional or whatever. So a lot of what we do at *The TRiiBE* is to undo all of that and say, "Bring yourself back and put it into your work because that's what people are going to relate to." If we're all about building trust, then we need to connect with people on a very human level.

In this way, through using AAVE as a production practice, *The TRiiBE* affirmed, or rather reaffirmed, the existence and importance of the vernacular traditions of Chicago's Black community. In her writing on Black English, Jordan (1988) writes:

[Black English] is a system constructed by people constantly needing to insist that we exist. . . . Our language devolves from a culture that abhors all abstraction, or anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now/the truth of the person who is speaking or listening. (p. 367)

Echoing this sentiment in the interviewing workshop, Tiffany emphasized the importance of language in affirming community members' culture and "meeting them where they are at." In this way, I suggest this recognition acts as a form of care in recognizing this community's struggles and lived reality. Like the care given to talking with and about intersectional media-makers, the way *The TRiiBE* team constructs language in news production signals a Black feminist ethics of care in how it chooses to speak about and recognize the Black peoples and communities they report on (hooks, 1989).

Framing Conversations Through Care.

The final way *TRiiBE TV* demonstrated a Black feminist praxis of care in production was through how conversations on the show were framed, or in other words, how the audience was oriented towards the discussion. In our interview, Morgan reflected that early in her career as a documentarian, she came

to understand the importance of framing and how it influenced people's understanding of social and historical narratives. While interning at a production company during College, Morgan recalled:

The production house I was working for was led by this white man, and he was really making General George Custer out to be like this typical American hero story. This man was going around massacring Native Americans, but the framing of these stories and raising these American figures up on these pedestals and framing them like they are Marvel comics, everything is like a comic book. It's like there's a hero, and then there are the people who he conquered and the land that he conquered, and it was just like ... it taught me a lot about framing narratives...I just remember it not feeling authentic to me or just feeling a little bit absurd.

This experience taught her how important framing could be in framing audience perspectives. On *TRÜBE TV*, Morgan actively framed conversations in a way that extended care and grace to Black people, especially Black women. Care in framing came up in a discussion about Derrick Jaxon, a “relationship expert” social media influencer, who had recently made a video confessing to cheating on his wife multiple times throughout their 12-year relationship. That week, our guests on the show were two Black women comedians from Chicago: Kellye Howard and Ashley Tribble. As we waited for the show to start, the guests and the production staff engaged in a lively discussion about Jaxon's announcement —it was a big deal on Black Twitter. In the middle of this lively pre-broadcast discussion, Morgan appeared on screen from backstage to join in the conversation because, as she put it, Jaxon was “fraudulent.” However, she then asked the guests and the production staff to limit their on-air commentary about the situation to Jaxon and not to his wife, Da'Naia. The latter had appeared in the video confession with Jaxon holding his hand. Online, people had criticized Da'Nai for her seeming support of her husband and for her appearance, in which she was wearing a bonnet and comfortable clothing. Morgan made the point that we do not truly know what Da'Nai had been through or if there was abuse involved in the situation. “Roast him, but leave her out,” said Morgan. Tonia asked if they should show the video where Da'Naia refers to her bonnet as a “helmet of salvation,” but Morgan said no and to just leave her out of it completely. By insisting they not talk about Da'Naia, Morgan produced a segment that extended care and grace to Black women. In other words, the show was grounded in the love-politics Nash (2013) describes that privileges care and grace over judgment and punishment.

Similarly, in an episode discussing the news that then-Senator Kamala Harris was selected as Democratic Presidential nominee Joe Biden's running mate, Morgan insisted that the conversation steer clear of the controversy about Harris' moderate stance and a past career as a prosecutor. Instead, she decided to frame the discussion around Harris being a graduate of Howard University, a Historically Black College, and a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Inc. (AKA), a historically black sorority. Again, in producing the segment, Morgan intentionally oriented the conversation away from judgment and towards an affect of care that gave grace to Harris' past. In our interview, Morgan told me:

Not just us being black women, as in our identity, but us specifically being feminist and womanist, and that informing the way that we think about media is important because we want these narratives to nurture people. It's not only about capitalism and punishing people...I would say that that's anti-feminist... Our work is going to be about, how did this happen? How did we get here? Not necessarily just blaming.

In this way, Morgan positions this production through care as a manifestation of her womanist¹⁷ and Black feminist praxis. It is a praxis based on forming a community through a shared political position of not punishing people for their actions, but instead extending a sense of care and understanding; a community formation "not based on the elisions of identity or a shared (imagined) sameness, but on a conception of the public rooted in affiliation and a shared set of feelings" (Nash, 2013, p. 14). In this way, Morgan extends a radical ethics of care to Da'Naia and Harris, not just because she is also a Black woman, but rather due to a mission to build a news platform rooted in care and empathy. It is through this care, "rather than an assertion of shared injury," that a public or, in this case, their audience community is formed (Nash, 2013, p. 15).

Including Black Women, Femme, Queer Perspectives

[Excerpt] TRiiBE TV Pitch Meeting November 9th, 2020:

Tonia starts the meeting asking if Rome wants to go first with pitches or if he wants her to go first. Rome volunteers to go first. As a continuation of the earlier pitch meeting, Rome brings up the death of Chicago rapper King Von and asks how we want to cover it. Rome asks if we want to do another panel

¹⁷Womanism is a term coined by writer Alice Walker (1983) to describe a form of feminism that centers on Black women. Throughout this project, places where I use womanism instead of Black feminism denotes the interlocutor, writer, or scholar's own understanding of their positionality or work as being rooted in a 'womanist' as opposed to a 'Black feminist' perspective. It is also important to note that while scholars have debated and explored the extent to which these political orientations overlap or differ (e.g. Brewer, 2020; Collins, 1996; Phillips McCaskill, 2006) these debates are outside of the scope of this current project.

like *TRiiBE TV* did for the shooting of Chicago rapper FBG Duck on their first episode, especially in light of the fact that Von had been planning to release a mix-tape with fellow Chicago rapper Lil' Durk.

Tonia says she preemptively reached out to Lil' Durk's people about the death of King Von in case they want to do something. Tiffany follows up on this by mentioning she just watched a clip on Twitter of influencer DJ Akademiks, who recently talked to Von, speaking about the incident as a suggestion of another person we could bring on the show if we wanted to a panel similar to what they did for Duck. But Morgan seems unsure, "I don't want to continue to have the same narrative about Drill and people being killed." Morgan tells Tonia that she saw Evan from the *Sun-Times* wrote about Von's shooting and suggests Tonia look into seeing what potential other narratives there are, but she doesn't want to continue with the same narrative of Chicago rappers being shot. Morgan then follows up on her own suggestion, saying, "you know who we don't hear from [when rappers get shot]? The girlfriends and baby mamas. I would be interested in them...." Morgan adds that women often have to deal with picking up the pieces of family and community when these things happen. She adds, "I know the newsworthiness makes it feel like it has to be now, but it happens to so many rappers. It feels like an evergreen topic because so many families deal with this loss." Tonia "mmhhmmms" in agreement.

Actively Reporting on Black Women & Femmes

In *The TRiiBE* and *TRiiBE TV* pitch and editorial meetings, moments like this were common: A staff member would pitch a story, and Morgan or Tiffany would ask them: What angle speaks to the experiences of Black women? What perspective speaks to the experiences of Black queer people? In her suggestion of covering rappers' shooting from the perspective of the Black women in their lives — their girlfriends, wives, baby mamas, and mothers — Morgan was pushing the staff to be more inclusive in how they reported on how issues impacted the Black community. Chicago's Black community is more than just Black men, it also includes Black women and Black queer folks, and their lived experiences must be accounted for as well. Moments like these were a constant and another intentional way in which Morgan and Tiffany aimed to bring an intersectional practice into their newsroom reporting. By intentionally incorporating the voices of and perspectives of Black women, femmes, and queer individuals in their reporting, *The TRiiBE*'s work actively thought through different positionalities that may be present within Chicago's Black community and represent these various perspectives in their reporting.

A similar moment is illustrated in this chapter's introductory field note when Morgan's suggestion to Rome "put more Black women on the list" of rappers for the Forecast, a regular segment within the show where Rome highlights the hottest new tracks on the Chicago music scene. Throughout my work with *The TRiiBE*, I would often hear Morgan and Tiffany repeat this suggestion to Rome, helping to produce the segment [see **Image 3a & 3b**]. Talking about these moments, Morgan said:

It's important to challenge the cis men on our staff who are going to naturally gravitate towards this hetero narrative that they're comfortable with. But it's just, over time, I'll look at *TRiiBE TV* and be like, "Huh, we did a playlist, and it was all just hetero men." I can look at that last playlist and be like, "Okay, Rome is going to naturally gravitate towards that." And it's my job to come in and be like, "Hey, you're going to have to expand...You're going to have to go into this space over here and listen, and go into this space over here and listen." Because he's not going to do it naturally, that's not what he's been trained to do, that's not what he's drawn to. But we have to push and continue to nudge people in that direction.

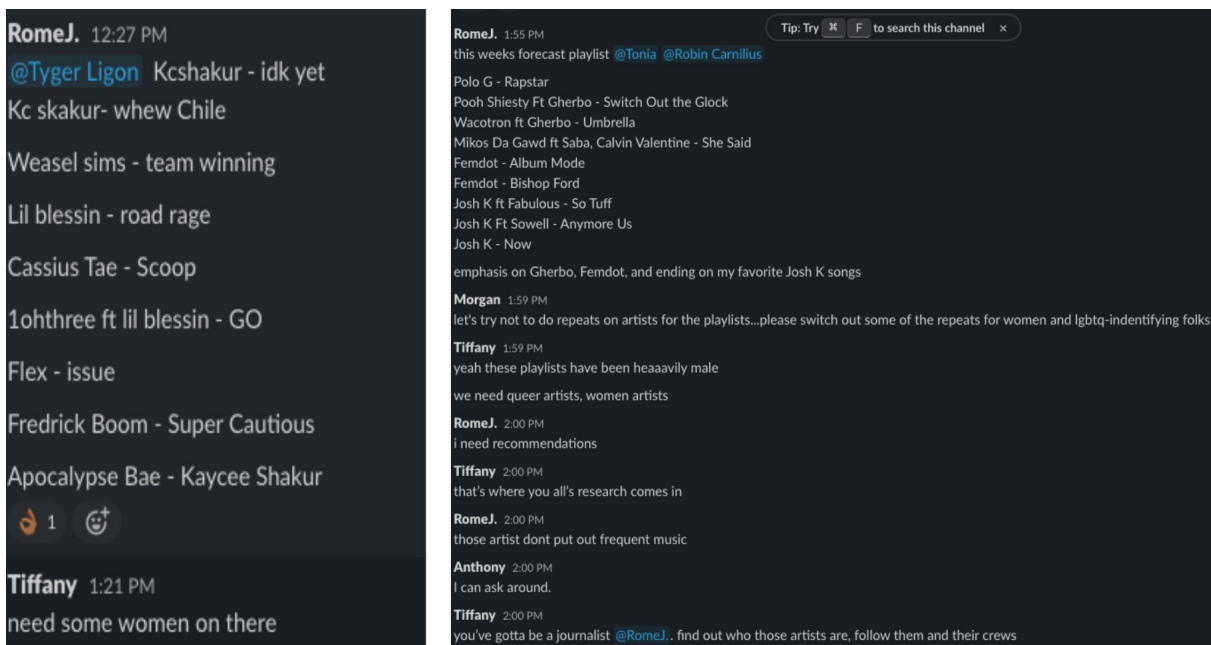


Image 3a & 3b:

Slack messages from Tiffany & Morgan to Rome asking him to include more women & LGBTQIA-identified people in the forecast

By asking Rome to include more Black women and queer rappers on his list, Morgan pushed Rome to think about the work and experiences of Black Chicago rappers that go beyond a heteronormative, male perspective. I position these editorial suggestions by Morgan and Tiffany as a Black feminist production practice geared towards inclusion. In challenging their staff, and especially the cisgender heterosexual men on their staff, to think beyond their own perspective and imagine how a story could include or be told through the perspective of women or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, *The TRiiBE* is

ultimately able to offer their audience an intersectional and inclusive perspective of how Chicago news impacts the Black community.

These pushes often led their staff to be more inclusive about the musical artists they pitched and ultimately covered on the show in active and visible ways. For instance, in *The TRiiBE* TV pitch meeting following Morgan's slack message about the need to include more women on the playlist, Rome and Tonia intentionally sought out and pitched new music from Black women artists. In the final Forecast segment for that week's show, three women rappers were featured: Cupcakke, Channel Tru, and Queen Key.

In this way, by continually pushing their writers to be more intersectional in their approach to talking about and understanding Chicago's Black community, Tiffany and Morgan demonstrated how intersectionality, as an analytical approach, can invoke social change. As Patricia Hill Collins (2019) suggests, employing intersectional analysis is often deeply rooted in social justice and social change projects. Thus, in their use of critical intersectionality in their approach to news reporting, Tiffany and Morgan slowly but surely changed the editorial output *The TRiiBE*'s reporting by normatively centering equity in its approach to reporting on Black Chicago.

Actively Incorporating Black Femme & Queer Perspectives

In many ways, *The TRiiBE*'s intention to actively engage the speak to the heterogeneity within Chicago's Black community was contingent on increasing the perspectives and voices present on their staff. As Morgan suggests, it is often not our natural inclination to think beyond our own space of privilege. For this reason, Tiffany, Morgan, and even in some cases, Tonia, as Black women, were more readily able to identify the importance of including Black women's work and perspectives in conversations about culture and music. However, Morgan also recognized that as cisgender women, she also held certain privileges in their gender identity that may create blind spots in their reporting practices. As seen in the earlier discussion regarding McKinnon's pronouns, the Black women in charge of production at *TRiiBE TV* often challenged themselves to think beyond their own spaces of privilege and educated themselves when interviewing people whose positionality was different than their own. Further, Morgan commented that it was also important to "includ[e] those voices in [their] staff," and noted the importance of having non-binary trans person on their staff. While this person's immediate job was not necessarily as a reporter,

their presence and their ability to correct or call the staff in when their reporting failed to account for Black LGBTQIA+ perspectives was crucial.

TRiiBE TV also actively included Black women, femme, and queer voices through the guests they invited on the show. As the show slowly developed a regular repertoire of commentators, two regular guests were Ashley Ray, a now LA-based film and television writer originally from the Chicago area, and Danielle Scruggs, a Chicago-based photographer and writer who does freelance film coverage for *The TRiiBE*. Ray and Scruggs' regular inclusion of guests often opened the conversations up the experiences and perspectives of Black women and LGBTQIA+ as it related to a given event or topic. This was evident in an episode centered on the newly released film *Judas and the Black Messiah*, about the Chicago Black Panther Party (BPP) and Party Chairman Fred Hampton's assassination by the FBI. Danielle was invited on the show to talk about her coverage of the film's Sundance premiere on The TRiiBE.com, along with Hampton's son, Fred Hampton Jr., and Damon Williams, a Chicago media activist. Twice during the conversation, Danielle introduced topics that focused specifically on the role of Black women, femmes, and LGBTQIA+ individuals in the Black Panther party and larger Black liberation movements. During Blackflix & Chill, a semi-regular segment that focuses on currently streaming Black movies, Danielle brought up films that highlight Black and Indigenous Women, LGBTQIA+ people of color in liberation movements. Later in the conversation, Danielle brought up a push to more clearly understand the role of Black women in the BPP, who are often erased from the narrative about the organization. These interjections in a conversation otherwise dominated by Black men prompted the other panelist and audience to respond to and consider within the discussion: where do Black women fit into this conversation?

Inclusion through Digital Production

Digital production was also critical in allowing for the inclusion of a greater multiplicity of perspectives in *TRiiBE TV*'s discussions on Black Chicago culture. This became apparent in an early episode of *TRiiBE TV* featuring members of 'The Era,' a four-person Chicago-based footwork crew, demographically made up of Black and Latinx men. One of the members, Brandon "Chief Manny" Calhoun, called in from his cellphone while driving in his car — a practice that had become standard since *TRiiBE TV*'s

first episode and made possible by the show's completely remote set-up. At one point, in talking about who does footworking best, Manny says, "I have someone who can speak to the 'woman part of the style or the culture,' and passes the phone over to a woman sitting next to him in the car, saying "they got they own set of things that they go through.' She says her name is Eleele, a co-founders of 'Partners in The Circle,' a two-woman footwork crew. She added:

As a woman in the culture, it's definitely a lot different. It's male-dominated, obviously, so while we're dancing, we got a whole lot of stuff going on in our head. We're wondering: Okay, are they paying attention to us... or are they just paying attention to, 'okay, it's just females, they lookin' good.' We actually do this too; we get down just like the men too. Anything they can do, for the most part, we can do it.

Into the conversation on footwork, Eleele calls attention to the way women, specifically Black women, are objectified in foot working—a perspective that otherwise would not have entered this conversation.

At first, based on my own professional experience working in the news, I found it odd that he would just pass off the phone to a different person while being interviewed. Then I realized how this "informality" of the interview structure allowed the interview to bring in more perspectives, particularly in this case, a Black woman's perspective in a conversation dominated by Black men. The preference for in-person interviews (at least pre-COVID) and a professional aesthetic by mainstream and traditional news organizations would discourage someone from using a cell phone or calling in from their car; they would insist on the interviewee being in a more professional-looking setting when calling in. However, in this case, it was the fact that *The TRiBE* did not behold themselves to these traditional production standards that broadened the perspectives present in the conversation. When I asked Tonia about the potentially inclusive nature of these digital production practices, she added, "I do feel there's an opportunity to get more people because it's online, and we could fit more bodies on the show virtually." In this way, their lack of convention opens their show up to guests who may not have access to the technologies and set-ups often required of mainstream news outlets.

Platformed Limitations of Bootstrapped Digital Production

Bootstrapped Digital Production as a Black feminist Praxis

While digital production has become integral to many of the Black feminist production practices *The TRiiBE* has developed, the organization's use of digital platforms and tools has often been out of necessity. The initial decision to make *The TRiiBE* a digital platform was both a matter of access and opportunity. In October 2016, after deciding on a name for their platform, Morgan and Tiffany bought the URL domain variant of Tribe with two i's, "because it was \$2.99, and everything else was thousands and thousands of dollars" and set up a WordPress page. However, the pair was still navigating how to build and launch their own website. It was not until December 2016, after running into their now head of operations, David, at a birthday party for a mutual college friend, that the website was built. At the party, David, a web developer, approached Tiffany and Morgan and offered his web design services if they ever needed a website. It was kismet. The pair said they could not pay David, but they offered him ownership stakes in the company in exchange for his services. At every turn, their reason for building a digital platform revolved around what they had the resources to access. As Tiffany suggested:

We did the website because you can build a website. You could build a website for \$10 ...WordPress, I think that was free. And then David, we paid \$2.99 for the URL...but everything else was accessible and free. The most expense we paid was for Morgan's camera. She bought a camera, a Nikon, something, and that was like \$1,200 or something like that, and we bought it with a credit card...So if your biggest expense is a \$1,200 camera versus thousands of dollars in printing something, that changes the game. All you have to do is have an idea.

From the URL name to the eventual website, *The TRiiBE*'s digital production practices grew directly out of what they could produce within their limited budget. As a small, start-up news organization *The TRiiBE* did not start with the capital to pay thousands of dollars for print publication or audio engineering equipment. Nor did they necessarily have the capacity or the resources to learn the skills associated with these other mediums of publication. What they did have was access to a cheap URL, Morgan's camera experience after years of studying and working in documentary film, and David's web development skills.

TRiiBE TV's digital streaming set-up was also born out of necessity. *TRiiBE TV* was conceived and developed during a global pandemic, meaning any production would have to be remote. In addition, while

it may only cost \$2.99 and a skilled friend to launch a website, independent live streaming capabilities are complicated and costly. Streamyard's platform allowed them to develop a controlled live streaming environment, where they could control who was on screen and digital graphical elements for a fairly low cost. Further, the show's overall production is bootstrapped, meaning it is done with whatever resources are at the staff's disposal. *TRiiBE TV* staff produce graphics using Google slides, write scripts in Google docs, and gather visual elements through guests or free online resources.

These practices of bootstrapping parallel the growing use of digital production tools by Black women, femme, and queer individuals as an accessible means to enact self-definition and self-expression discussed in previous chapters. Like Digital Black feminists and Black femme and queer media makers who embrace the internet's low barrier to entry to make media that speaks to their lived experiences, *The TRiiBE* takes up the low-cost affordances of the internet as a way to engage in new production (Bailey, 2021; Christian, 2018; Day, 2018; Steele, 2021). Through their use of these online tools, *The TRiiBE* demonstrates how it can bootstrap production to circumvent gatekeepers and the restrictions of capital to forge into neoliberal entrepreneurship. Under neoliberalism, the concept of 'bootstrapping,' or self-sustained entrepreneurship, has historically been a key way people from marginalized communities have attained social mobility (Basu & Werbner, 2001). However, within our current digital age, digital production tools have allowed marginalized communities—especially Black women, femme, and queer communities- to benefit even more through a bootstrapping model of entrepreneurial success. Thus, in a similar way to how Digital Black feminists use the blog space to engage in neoliberal marketing practices, *The TRiiBE* has been able to mobilize the internet towards making a name for themselves in the news pace. However, *The TRiiBE*, as opposed to an individual blogger, represents a collective platform pushing towards a singular goal: intervening in the harmful, mainstream narratives about Black Chicago.

The Limits of Relying on Third-Party Platforms

However, *The TRiiBE* and *TRiiBE TV*'s dependence on third-party online platforms to function often confined both their content and exposure to the parameters set by platform structures. One way this limitation manifested itself was through a reliance on the Streamyard platform. Since, as I previously noted, independent live streaming can be both complex and costly, having affordable access to live

streaming capabilities was highly advantageous. At the same time, the platform had many limitations that the team had to adhere to. During a television broadcast, one can often expect 20-100 people spread between the control room, the newsroom, and the edit bays, working cooperatively to produce a live broadcast. Comparatively, Streamyard does not allow more than ten individuals to be active in production. This means, including guests, only a limited number of TRiiBE staff could be responsible for the live show, placing a heavy burden on these few.

In addition, the team frequently ran into issues navigating the platform's video streaming feature. Streamyard only allowed users to play videos that were pre-uploaded to the platform but severely restricted the file sizes of videos the platform would support. This often led to complications as the team navigated how to play videos that the platform would not support. This issue came up in one episode in which we planned to discuss *Unapologetic*, a film that Morgan helped produce, that was set to premiere later that week at the Black Harvest Film Festival. In our pre-production meetings for the show, Tonia flagged that the movie's trailer, which they wanted to play as a part of the conversation, was too large for Streamyard. As a work-around, Morgan suggested they attempt to stream the trailer directly through the Google slideshow without uploading it to Streamyard. Later that week, on the day of the broadcast, Robin, who was running the Google slides, tested both the streaming and sound on the video. However, during the actual broadcast, there was no audio when Robin played the video. After several attempts, Morgan tried to play the video from her computer, but there were buffering issues causing the video to stop and start continually. In the end, the video had to be edited back into the show in post-production. Issues like these, where platform limitations caused increased challenges to production, were not uncommon during my time working with *TRiiBE TV*. While many of these incidents are arguably the production growing pains of a small, upstart media company, they also point to the increased challenges digital production poses to small, community, news organizations that rely on third-party technologies for production.

Another limitation of using a third party platform arose when *TRiiBE TV* attempted to navigate the YouTube platform guidelines for fair use of content. News outlets across all mediums often use third-party materials such as citizen images, archival footage, and movie clips in reporting. While best

practices encourage journalists to receive clearances for these materials before usage, this is not always possible when working on a deadline (like on a live show). In these instances, news organizations use fair use policies, which allow individuals or organizations to use copyrighted material for “limited and transformative” purposes to “comment upon, criticize, or parody a copyrighted work.” (“what is fair use,” n.d.). While YouTube does have a policy allowing for fair use, the decision-making apparatus around deciding if something constitutes fair use is often ambiguous and obscured by proprietary copyright detection algorithms. As a result, this lack of clarity leaves smaller media organizations like *The TRüBE* facing the constant threat of having their content reviewed or deleted if they accidentally violate these opaque guidelines.

TRüBE TV would often discuss how to incorporate media elements such as images and music into the broadcast without triggering the copy-right detection algorithm. At one point, Morgan even asked me to research YouTube’s fair use policies. However, even when *The TRüBE* stuck to these guidelines, their content was placed under review or deleted. During a *TRüBE TV* broadcast in April 2021, while talking about notable sports moments with Black Chicago sports media reporters Terrence Tomlin & Gene McIntosh, aka “The BIGS,” the broadcast was disabled. During the show, Tiffany, who regularly streams the show via YouTube instead of watching the show backstage on Streamyard, messaged *The TRüBE TV* team on the slack channel, “the stream went off for me.” In a follow-up message a few minutes later she wrote, “says “suspended for policy violations” and says it happened right after they used footage from the Michael Jordan documentary “The Last Dance” in the context of the documentary’s one year anniversary and Michael Jordan being inducted into the Basketball Hall of fame. Finally, Tiffany sends a screenshot of an email from YouTube that reads: Due to a copyright match, your stream was interrupted. As this was happening, the production team took to Streamyard to discuss what they should do:

Morgan: Wait, YouTube suspended our stream

Tonia: should we stop?

Morgan: Finish the show but imma investigate ugh.

Robin: Was it because of the footage?

Tonia: okay. smh

Morgan: Probably

Robin: Is it still recording?

Tonia: yes

Robin: we have the technical error thing as well

Robin: Ugh

Robin: Can't do music

Robin: Can't do video

Robin: What can you do? haha

By the time this conversation came to a close, Tiffany had messaged that the stream was back online. However, notable in their reaction is the frustration of repeated attempts (and failures) to navigate the YouTube platform algorithm to distribute their content successfully.

This example also illustrates how in these instances, these third-party platforms become direct intermediaries between *TRiiBE TV* and their audiences. In my own experience working in television production, I have made fair use claims more times than I can remember to use images and videos I could not license before broadcast. However, in those cases, we were broadcasting on our own network channel and were backed by a team of in-house lawyers ready to dispute our copyright claims. *TRiiBE TV*, as a digitally bootstrapped production, had no choice but to hope their fair used content did not get caught by YouTube's detection algorithm, which first removes your content and then allows you to claim fair use through an appeals process. While we did not stop recording during those 2-3 minutes that the show was down, those audiences watching could no longer see what they were streaming. And while these audiences could arguably come back and watch these interrupted few minutes of the the show's recording later posted to *The TRiiBE's* YouTube channel, would they?

Changes, Challenges, & Limitations of News Ethnographies in the Digital Age

As I bring my findings to a conclusion, I think it is necessary to pause and discuss the potential limitations of these findings as a digital newsroom ethnography. Robinson & Metzler (2016) suggest that the changing spaces and environment through which news work is produced call for us to renegotiate how researchers approach the spatial and temporal nature of news work. The increasingly digital nature

of news work means that not only does the schedule on which news is produced and published shift to a more fluid schedule, but where news work happens, noting the potentially remote nature of digital news work.

In this study, almost all of my participant observant work was conducted virtually through digital text and video messaging platforms such as Slack, Zoom, Streamyard, and Gmail. This was largely because I performed my research during a global pandemic that necessitated people socially distance in their homes. In a much smaller part, this condition was also because when I conducted my research, *The TRiiBE* had just begun to grow its staff and did not have a physical location. Before the Summer of 2020, *The TRiiBE*'s full-time staff consisted solely of co-Founders Tiffany Walden and Morgan Johnson, supported by a team of freelance journalists and David. However, by the Fall of 2020, *The TRiiBE* would boast a mix of ten full and part-time employees working remotely, including two full-time reporters, a social media coordinator, an outreach coordinator, and David as the full-time head of operations. Thus, while Tiffany and Morgan often spoke about acquiring a physical space for this growing staff, timing, specifically the pandemic, had not allowed for this yet.

Further, as Robinson & Metzler (2016) suggest, conducting my ethnographic work virtually presented its own unique spatial and temporal challenges. First, the electronic modes of communication through which editors and writers would coordinate meant I was not privy to all of the production and decision-making processes that occurred between individual parties. Second, the lack of physical access to newsroom employees often meant there was not always a way to get immediate or timely responses to questions I attempted to raise in the field. For instance, after some pitch meetings or group messaging conversations, I would have specific questions for certain employees about their choices or thought processes which I would message to them personally. However, given the large workload carried by this small staff and the inherent distance in virtual messaging, I would sometimes go weeks without responses to my questions, despite follow-ups. Finally, not interacting with newsroom employees in a physical space often meant I struggled to capture the nuances of relationships between individuals. This lack of physical interaction made it hard for me to form bonds and report with certain staff members since our interactions would be limited to meetings where my access parameters and their roles overlap. While I

often attempted to work through and around these challenges, they undoubtedly impacted my overall access to the news work I observed and my ultimate findings.

Negotiating Black Feminist Production Practices in the Digital Age

Throughout my fieldwork with *The TRiiBE*, I observed the distinct and innovative ways this Black woman-led news organization implemented policies and called on the affordances of digital media to enact a distinctly Black feminist approach to reporting and production. These production practices actively engaged a Black feminist praxis of care, intersectional analysis, and creativity to produce news from within and about Chicago's black communities. As Boczkowski's (2004) research on digital news production highlights, newsrooms' use of digital technologies can vary from newsroom to newsroom. However, I suggest these findings from *The TRiiBE* offer us a preliminary framework for thinking about how expressions of Black feminism and Black feminist praxis can manifest in digital news production. Specifically, *The TRiiBE* uses the affordances of digital media and production, not to increase "speed of work" or immediacy but rather as a vehicle to express care towards their staff and Chicago's Black community and invite marginalized voices into their conversation of Black Chicago. Most notably, *The TRiiBE* uses the flexibility of digital production to extend grace and rest to their reporters when it is most necessary. Additionally, this flexibility in production allows their reporters the time and space to approach community issues with care and thought.

At the same time, the fact that the news organizations *The TRiiBE* is in conversation with often utilize the immediacy of the internet, this different orientation towards time and digital production is not lost on Tiffany, Morgan, or their staff. At a team editorial meeting in February 2022, Tiffany suggested they might want to consider doing more timely stories after a series of articles on the website from the previous month did well in terms of viewership traffic due to their perceived timeliness. While Morgan agreed it would be good, business-wise, for them to be more timely with their reporting, some of the editorial staff expressed concerns that working at that pace would be "unsustainable" as it would detract from the time and care they currently spend crafting long-form, complex narratives about Black Chicago. Some editorial staff also noted that instead of keeping up with large, traditional news outlets such as *The Chicago Tribune*, it would be more advantageous for them to continue focusing on finding unique

perspectives and angles through which they could enter these mainstream conversations. In the end, the staff collectively concluded that they should aim to strike a balance between these two poles. On the one hand, their work is rooted in a Black feminist praxis of care. On the other hand, as a bootstrapped entrepreneurial (neoliberal) endeavor in a fast-moving market, to survive, they need to keep up. Thus, for *The TRiiBE*, the melding of a Black feminist politic and a neoliberal ideology comes in the form of compromise; finding a happy medium between a Black feminist praxis and finding sustainability in a crowded news market.

While Black feminist news outlets, like *The TRiiBE*, attempt to bring their Black feminist praxis into the popular, commercial space of news, something of the reversing is happening in popular entertainment media. Due to the changing nature of media markets in the age of social media and visibility economy, producers in television, film, and music industry are starting to draw on Black feminist terms, aesthetics, and concepts to create representations of Black women, femmes, and queer folks that speak directly to these communities. I explore this phenomenon in the next two chapters, specifically through television shows and visual albums by Black women music artists. Specifically, I aim to detangle how the neoliberal impulses of these industries may change, reimagine, and extract value from Black feminism and what this *potentially* means for how this content spreads.

Part 2

**Black Feminism in Popular Entertainment
Media**

CHAPTER 4

Black Feminist TV?**Black women, femme, and queer characters in a networked TV culture**

On July 29, 2020, the streaming platform Netflix announced via Twitter that it had acquired the rights to seven "iconic" Black-centered television shows that it would be releasing into syndication on its streaming platform in the Fall (Strong Black Leads, 2020; Shafer, 2020). The shows: *Moesha*, *The Parkers*, *Sister Sister*, *The Game*, *Half & Half*, and *Girlfriends* all initially aired in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a time when both broadcast and cable networks focused on creating Black-centric, niche content to court Black audiences due to increased market competition (Gray 1995; Fuller 2000). Of the seven shows, *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000-2008) arguably did the most to push the bounds of Black women's representation in popular culture by focusing on the intricate dynamics of the friendship between four professional Black women living in Los Angeles. When *Girlfriends* —created and showrun by Black woman writer and producer Mara Brock Akil —premiered in 2000, it attempted to show the complex intricacies of what it meant to be a Black woman in a way few if any shows had done previously. As a child, I vividly remember watching the show with my mother and being awed by the diversity of Black women's representation it provided. However, the experience of rewatching the show as an adult alerted me and many other young Black women to the show's many pitfalls when it came to exploring Black women's stories that lay outside the confines of heteronormativity.

The reactions of Black women rewatching *Girlfriends* online and across social media were varied. Many women expressed the pleasure that comes with the nostalgia of rewatching a beloved television show. Still, many Black women also noted the problematics of the show's engagement (or lack of engagement) with non-heteronormative views of Blackness [See Image 4]. Comments pointed out that the show's

storylines often focused on compulsive heterosexuality, were laced with transphobic and homophobic remarks, failed to interrogate instances of toxic masculinity, and championed a politics of respectability. Despite the show's woman-centered cast, many storylines centered on the characters' ultimate desire for heterosexual love and fulfillment through men. In other words, while the show was *about* Black women, it often failed to center the agency and autonomy of Black women from perspectives that went beyond the individual personality differences. While this critique is not meant to undercut or downplay the significance of *Girlfriends*, which at the time of airing pushed the bounds of Black women's representation, it does help to highlight the ways content *about* Black women does not inherently carry with them messages congruent with Black feminist frameworks.

So why wasn't *Girlfriends* able to provide more nuanced and diverse representations of Black womanhood? Tee Noir, a Black woman vlogger and cultural commentator, told her viewers her theory is the "cringe" jokes and storylines in the show "were a result of unchecked biases from the writers or because of the acceptable lack of awareness of society at the time" (Tee Noir, 2020). To this, I would add that these unchecked biases were not necessarily the writers' fault alone but symptomatic of the historical and institutional moment in which the show was created. The commercial impulses of corporate television networks that owned the show, and the fact these television studios and networks were predominantly owned and operated by white men, often limited representations of Blackness and especially Black womanhood (Gray 1995; Fuller 2010; Lewis, 2012; Schulman, 1992; Zook, 1999). Thus, if these failings were structural and systemic, is it possible to produce representations of Black women and femmes on television that is more in line with a Black feminist epistemic? And if so, how? Moreover, what may they offer us that a show like *Girlfriends* could not?

In this chapter, I argue that changes stemming from new media, technology, and social media have created a new moment in our contemporary the television industry feels increasingly compelled to respond to calls from Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and LGBTQIA+ audiences to portray diverse, complex, and 'authentic' representations of Black womanhood and queerness in popular media. As a result, the strategic elevation and autonomy networks have given to Black women, femmes, and



Image 4:
Online Tweets reacting to rewatching *Girlfriends*

LGBTQIA+ individuals behind the camera have resulted in what I read as Black feminist and intersectional representations of Black women, femmes, and LGBTQIA on popular television shows. However, the media industry's capitalist impulses still pose challenges to lasting investments in these shows in ways that call into question the sustainability of Black feminist-informed television representations. I explore this argument through the analysis of two contemporary shows that focus on Black women, femmes, and LGBTQIA+ characters, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019 -) and *Pose* (2018-2021), unpacking the

distinct ways these shows open up new conversations about Black women, femme, and queer characters' lives.

Black Women's Representation in Television Media:

A Brief History

Broadcasting Black Womanhood: Early Representations of Black Women on Television

In the U.S., television has historically been a form of popular media through which the cultural politics of race and gender are negotiated, in large part due to the corporate and commercial impulses of broadcasting (Bogle, 1973, 2001; Gray, 1995, 2005; Shohat and Stam, 1994). The structure of television, both in terms of content and technology, initially developed from radio. Radio was predominantly controlled by three major networks —The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), The American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) — and consisted of staple forms of programming, including dramatic and variety shows (Bogle, 2001). While the first picture transmission, the basis for television, was completed in 1928, it was not until Post-World War II that the traditional broadcast era of television we know today came into being with the culmination of overall improvements in the picture transmission technology, the solidification of FCC licensing regulations, and the mass distribution of television sets into the home (Bogel, 2001, Lotz, 2014). This new technology brought visual societal and cultural representation, previously only seen in film and theater, into the comfort of people's homes. In this way, television played a crucial role in shaping Americans' understanding of themselves and the society around them (Bogel, 2001).

Early television networks in the late 1940s were sometimes willing to take chances on Black performers, especially in the variety show format. However, as television shows became increasingly successful, the business model of Broadcast networks de-incentivized these "risks" (Bogel, 2001). Broadcast networks used picture transmission signals to reach their audiences *en masse* in their homes and relied on advertiser support to recover the losses that came with creating, producing, and distributing television shows. Shows with more general and mass appeal, which practically translated to shows featuring and centering white actors, attracted larger advertising sponsorship and higher revenue (Bogel, 2001; Gitlin,

1983; Lotz, 2014). As a result, in the 1950s, most representations of Black women on television were encased in stereotypes.

Media as an institution has historically played a key role in structuring popular ideological beliefs about Black women. In his seminal work "Mammy's, Coon's, Mulattos, and Bucks," Donald Bogle (1973) suggests following a history of minstrelsy, early representations of Black people in media aimed to placate white audiences' racist sentiments towards Black people (Smith-Shomade, 2002). One such stereotype Bogels identifies is the servile 'mammy,' a stern but loving Black woman, wet nurse, and child caretaker. In *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, African American studies scholar Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (2008) explains that within popular literature in the early to mid-1800s, the mammy was mainly defined by her role as a caretaker for white children. However, with the release of Harriet Beacher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) and specifically the character of Aunt Chloe, a plump, dark-skinned "take charge caretaker who assumes an authoritative tone with her mistress" (Morgan, 1995, p. 91) the mammy's body and demeanor within media was standardized as one "grotesquely marked by excess: she is usually extremely overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin is nearly black," who is "a jolly presence...and a strict disciplinarian," (pg. 6). These more grotesque and decidedly unattractive iterations of the mammy differentiated white women's desirability and sexual appeal from Black women (Morgan, 1995).

Jo-Ann Morgan (1995) suggests following slavery, the proliferation of the mammy was also used to reinforce and maintain Black women's positions within capitalist economies. As Morgan explains, "Mammy became a defender of class privilege and the status quo. By remaining in the kitchen or nursery, she offered a ready solution not only to the problem of how to assimilate former slaves into contemporary society but also to the challenge of how to keep the middle-class Euro-American in her ladylike role of home administrator" (p. 88). In her role as an eternal caregiver/domestic, the mammy reifies within the public imagination the role of Black women as laborers while simultaneously allowing white women to not engage in this same labor.

In contrast to the mammy, another key trope used to represent Black women in popular media was the seductive 'jezebel.' Compared to the a-sexual mammy, the jezebel is oversexualized or exoticized

Black woman sexual object for white male desire (Bogle, 1973). In this way, the hypersexualized Black women served to contrast and reinforce the purity of white women (Bogel, 1973). This hypersexualized representation of Black women's bodies can be traced back to "Hottentot Venus," or Saartje (Sarah) Bartman, an indentured servant from Africa who was brought to Europe, publicly exhibited, and eroticized for her backside (Collins, 2005; Gillman, 1985). Taken together, the mammy and the jezebel exist as part of what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) terms 'controlling images: sexist racialized tropes employed by various forms of popular media such as news, entertainment, and music, to reify popular conceptions of Black women, especially as it relates to pervasive ideologies around gender and womanhood (especially white womanhood), sexuality, and systems of capitalism and industry. Television networks historically relied on, and in some cases continue to rely on, these stereotypical depictions of Black women to achieve popular, mass appeal by placating white audiences' assumptions and fears about Black women (Bogel, 2001; Smith-Shomade, 2002).

In early television, the mammy was represented most prominently through the character of Beulah in the show *Beulah* (1950-1953) and the character Sapphire in the show *Amos n' Andy* (1951-1953). *Beulah*, starring Ethel Waters and later Haddie McDaniel and Louise Beavers as the titular character, initially developed from a radio program of the same name. *Beulah* told the story of a warm, sweet, non-threatening Black live-in maid named Beulah. The show's depiction of Beulah as an all-knowing, asexual mother figure, combined with the dark-skinned and round stature brought to the role by Waters, McDaniel, and Beavers, cast her perfectly within the stereotype of the mammy. In her representation, Beulah placated white audiences' preconceived notions of Black maternal figures and presented a non-threatening counterpoint to white women (Bogel, 2001; Nelson, 2012).

Alternatively, the character of Sapphire presented a new take on the mammy trope — the shrill, Black bitch (Collins, 2000). Sapphire, played by Ernestine Wade, was the wife of George "Kingfish" on the show *Amos n' Andy*, a sitcom also developed from a radio show of the same name about two Southern Black men who made their way up to New York City. Like Beulah's more traditional mammy, Sapphire mainly operated in the domestic sphere. However, compared to Beulah's classic mammy portrayal as soft and demure, Sapphire was loud, vulgar, and rude, confirming negative societal stereotypes of Black women

(Bogel, 2001). Despite these stereotypical depictions of Black women these early characters reinforced, it is important to note that the Black women actresses who played these roles still brought with them their sense of agency. Additionally, everyday Black audiences still watched these shows, excited by the prospect of Black characters on television, and engaged in oppositional readings of these characters, an idea that will be explored more in Part III (Bogel, 2001; Nelson, 2012; Scott, 2014).

After the cancellation of *Amos n' Andy* and *Beulah*, it would be another fifteen years until a show centering on Black life would grace Prime Time television (Smith-Shomade, 2002). This decision was likely driven by the increasing formalization of advertising business models in television networks. While broadcast television has always used advertising as its key source of revenue, the absence of standardized audience reception data and the lack of clarity around audience viewership in the first half of the 1900s often meant television broadcast networks were willing to take more risks around the types of content they depicted. However, by the late 1950s, as the advertising industry's growth put more pressure on advertisers to sell products, several more formalized companies and methods emerged to help advertisers better target television audiences. These companies, the most dominant being A.C. Nielsen Inc., which established the Nielsen ratings still used prominently in television broadcasting today, helped elucidate key demographic and geographical information about audiences by utilizing a series of sampling methods to help advertisers better target audiences (Buzzard, 2012).

The awareness that placating the majority of mass (white) audiences translated into direct revenue made television networks hyper-aware of their content, as they attempted to please everyone and offend no one by producing what they perceived to be 'the least objectionable content' (Gitlin, 1973; Meehan, 1984). Broadcast networks began implementing their own pseudo-scientific methods to preemptively determine if a show would be successful. In *Inside Prime Time*, Todd Gitlin (1973) notes that these methods, such as non-representative audience screening surveys, focused groups, and loose heuristics, often under-sampled minorities and reinforced response biases that elicited what was perceived to be socially acceptable, normative responses from audiences. In this way, this 'research' often engendered feedback that spoke to dominant social ideologies and influenced content along white, heteropatriarchal lines.

The confluence of the institutionalization of ratings and these research methods de-incentivized Broadcaster networks from portraying Black characters, especially in non-monolithic and dynamic ways. By the 1960s, Black characters were virtually absent from television. As the growing civil rights movement came to the forefront of America's consciousness, token Black characters were sometimes brought in for guest spots, and in some rare cases as series regulars, on predominantly white shows as a way to discuss issues of race. These Black characters were often used to reassure white audiences against the perceived threat of Civil Rights (Bogel, 2001). While these roles occasionally opened up new opportunities for Black actresses to embody new types of roles outside of the mammy archetype, such as actress Cicely Tyson's depictions of social worker Jane Foster in *East Side, West Side* (1963-1964) — a slim, young, dark-skinned, and smart, professional Black woman — depictions of racial disparity and unrest on these shows were still tempered by networks to avoid upsetting white audiences and advertisers (Bogel, 2001).

It was not until the premiere of *Julia* (1968-1971) that Black women once again took center stage on television. *Julia*, starring actress Diahann Carroll in the titular role of Julia Baker, about a young, middle-class, single Black mother who moved to Los Angeles with her young son after the death of her Airforce Captain husband in the Vietnam War. While *Julia* helped forge the new and more progressive archetype of the educated, upwardly mobile Black woman, the show was decidedly not about Blackness. As a middle-class Black woman, the other characters who populated Julia's life were often white, thus giving viewers a spec of Black in a predominantly white world. In this way, *Julia* decidedly took what media scholar Herman Gray (1995) calls an "assimilationist" approach to depictions of Black life and race — while racism and prejudice were acknowledged, they were often not discussed in-depth or explored in any meaningful way (Bogel, 2001). Thus, in its depictions of Julia, the show focused on the seamless and non-threatening way Black women like Julia could assimilate into the dominant white culture. In response to real-time critiques of the show from Black critics and audiences, Carroll herself noted that she doubts the show would have been "successful" if it had overly emphasized the role of race (Bogel, 2001).

Finally, in the 1970's shows specifically centering Black characters began to regularly populate television, often in the form of the situational comedy (Bogel, 2001). Television shows such as *Good Times* (1974-1980), *That's My Mama!* (1974-1975), *The Jefferson* (1975-1985), *The Bill Cosby Show* (1969-1971), and *Sanford & Son* (1972-1977), several of which were spearheaded by iconic producer Norman Lear. These shows used comedy to explore issues of race and class. While these shows introduced more opportunities for diverse representation of Black people and Black women specifically, they often still employed updated versions of familiar, derogatory stereotypes, especially in the case of Black women. For instance, the character of Florida Evans in *Good Times*, played by Esther Rolle, a larger, dark-skinned, Black woman, was initially conceived as a domestic in the television show *Maude* (1972-1978) starring Bea Arthur. However, unlike earlier depictions of the mammy in film and television, Rolle's character was smart, bold, and forceful; in other words, she was not your regular docile, subservient domestic. Similarly, Florence Johnston, in *The Jeffersons*, was not only a domestic in a Black household, but she would often talk back to and criticize her employer through cunning and satirical remarks (Bogel, 2001). In this way, while the portrayal of Black women in these television shows still relied on historical stereotypes of Black womanhood that made white audiences comfortable, they updated these roles to give them slightly more agency.

Black By Popular Demand: Black Women on Niche Black Television

Stagnant broadcast representations of Blackness and Black women began to shift in the mid to late 1980s due to simultaneous structural and technological shifts in the television industry. In *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, Herman Gray argues (1995) argues the introduction of increased market competition from emerging cable programming and a new fourth broadcast network, Fox, precipitated decreased viewership for the big three broadcast networks. Networks noticed that while ratings amongst white, middle-class viewers dropped, primarily due to economic privilege that allowed them to access paid cable channels and VCR technology, ratings amongst Black viewers, who could not as easily afford the luxury of these emerging technologies, held steady. In addition, since cable programming did not wholly rely on advertising for revenue, these new competitors could take more risks in their approaches to programming, presenting new, alluring, and diverse content that traditional

networks were unable (or unwilling) to offer their viewers. Gray argues that due to these shifting market conditions, legacy broadcast networks began offering more niche, Black-centered content as a way to retain the Black viewership that was now central to their revenue stream (Gray, 1995).

These changes ultimately led to increased, yet limited representations of Black people and Black life on television. While broadcast networks now offered a wider variety of shows that focused on Black life, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Frank's Place* (1987-1988), and *Living Single* (1993-1998), these representations were often packaged in ways that networks felt would still be relatable to general, white audiences. Specifically, these shows depict upper-middle-class Black characters who espoused the assimilationist ideals of respectability politics and compulsive heteronormativity (Gray, 1995, Smith-Shomade, 2002). Nevertheless, some of these shows still offered what Gray terms a "multicultural" expressions of Black life, moving away from the monolithic representations of Blackness and towards a more diverse and nuanced discussion of what it means to be Black in America, especially as it related to the nuances of race, gender, sexuality, and complexion. Gray suggests shows like *A Different World* (1987-1993) about the lives of young, Black students at a fictional HBCU engaged in nuanced conversations about sexual assault and colorism, specifically through the lens of its Black women characters. Further, the show troubled notions of toxic masculinity and homophobia within the Black community (Gray, 1995). Gray attributes these nuances in *A Different*, the show's Black women directors and producers. Thus, while shows like *A Different World* focused on a certain type of Black woman —middle-class and college-educated —these dynamic representations expanded the wholeness of Black women's depictions on television in ways that had not previously been seen.

Simultaneously, cable stations such as the WB, UPN, and HBO, as well as the newest broadcast network FOX, which unlike traditional broadcast networks felt they had less to lose by taking risks because of their upstart position in the market, often employed Black-centered stories as a way to brand their networks in the hopes of attracting audiences through "edginess" and "difference" (Fuller, 2000; Smith-Shomade, 2002; Zook, 1999). In this way, this increased diversity of Black representation on television was part of an industry-wide strategy to increase revenue and less about offering nuanced and diverse representations of Blackness. Nevertheless, this moment presented an opportunity for Black

women showrunners to create content that highlighted the dynamic social location of Black women (Gray, 1995). However, these depictions were often still limited by the heteronormative bounds of mainstream television. Further, the impetus for increased depictions of Black characters was driven by economic impulses to attract untapped Black audiences, once these Black shows were no longer seen as being of service to networks, they would disappear, and by the early 2000s, almost all Black-focused content had disappeared from the networks and were exclusively on cable channels (Gray, 2005; Smith-Shomade, 2002).

Within these new representations of Blackness on television, Black women were given more agency and continued to be objectified on television (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Zook (1999) argues representations of Black women at this time both pushed against the monolithic representation of the broadcast era and, at the same time, were often still encased in a heteronormative framework. Zook illustrates this by analyzing the hit Fox sitcoms *Martin* (1992-1997) and *Living Single*. Zook argues that while *Martin's* portrayal of Black women highlighted an underlying anti-woman hostility, portraying "independent" women as loud and manipulative, *Living Single* often took on radical womanist undertones portrayed through the character of Khadija, played by Queen Latifah. One particularly disturbing way misogyny surfaced in *Martin* was through the character of Shanaynay, a loud, "ghetto" chick played by Lawrence in drag, which made Black women the punchline of the joke by recreating a satirical version of the Sapphire bitch stereotype (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Zook, 1999). Conversely, Zook attributes more dynamic representations of Black women on *Living Single* to Latifah's outspoken brand as a Black womanist rapper (Zook, 1999). At the same time, *Living Single* still had its limitations. Like my analysis of *Girlfriends* in the introduction, Zook notes that *Living Single* often portrayed Black women as man-obsessed. Additionally, network executives often pushed to distance Latifah's character from her as a person, especially as rumors about her sexuality began to percolate (Smith-Shomade, 2002). These analyses point us to the complexities and ambiguities around Black women's representation in this era of niche, Black programming.

These insights also point to the limits of Black representation on white-owned networks that still aim to appeal to mass audiences. For instance, Zook notes that Fox network executives only hired a Black

woman showrunner on *Living Single* at the request of the show's Black woman stars, Queen Latifah and Kim Fields, who were already famous and key to drawing audiences to the show. Similarly, Lewis (2012) suggests *Girlfriends* (2006-2009) and *The Game* (2006-2015) showed progressive conversation around the impact of AIDS/HIV on Black women through the lenses of race, gender, and sexuality due, in large part, due to the creative and filmic vision of their creator and producer, Mara Brock Aki. However, the abrupt cancellation of both shows by their white-owned network, UPN and CW, respectively, points to the larger constraints of racism and heteropatriarchal capitalism in which these shows were developed and confined. Thus, this tepid acquiescence to these Black women's insistence upon more authentic representation has often meant that these representations can be expansive and limited. Brock Aki's vision for Black women's representation was only allowed to flourish to the point that white executives saw it as non-threatening to the larger social realities they aimed to propagate. In this way, we see how popular media institutions play a crucial role in both helping to make capitalism appear friendlier to marginalized subjects, as targeted audiences with buying power, while at the same time limiting their overall cultural capital within society by defining and limiting these representations (Smith-Shomade, 2007).

Handling It: Black Women Audiences, New Media, & the Push for Diverse Representation

In these earlier eras of Broadcast and cable networks, both the perceived success of a show and advertiser revenue was predicated on indirect rating systems and pseudo-science audience surveys; there was no financial benefit for network executives and producers to respond to opinions and representational demands of marginalized audiences (Buzzard 1992, 2012; Gitlin, 1973). However, the power of these once ignored audiences to assert pressure on networks has grown in the age of digital media and streaming television. Fan studies scholar Nancy Baym (2000) argued that with the rise of the internet and Web 1.0 in the 1990s and early 2000s, audiences could directly address their thoughts, criticism, and critiques of the show to network executives and those in charge of production. Discourse within these online fan communities in chat rooms and blogs opened the possibility that other audiences and television producers could see these critiques—resulting in a material change in representation.

Additionally, the rise of new media technologies and an increasingly crowded media environment have forced television networks to shift how they think about audiences' value. The proliferation of digital technology within the realm of television since the VCR in the 1980s, including time-shifting devices such as TiVo and DVR and later online television streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, have made it harder for traditional Nielsen rating services to measure audience size accurately, the metrics networks use to monetize their audiences (Buzzard, 2012). Further, the exponential growth of channels and mediums of television watching available to audiences has increased intra-media fragmentations within households—making it harder for Nielsen meters to account for the full scope of television watching within a household (Kosterich & Napoli, 2017).

As a result of these inadequacies of traditional rating monitors, networks have increasingly turned to social media and social media analytics to monetize their audiences to advertisers (Moe, Poell, & van Dijk, 2016). Institutionalizing the fungibility of social media audiences, in December 2012, Nielsen announced it was creating the "Nielsen Twitter TV Rating" in U.S. market, offering a quantifiable and value-facing way networks could measure how social media audiences were engaging with their shows (Bouryal & Horwitz, 2012). While social analytics do not measure actual audience viewing, these metrics give networks and advertisers insights into audience engagement, allowing them to ascertain direct and immediate feedback about content on a previously impossible scale. Further, as opposed to traditional Nielsen ratings, which used a sampling method to measure audiences, social media analytics, as a form of "big data," are seen as offering a more holistic view of potential audiences, allowing for new strategic insights into content creation and advertising (Kosterich & Napoli, 2017). Here, I do not mean to suggest that social media analytics have come to replace traditional rating systems. Rather, social media rating and analytics offer an additional channel through which audiences can directly support or divest from television in a way that is knowable, and, most importantly, monetizable to networks.

Networks can now use social media analytics as a now market-friendly way to justify-content decisions, including casting, renewals, and cancellations (Lynch, 2015; Maas, 2019; Clark & Wittmer, 2019). Empirical studies have found a correlation between social media conversations around a television show and ratings, justifying how these new analytics can act as a new proxy for audience monetization (Oh &

Yergeau, 2017). At the same time, this may mean networks may feel more beholden to audience feedback and concern, opening up new avenues for previously ignored audiences to influence television representation and content. Potential evidence for this impact of marginalized on television content through social media is that several network television show led by women of color, femme, and queer actors, such as *The Mindy Project*, *One Day at a Time*, and *Sense8*, have all been saved from cancellation by audience engagement.

Black audiences, in particular, have been quick to engage with television networks and content through social media. Jacqueline Johnson (2018) illustrates how Black fans of the show *Underground* (WGN, 2016-2017) took to Twitter after the show's cancellation, mobilizing #SaveUnderground to save the show and communally mourn the loss of Black programming. Through targeted hashtags, Johnson specifically notes how even though *Underground* was not renewed for a second season, "the platform conventions and design of Twitter make black challenges to white helmed studios and networks more visible and easily identifiable" (para. 5).

Black women and femmes, specifically, have similarly used Twitter to critique popular representations they feel are harmful. In July 2017, five Black women took to Twitter using #NoConfederate to contest the creation of *Confederate*, a new H.B.O show by *Game of Thrones* (*GOT*) showrunners, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, set in an alternative world where the South won the Civil War and had seceded from the Union. On Sunday, July 30th, the #NoConfederate campaign launched on Twitter during that evening's *GOT* airing. By the end of the night, the hashtag trended #1 in the U.S. and #2 globally (Nevins, 2017). While it is unclear if the show's eventual cancellation was a result of this campaign, what the campaign was able to do, much like #SaveUnderground, was make visible to producers the concerns of Black viewers around potential representations of Blackness and, in this case, Black womanhood on the show. This ability of Black users to use the currency of social media to critique and push against mainstream representations of Black womanhood can be seen as particularly important and powerful in a time where "the driving economic logic is that diversity sells" (Farr, 2016, p. 155), leading streaming and premium cable channels to make increased commitments to on-screen diversity (Bonsivert, 2020). In

other words, to profit from diverse content, these networks can not be publicly seen as harmful to diverse and inclusive representation.

Monique Liston (2017) argues in their critique and engagement with television through social media, Black women espouse the key tenants of Collins' (1989) Black Feminist epistemology. Examining Black women's Twitter engagement with the show *Scandal*, Liston argues Black women engage in dialogue around the show's representation of Black womanhood through their own lived experiences, create communities of care by "@ing, commenting, and retweeting other Black women, and hold those in power accountable by "@ing in their comments to Rhimes directly. In these ways, Liston demonstrates how Black women use social media to engage Black feminist thought to critique to push back against stereotypical or problematic representations in ways that draw from their own dynamic experiences of Black womanhood. These overwhelming and public-facing and Black feminist-informed critiques of mainstream representations of Black womanhood combined with the increasing prevalence of audience metrics and social media analytics in how networks measure the success may give these critiques have added value in how producers are thinking about crafting representations of Black women. In this way, the increased value of social media metrics has potentially given Black women audiences more power to put pressure on networks to engage with authentic and holistic representations of Black womanhood. Similar to the social media reactions that circulated in response to the syndication of *Girlfriends*, the rise of new media and technology has given rise not only to new ways representations of representations Black womanhood on television can be critiqued, but the importance and value of these critiques to networks and advertisers who increasingly use these new direct audience metrics as a way gauge the potential value of a show.

New technologies have also allowed historically marginalized communities to create their own representations in the television market, highlighting the value of diverse and dynamic representations of Blackness previously unrecognized by network executives. In *Open Television: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*, Aymar Jean Christian (2018) argues that the development of the more accessible filming technology in conjunction with the rise of the internet and easily accessible video distribution websites such as YouTube and Vimeo, have opened new opportunities for individuals who have historically been marginalized, misrepresented, and underrepresented in mainstream television and

media industry to produce independent media that reflect their own lived experiences. These creators no longer need to rely on television networks for representations that accurately reflect their lives and identities—they can now make, produce, and distribute these portrayals themselves. Further, while capital and economies of scale still mean that it is hard for these producers to find audiences and success online, those web series from BIPOC creators that do become successful prove to larger networks that there is a value in authentic representation “beyond branding” and audiences outside of mainstream, white viewers (Christian, 2020).

Scholars have specifically noted how web series by Black women and femmes have presented new ways of representing Black women’s subjectivities that actively push against monolithic stereotypes. For instance, media scholars such as Ariane Cruz (2015), Rebecca Wanzo (2016) Francesca Sobade (2019) have noted how Issa Rae’s web series “The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl” deploys awkwardness as a way to reshape popular narratives of Black women as monolithic sexual or asexual object. As Cruz suggests, “The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl” constructs “complex and contradictory portrait of Black female sexuality that is simultaneously unwieldy and easily consumed, hyper- racialized and deracialized, unique and universal, aggressive and diffident” (p.73). Cruz and Wanzo, in particular, note how, through its focus on awkwardness, the show embraces the potential abject nature of Blackness as a way to resist predominant stereotypes that reinforce the dichotomous positive/negative framework through which Black women on television have historically been depicted. As Wanzo suggests:

J’s awkwardness is not developmental, nor is it something she will outgrow. Rather, it is grounded in her African American subject position. Blackness may make J abject, but her particular performance of blackness is also a means of rejecting the kind of abjection traditionally linked to racist stereotypes. Awkwardness is not something usually associated or synonymous with abjection. However, the dissonance between awkwardness and blackness puts J in a transitional (and comically transformative) space, in that she is between being unrecognizable to others as black and being unassimilable as abject(p. 46).

In this way, as Cruz argues, Rae’s use of awkwardness, while grounded in a particular experience of Black womanhood, allows her to attach the representations of Black womanhood she creates to larger arguments about the universality of ‘awkwardness’ as a trope and individual subjective experience. Further, the show’s focus on a dark-skinned Black woman with short hair, who was still romantic and sexually

desirable, helped disrupt traditional mainstream depictions of Black women as desexualized mammy or the sexual, light-skinned tragic mullato or jezebel (Cruz, 2015; Sobade, 2019).

The success of "Awkward Black Girl" helped prove the value of this non-monolithic representation to mainstream networks — opening the doors for Rae to create a show on premium cable channel HBO, entitled *Insecure* (2016-2021). *Insecure* continues to highlight the potentialities of Black feminist representations by focusing on the complex and dialectical nature of Black womanhood and ultimately expands how Black women are portrayed on television (Levy 2020). In this way, these web series have the power to reclaim and speak back to popular culture's portrayal of Black womanhood and ultimately expand how Black women are portrayed on television (Levy, 2020; Sobande, 2019).

Faith Day (2018), Moya Bailey (2021), and Aymar Jean Christian (2018) have also examined the specific way web series have been deployed to rearticulate representations of Black queer people. Bailey (2021) argues web series allow Black queer and trans folks to create media representations that resist the monolithic and misogynoir framework through which mainstream media has typically depicted them. As Bailey writes, these web series are "less about creating positive or respectable images that would appeal to normative audiences, but rather a means of creating networks and representations that speak to communities not acknowledged in mainstream media" (p. 104). However, as Day (2018) posits from her analysis of Black lesbian performances in web series and the discursive communities that form around them, the limited depictions of Black queer women in mainstream media produce concerns around the complex and nuanced ways these web series must approach queer politics as not to reproduce heteronormative and oppressive binaries. This research exposes the possibilities of web series for producing new articulations of Black womanhood, femmeness, and queerness and the potential profitability of these more nuanced representations. As Christian suggests, the ability of these web series creators, like Rae, to successfully build an audience and a following allows legacy television producers to see the potential market value of funding television shows that provide more expansive representations of Black women, femme, and queer folks.

Building on this, I suggest that because new and digital media has allowed television networks to not only see but economically benefit from the increasing the market value of creating expansive

representation of Black women, femmes, and queer folks. I argue this has caused a new space in popular media for shows that mobilize Black feminist frameworks such as intersectionality and standpoint theory to create characters that resist monolithic stereotyping. I examine this phenomenon through a close reading of two such popular television shows on mainstream, legacy television networks *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019-) and *Pose* (2018-2021). Specifically, I argue that the increased value placed on Black women, femme, and LGBTQIA+ audiences and creators, these television shows have been able to engage more critically with the ways race, gender, sexuality, and class. I also foreground this analysis in discourse analysis of conversations surrounding these shows to provide deeper insights into what the show's creators may have been thinking when crafting these representations. Thus, while my analysis of these shows can not definitively state if the show's creators used the exact Black feminist framework through which I read these media texts, what it can reveal is the ways the production and development of these shows may inform a specific Black feminist reading of Black women, femme, and LGBTQIA+ representations.

‘Specifically Cast but Universally Funny’:

Showcasing the Diversity of Black womanhood in Comedy

A Black Lady Sketch Show (hereafter referred to as *ABLSS*), which airs on the premium cable network HBO, was created in 2019 by Black woman comedian Robin Thede. A known comedic talent who had previously hosted her own late-night show on BET — *The Rundown with Robin Thede* (2017) — Thede pitched the show to HBO with Issa Rae, who at the time was successfully executive producing and starring in the network's hit show *Insecure* (2016-2021) (HBO, 2019a). Thede, who showruns, executive produces, writes, and acts on the show, said she had been wanting to create *ABLSS* since leaving college:

I was performing with a lot of Black women throughout my years in comedy in live shows, but I never got to see a lot of *us* doing sketch comedy, especially not together on television. So I knew when I had the chance to create this I was gonna jump at it (HBO, 2019b).

Thede's comment speaks to how the historical underrepresentation of Black women in televised comedy, despite their actual presence in comedy as writers and comedians off-camera, was a key impetus for *ABLSS*.

Thede's remark, "especially not together," also highlights how, when Black women on sketch comedy shows, they are often the only one, relegating them to offering a singular, limited representation of Black womanhood. These actresses are often tokenized and given less respect and comedic freedoms than their white male counterparts. Contemporary examples of this include Black women cast members on popular sketch comedy shows such as Sasheer Zamata on NBC's *SNL* (1975-) and Debra Wilson on Fox's *MadTV* (1995-2009) (Comedy Hype, 2021; Schilling, 2017). In an interview with the vlog Comedy Hype, Debra Wilson revealed she quit *MadTV* after eight seasons because, despite being the only Black woman cast member since the show premiered, she was paid less than many white male cast members who had joined the show after her (Comedy Hype, 2021). These experiences of Black women comedians on televised sketch comedy shows underscore the importance of the casting on *ABLSS*, which features a diverse array of Black women actresses. Thede often notes *ABLSS* is "specifically cast, but it's universally funny," which she says speaks to the range of humor and comedic talent Black women have to offer "I want to show that Black women are funny, but we aren't just one type of funny." (Searles, 2019).

In each episode of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, Thede is joined by fellow Black woman cast members, comedians Quinta Brunson,¹⁸ Ashley Nicole Black, and Gabrielle Dennis, to perform sketches based on the diverse experiences of Black women. In addition to this core cast, the series features a variety of guest appearances by Black women comedians, actresses, and known personalities, including (but far from limited to): Angela Bassett, Vanessa Bell Calloway, Laverne Cox, Amara La Negra, Nicole Byers, Loretta Divine, Kelly Rowland, Gina Torres, and Issa Rae, who also serves as one of the show's Executive Producers. Commenting on the importance of this specific casting choice, Black, who also serves as a writer on the show, noted:

I feel like when there's only one Black woman on a show, you kind of have the pressure to make sure she looks kind of good because she's the only one and people may think you're saying something about all Black women if you say something bad about her. But on a show where there's hundreds of Black women characters and we can see the most annoying, the weirdest, the worst...the most fun I've had as a comic is like, 'oh, I get to play the worst character ever' which I hadn't gotten to do before. (Writers Guild Foundation, 2020)

¹⁸Brunson did not appear on the second season of *A Black Lady Sketch show*.

The show's deliberate casting of an array of Black women actresses gave the show's writers the freedom to represent the range of what it can mean to hold a Black woman identity beyond a singular, static representation. Many of the show's writers said having this range of Black character representation allowed them to shift away from crafting the "right" or "the best" Black woman representation and instead focus on building full, rich three-dimensional characters that were complex and dynamic. In other words, it gave them the freedom to more realistically depict the full range of what it means to be a Black woman. In addition, this casting brought attention to how previous comedy shows' scant hiring of Black actresses was not from lack of available talent but a manifestation of the systemic marginalization of Black people, women, and Black women in particular in comedy and television entertainment writ large. As Thede notes, she did not have to work hard "find" this cast "y'all just been ignoring them," highlighting the ways Black women's talents are often overlooked and tokenized in the television industry (Writers Guild Foundation, 2020).

We Made it to the Top: Black Women Writing Black Women's Stories.

A first of its kind, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is completely shaped and crafted by a diverse group of Black women. The entire first season of the show was directed and co-executive produced by Dimonique "Dime" Davis, a Black, queer woman whose work on the show resulted in her being the first Black woman to get an Emmy nomination in the variety show directing category (Turchiano, 2020a). In addition, the first season of the show was written by a group of eight Black women comedians, led by head writer and co-executive producer Lauren Ashley Smith.

An all Black-women's writer's room is arguably revolutionary. Historically television writers' rooms have been dominated by white men, creating systemic patterns of exclusion that deeply impact the way Black women are represented on screen. In her book *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild*, Miranda Banks (2015) notes that writers of color and women writers often experience a sense of insider exclusion in the writer's room: not only are they highly underrepresented, but their opinions are not valued or respected. Many of these writers struggle to make fellow writers and producers conscious of what, to them, are clearly offensive stereotypes. This historical exclusion and marginalization

of people of color and women in the writer's rooms comes from the institutionalized view that screen-writing, despite often being rhetorically framed as a form of creative artistry, mandates a certain level of education, thus excluding non-white men (Banks, 2015). Further, early inclusion and membership in the writer's room was based on one's ability to assimilate into the culture of the head writers, who were predominantly highly educated, white, Jewish, men (Henderson, 2011). As a result, women and people of color have historically struggled to gain membership into this space, which serves an integral role in shaping on-screen representation — especially in comedy.

Writer, showrunner, and media scholar Felicia Henderson (2011) argues that writer's rooms are "ground zero" for the comedy genre, a "quasi-familial and organizational rules structure conventionalized socioprofessional activities that overdetermined the manner by which television's on-screen texts are authored" (Henderson, 2011, p. 145). The comedy writer's room is the space in which representation is negotiated, contested, and ultimately decided (Henderson, 2011; Heuman, 2016). Within these historically white and male-dominated writer's rooms, networks and showrunners have engaged the rhetoric of creative freedom to allow writers to make crude racist and sexist remarks. In turn, they protect the privilege of white men to be culturally insensitive in the name of creativity, marginalizing and silencing writers of color, women writers, and especially women of color writers (Heuman, 2016). Also, this writer's room culture often precipitates an environment where the crux of most television humor becomes jokes centered on categorizations of difference that can potentially perpetuate harmful stereotypes (Henderson, 2011). As a result, Black writers and particularly Black women writers, have often found it difficult to tell their stories accurately and authentically within these spaces.

Even Black comedian-led sketch comedy shows have not always taken care of when addressing the nuances of representations within the Black community, especially around gender and sexuality. One key example of this is Fox's *In Living Color* (1990-1994), a sketch comedy and variety show created by Black male comedian Keenen Ivory Wayans, the eldest brother of the Wayans comedic family, including brothers Damon, Shawn, and Marlon, and sister Kim. While *In Living Color's* sketches foregrounded Black cultural politics in a way most mainstream sketch comedies shows would not and can not, it has often approached these issues through a framework of ambivalence, not taking a particularly strong stance

on issues of race, gender, and sexuality (Gray, 1995). While this ambivalence allowed the show to have a broader appeal, it also perpetuated derogatory stereotypes about Black women and LGBTQIA+ people (Schulman, 1992). Black women and LGBTQIA+ characters on the show are often the butt of the joke through reliance on reductive stereotypes, such as the shaming of Black women's bodies and appearance in the recurring sketch characters "Oprah Winfrey" sketch the character "Wanda," played by comedian Jamie Foxx in drag, and portrayals of Black gay men as emasculated and overtly feminine in the recurring "Men on..." sketches and the "Gays in the Military" sketch (Gray, 1995).

Thus, the significance of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* lies not only in its representational focus on Black women specifically but in the fact that a diverse group of Black women specifically crafts these representations. In a conversation hosted by the Writers Guild Foundation, the women noted the freedom and sense of ease that came from working in an all-Black women writer's room. As Theede commented:

We have this armor when we go into a writer's room just because of our former experiences we're used to having to explain ourselves, our culture, our womanhood, our Blackness... and I remember... The first week, we had to go like, 'oh, what show are we pitching for?' Like it was like we were pitching ideas that centered whiteness or other things that we thought about because that's just like how we were conditioned and we were like, wait, wait, wait, guys, we don't have to do any of that.

In this way, the women quickly learned that a fundamental part of what *A Black Lady Sketch Show* allowed them to do was decenter whiteness in their comedy and instead focus on building dynamic and complex Black women characters. Similarly, writer Brittani Nichols commented:

One thing I don't think I noticed until we had that conversation just about what the expectations for the room were, I think, especially as a queer person, I'd gotten used to being like, "all right f' you guys, like I'm writing this from my perspective and I'm not gonna explain anything." And to realize that I hadn't been given the opportunity to do that with my Blackness was like something that I walked away from the room with and take [sic] that with me in every project I've done since then.

Nichols' comment also points to the ways the writer's room created by *A Black Lady Sketch Show* allowed her to bring her whole self into the writer's room, not just as a queer person, but as a Black queer person, when writing her sketches and crafting the characters on screen. In addition, Nichols' comment emphasizes how being a writer on *ABLSS* allows her to take this fullness of her Blackness and

queerness in her writing into other writers' rooms, potentially speaking to the lasting impact *ABLSS* will have on Black women's representation on television.

This distinct nature of *ABLSS*'s writer's rooms also allowed the women to build a new writer's room culture based on mutual care and support. As writer Holly Walker commented: "A beautiful thing about this writer's room is that everyone had everyone else's back," reflecting on how, despite coming into the first season feeling pressure to come up with a lot of content, by the start of the second season she felt more relaxed as she realized "I'm good, they all got me, I can be the nutball that I am and go in there with the ideas that I have because they're gonna support and 'yes and' everything that I do." As Walker shifted her mindset from that of a traditional writer room rooted in neoliberal ideas of individual productivity to the supportive and caring writer's room community created in *ABLSS*, she realized she was able to let go of her 'armor' and fully be her whole self (Writers Guild Foundation, 2020). In this way, parallel to the care seen in *The TRiBE* newsroom, the unique culture of an all-Black women writer's room allowed the writers of *ABLSS* the freedom to embrace their wholeselves and all the facets of what it means to be a Black woman that is systematically repressed in other, predominantly-white writer's rooms.

In the following section, I engage in a close of *ABLSS* pilot episode to understand how these off-screen impulses to focus on the heterogeneity of Black womanhood show up in the Black women characters portrayed on *ABLSS*. As the first episode of the series, the pilot episode sets the tone for the entire series and provides a particularly clarifying space to understand the dynamics of Black women's representation in the rest of the series. Additionally, I discuss select sketches from other episodes to demonstrate how the show brings a new dimension to historical conversations about Black women's lives. The pilot episode of *ABLSS*, entitled "Angela Bassett Is the Baddest B***h," uses the range of Black women actresses available and the framework of sketch comedy to showcase the heterogeneity of what it means to live as a Black woman. Specifically, the episode interrogates issues of misogynoir, the commodification of Black women's bodies, and compulsory heterosexuality.

ABLSS: Representation From the Best to the Worst

Dynamic representations of Black Womanhood

From the very opening of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, the audience understands how the show thinks about and positions Black women's liberation and agency. In *ABLSS's* title sequence, set to the song "Hot Girl" by rapper Megan Thee Stallion, who is known for creating women-centric, sexually liberated anthems, we see each of the four main cast members depicted as puppets engaging in seemingly innocent, everyday acts that quickly turn various forms of transgressive debauchery: Thede's puppet seems to innocently approach two young girls running a lemonade before stealing the lemonade and running away. Brunson's puppet flirts and kisses a man at a bar, who we soon learn is not her husband. Dennis's puppet sits under a dryer at a hair salon reading "For (Stuffed) Colored Puppets who have considered suicide/ when the Rain bow is enuf," a puppet-themed take on the classic "choreopoem" by Black feminist playwright and poet Ntozake Shange, right before her hair catches fire. Finally, we see Black's puppet walking through the aisle of a grocery store only moments before she pulls out a gun and shoots the cashier in a presumed attempt to rob the store; in response, the cashier, also a Black woman puppet, pulls out her own gun and kills Dennis [See image 5].

In each of these sequences, we can see how *A Black Lady Sketch Show* aims to foreground the depiction of its Black women characters in a sense of complex agency. Despite being presented as literal objects, each of the women clearly and intentionally deviates from what the audience expects them to do or be. In other words, as opposed to relying on the predictability of stereotypes, *ABLSS* inverts their audience's expectations of how they expect Black women, highlighting the dynamism of Black women's lived realities. At the end of the title sequence, we see all four puppet women walking together in a group down the sidewalk as the chorus of Megan Thee Stallions' song repeats in the background, "don't get mad ho, get a bag ho." In this way, the scene ends by portraying the same sense of Black women's community and support recognized by the writers — despite their seemingly transgressive acts, in the end, Black women come together and support each other to get their "bag."¹⁹

¹⁹"Bad bitch," is a colloquial term used to refer to making money and accumulating wealth.



Image 5:
A Black Lady Sketch Show, Season 1 Opener

In the first scene after the title sequence of the pilot episode, we see a slate reads: 7:00 PM 11 hours and 10 minutes after "The Event," the specifics of which are not revealed to the audience. The scene opens up with the four main actresses at a casual girl's night, drinking and engaging in jovial conversation. As part of the unique nature of *ABLSS*, all of the sketches are linked together by a series of interstitial skits, in which the core cast members all play characters by their same names. These interstitial skits run throughout the first season, encasing all the sketches in one larger narrative. Like in the title sequence, the conversations in the skits portray a complex and diverse understanding of Black women's lives, views, and opinions related to issues of race and gender that are often unseen on television. In this first interstitial, we see the women playing "never have I ever," a party game in which participants hold up ten fingers and take turns trying to reveal private or embarrassing exploits by saying "never have I ever," prompting anyone who has done that thing to put a finger down. Throughout the game, the characters disclose foolish actions from their past, awkward sexual exploits, and embarrassing crushes: Robin stole her cousin Quinta's boyfriend, Gabriel says she has never done a walk of shame "because she wasn't ashamed," and Ashley has to put a finger down after Quinta prompts "never have I ever written love poetry to Cornel West and gotten a cease and desist letter in return." Far from the narrow

categories of Black womanhood depicted by the a-sexual mammy, the hypersexual jezebel, and the bitchy sapphire, these disclosures position these characters as Black women who take ownership and agency over their bodies and self-define the terms of their actions. By removing the judgment and shame often imposed on their actions by white, heteropatriarchal society, the Black women characters on *ABLSS* enact self-definition, a key tenant of Black Feminist Thought that aids to validate Black women's specific social standpoint (Collins, 1989). In this way, *ABLSS* frames these Black women's lives as complex and dynamic. In addition, claiming or reclaiming these awkward and embarrassing moments allow the Black women depicted on *ABLSS* to use Black abjection to reject stereotypes around Blackwomanhood and challenge racist and misogynistic understandings of these actions (Sobande, 2019).

The interstitial ends with the characters trying to find something to watch on television which opens up a discussion about misogyny and sexual assault in the Black community.

Quinta: Oh *Baby Boy*, I haven't seen this in ages.

Ashley: No, we canceled that movie, misogyny.

Quinta: I'm not canceling anything with Tyrese in it, I still fap to that Coca-cola commercial

Everyone laughs

This conversation about misogyny and cancel culture, which is extended throughout the remaining interstitial skits in the episode, depicts the complexity of Black women's relationship to Black popular culture: Despite the Black community's love of this classic John Singleton film, how do Black women contend with the fact that the movie's protagonist Joseph "Jody Summers thoroughly embodies toxic masculinity and often tries to prove his manhood by abusing and being sexist towards the women in his life? The answer provided by *ABLSS*: It's complicated. The conversation playfully reveals how Black women must constantly contend with what it means to identify with their Blackness and their womanhood, even when these identities are seemingly at odds. In addition, seeing Quinta and Ashley's varying responses to this situation underscores that Black women are not a one-dimensional monolith and often have differing perspectives and ideas when navigating the intersections of race and sex. This conversation then transitions into the show's first full sketch: "Motown Meltdown."

Untangling Misogynoir through parody

In "Motown Meltdown," the women play members of "Claude and the Boppers," a Motown-style singing group in which Thede plays Claude, and Black, Dennis, and Brunson play the rest of "the Boppers", Roy, Floyd, and Josephus, respectively. In the sketch, the group is backstage for their first big performance at the "Aphrodite Theater" after having only played smaller venues such as "Clementine's Rib Shack and Shoe Repair," where they were compensated in ribs. While it seems like this may be the group's big break, right before their performance is about to begin, Claude enters and tells the rest of the group he's about to "flip it and dip it" and to "try to keep up." As the group begins performing their hit song "Ice Cream Shop," unbeknownst to the rest of the group, Claude changes the lyrics, turning the one innocent du-op song into a sexist ballad filled with graphic innuendo. Throughout the sketch, we see Claude and his fellow group members engage in a battle over the meaning of the song and their thoughts on role and agency of women in society:

The Boppers: Holdin' hands in the ice cream shop. Woah woah woah. Holdin' hands in the ice cream shop. Woah woah woah. Of all the flavors, you're the cream of the crop, yeah. Holdin' hands in the ice cream shop.

Claude: A girl like you should never be alone, *come taste the flavor of my ice cream cone. Your two scoops* leave me at a loss, *I cover them in my chocolate sauce.*²⁰ [Claude thrusts his pelvis toward the audience].

The Boppers: Ew, ew, ew.

Floyd: Chocolate sauce goes on dessert, not on the Milk Duds under your shirt

The Boppers: Woah, woah, woah.

Floyd: We're just here to ask you out, that's what this song used to be about.

Claude: She satisfy any scratch I need itchin', and once a week, I let her out of the kitchen.

The Boppers: Wait, wait, wait.

Claude: Every night, she'll make my supper, after the dishes she'll do me and my brother.

²⁰Italicized for accentuation

The Boppers: [angrily] Hey, hey hey!

Roy: If she wants to, that's one option in the myriad of things she can do-oooh. For instance, my wife is a teacher, I love you, Sheila, this wasn't my idea!

The song continues in this fashion, going back and forth between Claude's increasingly graphic ice cream-laden innuendo and his fellow group member's attempts at correcting him, until the rest of the Boppers are so fed up that they try to force Claude offstage, ending in a brawl between Floyd and Claude. In a concluding scroll, the audience is told that Boppers never performed again after Claude died the next day in a "tragic ball-juggling accident in an ice cream shop," but that his legacy lives on through his grandson, Chris Brown.

Like the earlier conversation about Tyrese, this song uses humor to discuss the historical sexism and misogyny aimed at Black women in Black popular music (Frisby & Behm-Morawitz, 2019). Claude represents a specific type of singer that takes what could have been an innocent song about love and romance and sees it as an opportunity to objectify women and reinforce patriarchal stereotypes. This is particularly underscored by directly connecting Claude to the lineage of Chris Brown, a misogynist known for physically and verbally abusing women (Zimmerman, 2017; Kai, 2019). In light of the earlier conversation in the interstitial, the audience is also faced with the question: What do we do with Black male entertainers like Claude and Brown who perpetuate toxic masculinity and misogyny towards Black women? How do we divest from them or hold them accountable? And what does it mean that these forms of misogyny in Black music are not new, but in fact, part of a lineage, as the skit insinuates? Further, by using the rest of the Boppers as a corrective to Claude's misogyny, the sketch is also intentional to not represent all Black men or all Black men entertainers in a way that is monolithic or generalizing, highlighting the complex and fraught nature of allyship and support Black women receive from within the Black community. Then, seamlessly, in the next sketch, the show shifts from discussing the perpetuation of misogyny by Black men within the Black community to examining how Black women can also perpetuate misogynistic rhetoric.

Flipping the stereotype of the Hotep on its head, in the next sketch entitled, "Hertep Masterclass," the show parodies Black women who propagate unfounded, conspiracy-theory laden, hotepary. A Hertep

refers to a woman version of a Hotep, a word derived from an Egyptian word for "at peace," that over the past decade in popular culture has come to be associated with Black men who engage liberatory rhetorics that are extremely Afrocentricity and yet highly uninformed about Africa. Instead, these ideas are often rooted in conspiracy theories (especially ones related to race) and misogynistic and heteropatriarchal understandings of society (Young, 2016; Gaillot, 2017). Throughout the sketch, we see the show use parody to explore the ways not only Hoteps but also Herteps play into these unfounded misogynistic notions.

In "Hertep Masterclass," we see "critically acclaimed author" and "world-renowned philosophizer," Dr. Haddassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman Pre-Ph.D., played by Thede, advertising her latest masterclass, entitled: "Hertep Masterclass: Polygamy is Only Wrong if a Woman Does it." To visually signal her hertepness, so to speak, Ali-Youngman is dressed head to toe in non-specific African clothing, covered in Afrocentric jewelry, and has her hair in short, blonde dreadlocks [See **Image 6**]. To add to this Afrocentric aesthetic, behind Ali-Youngman are rows of tribal masks, an African drum, a piece of kente cloth hanging over the wall, and two Pan-African flags. Throughout the commercial, Ali-Youngman provides glimpses into her teachings with choice phrases such as: "Our Black family unit is under threat. Our Black men are unfocused and unproductive, doing frivolous things like getting therapy and smiling;" and "women are supposed to be the keepers of the home, but today's sisters are trying to exist outside the role of wife and mother; but if you're a wife and a mother you don't belong outside, take your shoes off." From these lines, we can see how parody is mobilized to examine how Black women such as Ali-Youngman also propagate sexist and patriarchal constructs within the Black community.

Further, throughout the commercial, Ali-Youngman advertises that she will teach her students how to "conspiracize," stating, "you have to ignore the empirical evidence that contradicts your beliefs. Think about it: Em-pirical, Em-pire, Free Jesse, Free ya-mind, Free En Vogue." Nonsensical "conspiracizing" like this, in conjunction with Ali-Youngman's improper titling of herself as a doctor despite still being "Pre" Ph.D., signals to the audience that Ali-Youngman's teachings are unfounded and not to be trusted. Unlike *In Living Color*, *ABLSS* does not take an ambiguous stance on Ali-Youngman's misogyny — she is wrong, and her rhetoric is being mocked.



Image 6:
Robin Thede as Dr. Haddassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman Pre-Ph.D. in "Herstep Masterclass."

In making characters like Ali-Youngman visible, *ABLSS* also showcases that not all Black women are Black feminists or even feminists. Black women have differing opinions regarding gender roles and women's agency, even amongst themselves. Talking about the character, Thede commented, "It was definitely somebody that I very much went to college with and had known and seen on Twitter in the days since" (Writers Guild Foundation, 2020). Thus, while being careful not to endorse what the character of Ali-Youngman is saying, through critical parody, in representing this character (and many of the other Black woman characters on the show), *ABLSS* actively aims to portray the complexity and diversity of what it can mean to exist as a Black woman. Black women are not a monolith, Black women don't all think alike, and some Black women can be sexist.

In addition, both "Motown Meltdown" and "Herstep Masterclass" specifically present comedic takes on misogyny. These sketches use comedy to dissect the ways pervasive patriarchal notions within Black

popular culture and media subject Black women to a specific and targeted form of misogyny that both hypersexualizes them and attempts to deprive them of their agency—making notions such as misogynoir legible and accessible to mainstream audiences.

Further, the lack of ambiguity in the comedy calls on the viewer to critically interrogate these discourses, unpacking the harm and violence they can bring to Black women.

Black Women vs. Capitalism

The next sketch taken on up by *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is "Bad Bitch Support Group," in which a collection of "bad bitches,"²¹ come together to support one another through the struggles of maintaining their bad bitch status, grief counseling, or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Throughout the meeting, we hear the "bad bitches" Tina, Mya, Kiana, and Sydney, played by Thede, Dennis, and guest stars Laverne Cox and Amara La Negra, respectively, complain about the effort it takes to be a bad bitch:

Sydney: Every morning, I wake up an hour early to put on my Fenty highlighter before my man wakes up. I'm exhausted! But I can't let Bae see me with my bare face, you know?

Tina: I've never been barefaced in front of a man. I'm afraid all the athletes I date wouldn't know what to do with a woman who takes her cheekbones off every night.

Throughout their therapeutic session, the women are led and mentored by Mo, played by Angela Bassett. During the sketch, we see Mya start to question the effort it takes to be a bad bitch, expressing a desire to be just an "okay bitch" to the shock and appall of her fellow group members. At the end of the sketch, the catch is disclosed to the viewer—the camera pans back to reveal Brunson playing an executive in a suit and Black playing a scientist in a lab coat, staring at the women in the support group through a two-way mirror. As it turns out, the women are all test subjects in an experiment:

Brunson: What is happening with subject 4? She seems to have built up an immunity to the Foxycodone. Ugh! Double her dosage. If women start rejecting impossible beauty standards, we'll go out of business.

Black: M'am it isn't safe, she's already at All-Star Weekend level

Brunson: I said double it!

²¹In popular culture, a "bad bitch," is often defined as a strong and confident woman who feels the need to constantly look aesthetically pleasing.

On a clipboard in front of Black, we can see who is sponsoring this seemingly non-consensual "Foxy-codone" drug trial: FashionNova, a popular, online, fast fashion brand that makes cheap knock-offs of Kardashian, Instagram-model style clothing. The sketch presents a commentary on how popular fashion brands market impossible beauty standards to women in general and how fast fashion brands like Fashion Nova are known for marketing to and profiting off of Black women without caring for or respecting them. While Fashion Nova's clothes are often directly marketed at Black women, capitalizing off lucrative deals with Black women artists such as Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B, the company rarely hires or features darker-skinned models. Additionally, the company has reportedly underpays its U.S.-based workers in Los Angeles, mainly consisting of Black and brown women (Kitroeff, 2016; Stevenson, 2021). In this way, beneath the hilarity of the sketch lies a Black feminist critique of the way capitalist structures use, pilage, and profit off of Black women's bodies.

Deconstructing Black women as a monolith

In addition to these sketches in the pilot episode, one sketch from the second episode of *ABLSS* feels particularly pertinent in highlighting how the show presents and celebrates the complexity and diversity of what it means to be a Black woman. In this scene, the running interstitial throughout the entire episode, Quinta, Robin, Ashley, and Gabriel debate Black women's hair care. The conversation begins when Gabriel remembers she forgot to bring her headscarf.²² Distressed about the prospect of sleeping without a scarf, Gabriel asks Ashley if she can borrow an extra one from her. At this point, Ashley engages in a stunning confession: She doesn't wear a headscarf; they hurt her head, and she is prone to headaches. Everyone is stunned. "Unnecessary Pain is an important part of being a Black woman, everybody knows that," replies Gabriel to this shocking statement, but Ashley simply responds "no" with confusion. Instead, she avoids putting heat on her hair and uses a plethora of natural hair care products on her hair daily, including moisturizing spray, a leave-in conditioner, and stretching cream.

At this point, a debate ensues about the "right way" for Black women to care for their natural hair. While Black women's hair has historically been and continues to be politicized within society (Johnson

²²Black women traditionally wear head scarves to bed to maintain their natural curls, keep in moisture, and protect their edges from breakage while they sleep.

et al., 2020; Koval & Rosette, 2020; Mercer, 1987;) and popular culture specifically (LaVoulle & Ellison, 2017; Price, 2009), rarely do we get to see such explicit conversations about the *different* ways Black women think about hair and hair care discussed on television. Thus, while Black hair is political, the shows reveal how Black women's understanding and approach to their natural hair is far from monolithic.

As the conversation progresses throughout the interstitials, the group segues into a larger discussion about the different ways the women think about their Blackness. After forcing Ashley into a headscarf, the group begins to question the ways they are attempting to impose their view of Blackness on Ashley, allowing them to each recognize the varying ways they each inhabit Blackness and diverge from pervasive stereotypes:

Quinta: No. Guys, What are we doing? Just because sleeping in a scarf is our idea of Blackness doesn't mean it has to be hers.

Robin: Uh, yes it does!

Quinta: No! There is no right way to be Black... I don't eat chicken.

Robin: What? Chicken is delicious// **Gabriel:** How??? Why??// **Ashley:** But it's chicken.

Robin: You know what, actually, that's fair. [Inhales]. I don't like "The Five Heartbeats"

Gabriel: What?? // **Quinta:** Woah

Robin: ...I don't think Leon's interesting [shrugs]

Quinta: Woah // **Gabriel:** Do your eyes and ears work? Does your pussy work? // **Ashley:** What is wrong with you?

Robin: I don't know what to tell you [shrugs]

Gabriel: Okay, honestly thought since.... we're having truth time [exhales]... I... do not wear lotion.

[**Quinta and Ashley walk away in disbelief**]

Robin: Wait, I'm sorry hold on, hold on... what?

Gabriel: I mean I just don't like how it feels, like, when I sweat

Robin: Oh, you said lotion?

Gabriel: Yes, lotion.

Robin: Oh no, f*ck that.

I quote this scene at length to show the full breadth of how this discussion on *ABLSS* brings forth a complex discussion of Black woman's heterogeneity in popular culture. What it means to be a Black woman can take many forms. While some previous television shows such as *A Different World* and even *Girlfriends* have represented the differences between Black women, rarely have these differences been explicitly addressed, *especially* in relation to their Blackness. In other words, the show directly and intentionally takes on an examination of the dynamic ways womanness can intersect with Blackness. Unlike previous shows that encased these conversations in a narrative familiar to non-Black audiences, it is clear that this conversation, while made available to all audiences, is addressed to Black people. By this, I do not mean to say that the sketch comedy genre itself is not understandable or recognizable to white audiences, but rather that the scripting of the conversation is a public manifestation of an intentionally intra-racial conversation. For instance, Robin's reference to "The Five Heartbeats," a Black cult classic film, is not explained; it's assumed that if you're Black, you'll get it, and if you're not Black, you may not get it, and that is okay. Thus, as a manifestation of Black feminist politics, the scene unapologetically writes Black women characters, discussing the many ways being a Black woman can manifest itself, specifically for other Black people, and explicitly not centering or thinking about whiteness.

Additionally, throughout the show's first season, respectability politics and compulsive heterosexuality, key organizing themes in previous shows with Black women-centered narratives such as *Girlfriends* and *Living Single*, are often refuted in *ABLSS*. For instance, the sketches "Dance Biter," also in the pilot episode, and "The Basic Ball" feature Black lesbian relationships and Black queer culture. The fact that the characters are lesbians or potentially queer is not the focus of the sketches but is just one aspect of the larger concepts being explored. In this way, when sexuality is brought up, it is not done in a way that is othering, but to acknowledge that non-heterosexual Black women exist and should be represented in popular culture.

The show even goes so far as to poke at the notion that the epitome of a Black woman's life lies in finding heterosexual love in the sketch "Viral Proposal," in which Asia, played by Black, becomes upset when her boyfriend Dwayne plans an over-the-top proposal:

Dwayne: It's a viral proposal, it's what you always wanted!

Asia: No, what I always wanted was to find a Black lady therapist in-network but I guess I dream too big.

In this way, the show pokes fun at the idea that a Black woman's dreams can only be found through a Black man, and instead espouses a Black feminist politics in instead centering a Black woman's ultimate dream in finding care through other black women (Cooper, 2018).

Similarly, the sketch "Gang Orientation", which gives a comedic take on the progressive rhetoric of corporate orientation activities by setting it within the context of an all-women gang named "The Reefs," highlights how the show approaches all Black women with care—not just those Black women society deems respectable. In the sketch the gang is depicted as a progressive community, implementing new forward-thinking policies, including allowing members to work from home two days a week and increasing paid parental leave. In addition, the gang leader, played by Dennis, notes they will no longer be referring to it as "maternity leave" because they "don't want to be complicit in enforcing a cisnormative agenda." In this way, the show gives the same space, grace, and reverence to a gang of Black women that we would often expect to see depicted around upper and upper-middle class Black women. In talking about the sketch, Thede notes that it helps us "see these women in an elevated light... because I think anybody else who would treat Black gang members in a sketch would mistreat them in a sketch, and I think the cool part is we elevated them: they're smart, they're considerate, their progressive, they're forward thinking, they're accepting." In this way, Thede's comment shows how the writers of a Black lady sketch show intentionally put care into their depictions of all Black women, even those Black women who have are marginalized within other Black media and televisual spaces.

In each of these sketches, the Black women characters use humor and parody to open a dialogue about racism, misogyny, and the breadth of what it means to live as a Black woman or femme. In this way, I argue *A Black Lady Sketch Show* uses the structure of the sketch comedy show to bring first-level

Black Feminist Thought into popular culture — its representations completely center on the diverse lived experience of Black women. This focus is fully realized at the end of the pilot episode when the audience finally finds out what "The Event" is: The apocalypse. The show gives itself the freedom to reimagine a world where whiteness and maleness are not only de-centered but obsolete. Thus, the show's larger narrative is encased in the notion that it's the end of the world, and the only people left on earth are four Black women who reimagine what their representation could be.

The Category is... Live, Work, POSE!

The above heading is the opening refrain to FX's *Pose* (2018-2021), a drama series created and co-Executive produced by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals. *Pose* follows the lives of gay men and transgender women of color in New York City's ballroom scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Canals, who originally developed the series's concept, identifies as Black, Latinx, and queer. Canals fell in love with film and television at a young age, often using the stories to escape from the often violent and oppressive realities of his southeast Bronx neighborhood. Still, it was only after Eva, his childhood friend and co-producer on a documentary on gang violence he worked as a part of an afterschool program, was murdered that he decided he wanted to pursue a career in film and television.

Canals saw media as a way to tell the stories of people like him and his community, often not seen in the mainstream— Black, brown, queer, and working-class. In a personal essay, Canals writes that while he enjoyed early LGBTQIA+ representation in the late 90s and early 2000s, because these shows focused on white gay and lesbian identifying individuals, he "wondered, as a queer brown person, where was my story? When would I be fully reflected?" (Canals, 2019). This longing to create authentic representations of Black and brown queer people sparked Canals' longing to create a show like *Pose*. In an essay, Canals writes:

In my youth, I never saw mixed-race families portrayed on film and television that looked or sounded like mine (Black and Puerto Rican). Exhausted by the erasure of my experience, POSE was conceived as way [sic] to fill a gap that has long existed. A love letter to New York City and the miraculous queer and trans, black and brown souls who managed to create community in the face of a plague, violence, and familial rejection. (Canals, 2019)

In this way, Canals' deep desire for representations of complex, Black queerness in which he could see himself fully was the foundation for the representations seen on *Pose*. Further, Canal's desire to focus on not only the trauma this community experiences but also moments of connection and joy point to how *Pose*, unlike many previous depictions of Black and brown queer people in popular media, does not intend to other this community but represent them as whole, authentic and complex individuals.

The concept for *Pose* first came to Canals in college after watching a screening of Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990). Canals began writing the script in 2014 while studying screenwriting at UCLA (Canals, 2019; Kaplan, 2019; Singh-Kuritz, 2020). However, Canals has said the journey to get *Pose* into development was arduous. While television executives often feigned interest in the concept, they were not interested in taking on what they perceived as the "risk" of centering a show around Blackness and queerness. As Canals recalls:

I would leave countless meetings with their questions ringing in my head: "Who is the audience?" "Where does a show like this live?" "Does every character have to be gay or trans?" Their questions were meant to convey their disinterest in developing my script but it left a deeper rejection. If this personal story doesn't have value, I must not have value. In a time where the proliferation of Black content is being monetized, and receiving awards attention, how could THIS story – one that centers Black and Latinx people who happen to also be LGBTQ – be shunned?

Canals' experience highlights how large television networks are often only interested in investing in representations of Blackness that appeal to heteropatriarchal whiteness. Only ten years ago, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) noted in its annual media report that only 2.9% of scripted characters on broadcast shows were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; and of those, none were transgender or African American (Ferraro, 2011). As queer studies scholars have argued, this erasure of Black non-heteronormative sexualities in popular culture reflects racist practices based on liberal ideologies that impede a larger analysis of the role of race, gender, sexuality, and class in lived experiences (Ferguson, 2004; McBride, 1998; Reddy, 1997). The question "does every character have to be gay or trans?" implies that without a cishet character, a show has no value because it is untranslatable to mainstream audiences, signaling the lack of value placed in creating authentic representations of Black queer people. Further, while "Blackness" has been used strategically by television networks to attract

more revenue, a show that centers on poor, Black, queer, or trans people presents a reality too particular to be seen as monetizable.

It was not until Canals met television producing behemoth Ryan Murphy in 2016 that the tide began to change. Having Murphy's support, who at the time already had an overall deal to develop and produce shows with cable channel FX, went a long way in providing Canals' story with the market appeal it needed to go into development. At that time, Murphy had already executive produced more than ten successful television shows, miniseries, and television movies, giving profit-driven studios the assurances they needed that the show could be a success (Gitlin, 1973). At the time, Murphy was launching his HALF initiative to fill 50 percent of the directing slots on his projects with women, people of color, and people within the LGBTQIA+ community. The inspiration for HALF came when in 2016, Murphy was directing an episode of his miniseries *The People v. O.J. Simpson* (2016), which detailed the OJ Simpson trial in 1991. Murphy realized a woman would have been better suited to direct one of the episodes, questioning how he could (and had) neglected to use his power in the industry to promote creators from historically marginalized communities (Galanes, 2018). Partnering with Canals on *Pose* opened more opportunities to do just that. Further, Murphy noted what he particularly liked about Canal's script was the ways it centered joy:

For me, the power in Steven Canals' script was that this isn't an origin story: "What's wrong with me?" "How can I fix it?" These people are already leading their authentic lives, so they're already moving toward joy...What I'm hoping is that young people see this show and say: "There isn't anything wrong with me. I'm entitled to love and a family. And if I'm not getting it here, I better go out and find it. (Galanes, 2018).

In this way, Murphy recognized what is so revolutionary about Black trans representation in *Pose*—it did not center trauma or the white gaze. Instead, while *Pose* acknowledges the various forms of oppression characters face, it still focuses on the joy in these characters' lives.

Murphy's support and involvement in the show's development also signals a potential evolution in Murphy's understanding of the importance of authentic and positive transgender representation. In one of Murphy's earlier projects, FX's *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010), a particularly maniacal character on the show, Ava Moore, played by actress Famke Janssen, was revealed to be transgender after essentially being raped

by one of the show's protagonist, Dr. Christian Troy, played by Julian McMahon. After penetrating Ava, in the next scene Christian, a surgeon, pronounces to his partner Dr. Sean McNamara, played by Dylan Walsh, that "Ava is a man," commenting on the depth of her vagina. This representation of trans women, which equates them to men with fake vaginas, is far from how Murphy portrays trans and nonbinary individuals on *Pose* and *Glee* (2009-2015). Commenting on Murphy's seeming evolution in the Netflix documentary *Disclosure* (2020), Actress and trans advocate Laverne Cox said:

When I think about *Pose*, and that one of the show's creators is Ryan Murphy, and I think about shows like *Nip/Tuck*, I get excited because I think that people can evolve.... So I think that folks can evolve, and a moment shifts, and awareness shifts." (Feder, 2020).

Pose may also signal the media industry's increased understanding of the market value of trans representation. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Murphy notes that he attempted to write a script about a trans person earlier in his career but could not get any advertiser or studio support. Murphy recalled:

That was their business reality, and I was heartbroken. Now, cut forward 12 years, and many, many hits later, they trust me. "Is this what you want to put on the air? O.K., good." The executives and consumer market have changed. Advertisers are thrilled to buy ads for "Pose." That would not have happened 10 years ago. There's been an evolution in society.

This societal and market shift that Murphy notes speaks to Canals' earlier question about the value of Black queer and trans stories in today's media market. It was not that there was no value in the story Canals was trying to tell — but it was a form of value that was illegible to white, mainstream networks. The combination of Murphy's proven track record as a showrunner and increased discourse around transness in popular culture through the success of shows like *Transparent* (2014-2019), the social media campaign #GirlsLikeUs, and advocacy from Black trans women such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, helped networks see how *Pose* could be successfully monetized.

Trans on Both Sides: The Trans people in front and Behind the Camera on Pose.

To develop *Pose*, Murphy and Canals emphasized involving trans and queer individuals of color, both in front of and behind the camera. On-screen, the show features five trans women of color characters, all

played by trans women or nonbinary femme individuals of color: MJ Rodriguez plays Blanca Evangelista, Mother of the House of Evangelista; Dominique Jackson plays Elektra Abundance, Mother of the House of Abundance; Indiya Moore plays Angel, initially a child of the House of Abundance who then switches to the House of Evangelista; and finally Hallie Sahar and Angelica Ross play Lulu and Candy, respectively, who both begin the series as children of the House of Abundance but later go on to be co-Mothers of the House of Ferocity. In addition, the show features several Black gay and queer actors in starring and supporting roles, including Ryan Jamaal Swain as Damon, Dyllon Burnside as Ricky, and Billy Porter as the emcee Pray Tell.

Like *ABLSS*, having a breadth of trans women of color allowed for diverse representation within this community. This deliberate casting of trans and femme people of color also acts as a corrective of historical media representations of trans individuals that reinforced the idea that a trans woman is just a man in a dress — a costume that can be taken on and off (Feder, 2020). "The day and age where you put a wig on a straight white man and say he's trans is over " noted Murphy (Real, 2018). Speaking about the significance of this decision, *Pose* Actress Angelica Ross said:

So many times, they're saying trans women are really men. But that's why when you see five different main characters along with all of the supporting characters and background players in "Pose" make those portrayals pale in comparison. Because you can just see the lived experience, and it's not something you can steal in order to get award recognition. I think that "Pose" has helped prove a point. (Turchiano, 2020b)

By intentionally casting trans women and nonbinary femme individuals of color as trans women on the show, *Pose* moves towards a Black feminist politic in recognizing that making Black trans women's lives fully visible on-screen comes from self-representation and self-definition (Collins, 2000). For instance, Rodriguez and Moore spent many of their formative years in the ballroom scene and could bring these experiences to their respective characters (Rayner, 2018).

In addition, behind the camera, Murphy relied on queer and trans individuals to tell the stories on *Pose*. Once the show was in development, Murphy reached out to writer and transgender activist Janet Mock, a Black trans woman, and later *Transparent* producer Our Lady J, a trans woman, to work with him, Canals, and Fulchuck on writing the show. Throughout the series, Mock was later promoted to

Producer and subsequently Co-Executive Producer and directed five of the series' episodes. Similarly, Lady J was promoted to Supervising Producer during the second season. In talking about the essential perspective Canals, Mock, and J brought to the development and storytelling on *Pose*, Murphy has said:

It could have never happened without our trans writers, producers and stars on the show...Steven, Janet and Our Lady J cast every role, and we worked for six months on the casting process. It's such a huge community of people who don't have opportunities and are desperate to be a part of Hollywood and a mainstream project like this. (Real, 2018)

The presence of queer and trans people of color behind the scenes was essential in crafting Black trans representation on *Pose*. Mock, Lady J., and Canals pushed for representation of Black and brown trans and queer individuals that recognized the breadth of what it means to inhabit all of these identities. Further, in acknowledging how these communities have historically been kept out of mainstream film and television, Murphy's comment underscores the often overlooked value of allowing Black, trans, and queer individuals to tell their own stories: authenticity and self-definition. In speaking about her experiences on set in *Disclosure* (Feder, 2020), Rodriguez notes, "being directed and written for by Black trans individuals on the show is amazing, because it felt like we were all included and people took our minds seriously. And also being around people who are like you." Rodriguez's comment highlights how the media have used black and trans people as props — their representation has only been used to the extent that it can garner capital from (white) audiences. However, on *Pose*, the Black trans actors, producers, and directors are acknowledged for their humanity.

In addition, throughout the series, Murphy made strides to incorporate other Black trans individuals in both directing and consulting functions. As part of Half's Directing Mentorship Program, emerging trans directors were brought on set to shadow and help direct episodes. Further, several Black and brown trans and queer individuals who were key figures in the Ballroom scene in the 1980s, including Hector Xtravaganza and Jack Mizrahi, consulted on the show. These elements coalesced to form the rich representations of Black and brown trans and queer individuals on *Pose* (Reign, 2018). In the next section, I engage in a close reading of select *Pose* episodes to elucidate how the influence of Black queer and trans people on the show's production infused its narrative with an explicit Black feminist politic.

The Categories are — Community, Intersectionality, & Realness: Representing Black Trans and Queer Folks on Pose.

Season one, episode two of *Pose*, entitled "Access," begins where many of the show's openings occur: The Ballroom. A large, open, auditorium-like space is filled with young Black and brown trans and queer kids drinking, laughing, and watching as the different houses send representatives to walk the categories. On the stage at the front of the room, a row of judges sit at a make-shift dais; and from a podium, Pray Tell yells out the categories. The category is "Realness" —a classic ballroom category that judges trans women on their ability to present as a "real" man or woman. In other words, if the standard for maleness or womanness is a typical cisgender body, would the contestant pass?

Tonight, the young upstart house of Evangelista, founded by Blanca in the preceding pilot episode, poses a new challenge to the reigning House of Abundance, headed by legendary house mother Elektra Abundance. Angel, who left the House of Abundance to join Evangelista, sweeps the realness category. Angel, a petite, young Latinx trans girl with slight features and a halo of curly hair, effortlessly walks up and down the ballroom in a two-piece knit suit and glasses, giving off the aesthetic of secretary chic — she knows she can pass. I read Angel's character as an homage to Octavia St. Laurent, a legendary figure in the 1980's ballroom scene who engages in sex work as a means of survival but has dreams of modeling and being admired for her looks [See Images 7a&b]. After Angel's win, the crowd's enthusiasm for Evangelist inspires Blanca to challenge Elektra in the upcoming category — Legendary Runway — a category Elektra has historically dominated. As Blanca puts it, "I felt the wind in my face my whole life, which means I know when it's at my back." As the episode progresses, *Pose* presents three important themes throughout the series that portray a Black feminist politic to the audience: Communities of care & Black mothering, Intersectional activism, and critiquing heteropatriarchal definitions of "realness." These three themes are carried throughout the series in various ways. In the following section, I will analyze how these issues present themselves in the episode through three main storylines and how they convey these Black feminist messages.

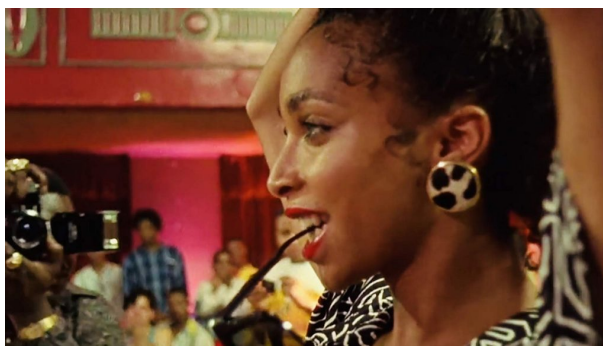


Image 7a:
Octavia St. Laurent



Image 7b:
Indya Moore as Angel on *Pose*

Communities of care & Black mothering

One theme that continually comes up in *Pose* is care. This theme initially presents itself in "Access" through depictions of Black and queer radical mothering. At the beginning of "Access," after the ball, as Damon sits on the steps waiting for Blanca, he is approached by Ricky, another young, attractive

Black gay boy, who flirts with him and asks him out on a date. As Ricky leaves to get his stuff, Blanca approaches Damon, questioningly:

Blanca: What was all of that?

Damon: He asked me if I can go on a date. Can I go?

Blanca: He looks like trouble, but they're always the ones I like too. Don't do nothin' stupid, be back by 3:00 AM, no minute later, understand?

Damon: Yes, Mother.

Blanca: All right.

In the previous episode, Damon, whose parents kicked him out of their home for being gay, was taken in by Blanca as a child in the House of Evangelists. As Damon's new, adopted mother, Blanca offers him and the other children of her house a place to stay, food, and security. In exchange, her children must listen to her, respect her, and follow the rules she puts in place to keep them safe — they must follow curfew, they are not permitted to sell or do drugs, they must engage in safe sex, and they must get a job or get an education. In Damon's case, Blanca secures him a spot in Alvin Ailey's Pre-professional dance training program to help him achieve his dreams of becoming a professional dancer. Blanca loves, cares for, and tries to protect Damon by setting ground rules to keep him safe. Through this exchange, we can see how the chosen family which Blanca has created encapsulates the care of Black motherhood.

After coming home past his curfew later that morning, we again see how Blanca tries to care for and protect Damon in ways society and his biological family have previously failed to do. Laid across the couch in a flowing pink robe, Blanca sternly admonishes Damon for disobeying her, letting him know, "I won't tolerate you breaking my rules." The discussion then divulges into a conversation about safe sex, a particularly pertinent conversation for LGBTQIA+ individuals at this moment at the height of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. Damon notes that his father had previously given him the "birds and bees" talk, but it focused on heterosexual sex. The whole time he was thinking, "this is not the information I need to get," but he couldn't ask what he really wanted to know for fear of outing himself and the possibility his father may try to kill him if he did.

Blanca: Well here's what no one will tell you but me. Gay life is hard.

[She leaves the room, reaches into a cabinet in the next room, and re-enters]

Here.

[Blanca hands Damon two pamphlets, one entitled "How to use a condom" and the other entitled "Gay Men Aids: Reducing Risk."]

Damon: No, I-I-I don't need these. I'm not planning on having sex with Ricky.

Blanca: Oh, chile, no one ever plans on having sex. And I can't be your Mother and your conscience. I'm not gonna always be here to protect you. You are a good-looking young man, and soon you're gonna want to start exploring but you gotta make smart choices... Now, as a gay man, you have options when it comes to sex: you can be a top or a bottom.

Damon: How will I know which one I am?

Blanca: Well there's no rule book. Sometimes you want to give, sometimes you want to receive, sometimes you want all the pleasure. It's up to you.

Damon: What if I'm a bottom, and I fall for another bottom.

Blanca: Oh, don't!

Damon: You said there was no rules!

Blanca: Oh, so what y'all gonna be doin', bumpin' purses all night?

They both laugh

Blanca: Look, don't overthink it. When you find the right guy, you'll figure it out. Just promise me you'll protect yourself. There's a virus out there, and if you catch it, it will kill you.

Again, in this exchange, we see the ways Blanca cares for and tries to protect Damon and, by extension, all the children in her chosen family. This representation of motherhood resonates with Black feminist and queer manifestations of mothering as explored by Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1987, 1994), June Jordan (1985), Barbra Christian (1994), and Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016). Due to how motherhood has historically been defined through a white, patriarchal perspective that centers on white, middle-class women, Black motherhood has been both pathologized and mammy-fied—further subordinating and violently ungendering Black women in popular discourse (Collins, 1987, 1994, 2005b;

Christian, 1985; Spillers, 1987). However, against this narrative, Black mothers have developed their own logics and practices of motherhood which must constantly reconcile the importance of care with societal oppression and subordination. Patricia Hill Collins (1987,1994) suggests Black mothers must care for their children while also teaching them to survive and be self-reliant in a society that will oppress them — their care and love can often come with a certain amount of toughness. This is reflected in Blanca's approach and tone to mothering Damon: She is caring and comforting yet stern. Blanca is clear that her goal is to care for Damon while protecting him from all the potential dangers he will face as a Black, gay man in society in the future when she will not be there physically to watch over him.

In addition, as Damon's chosen mother, Blanca takes up the position of what Collins (1987) refers to as othermotherhood, the kinship network that Black women have traditionally relied on to raise their children when the biological parent is unable. Given her own experiences in the LGBTQIA+ community, Blanca is more equipped to guide and care for Damon than his biological parents, whose views on homosexuality often left Damon feeling unprotected, uncared for, and unsafe. This is especially true within the context of their conversation regarding safe non-heterosexual sex and HIV/AIDS — a topic Blanca is intimately familiar with after recently being diagnosed as HIV-positive. However, unlike traditional othermothers described by Collins, Blanca does not parent alongside but in place of Damon's biological mother. The relationship we see develop between Blanca and Damon represents how Black women, femme, and LGBTQIA+ care for each other, look out for each other, and create non-heteronormative nuclear family structures —often in response to the ways mainstream society has neglected to protect them. Further, as a chosen parent, Blanca's motherhood occupies what Black feminist activist and academic Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016) describes as the radical political position of Black motherhood — she actively names herself mother in a world that refuses to recognize her as such.

The theme of care is again revisited in Season 2, Episode 9, "Life's a Beach." The episode is set in the dead of summer, and everyone is trying to deal with the sweltering heat in New York City. Additionally, everyone in the community is still grieving from the loss of Candy, who was murdered earlier in the season by a John. Blanca is also coping with the loss of her business after her transphobic landlord, real-estate mogul Fredericka Norman, played by actress Patti LuPone, set fire to the building. In response

to everyone's distress, Elektra decides to organize a girl's trip to the beach on Long Island for herself, Angel, Lulu, and Blanca. Elektra secures a beach house through one of her clients, who agrees to let her and her friends use his vacation home in exchange for bandaging him in a cage in the garage for the weekend so he can revel in 72 hours of sensory deprivation.

Throughout the trip, we see the women exemplify an ethics of care in how they take care of and look out for one another. At one point, when Blanca decides she wants to go for a walk on the beach with an attractive lifeguard who saved her from drowning earlier, the rest of the girls immediately become protective:

Elektra: You're insane. It's unsafe for girls like us to walk off in the middle of the night with a stranger. You know you can't trust a man once the sun goes down.

Angel: Oh, I didn't think about that.// **Lulu:** That's true.

Blanca: That doesn't make any sense.

Angel: Yes, it does. You know these men are afraid of their desires for us. They take it out on us all the time.

Elektra: That's probably what happened to Candy. They don't kill us because they hate us. They hate us because they hate what it means to love us.

Blanca: So am I just supposed to live in fear for the rest of my life? Die without ever knowing love?

Lulu: Maybe you could just meet him for coffee or something before we head back girl.

Angel: Yeah.

Blanca: Where's the passion in that? Listen, I know y'all care for me, I have to trust my instincts on this one I'm going.

[Elektra pulls Blanca by the arm]

Elektra: Wait. If you're going to go, at least take this.

[Elektra hands Blanca a switchblade, Angel hands Blanca a pair of brass knuckles, and Lulu hands Blanca a taser]

While the conversation centers on the violence trans women, and particularly Black trans women, often endure at the hands of men whose internalized societal homophobia and transphobia, it also reveals how these circumstances often lead the women to care for and look out for one another. As her sisters, Lulu, Angel, and Elektra, know the risk Blanca is taking and want to keep her safe — something they could not do for Candy, their friend who was murdered. They come prepared to give her both the advice and tools, both literally and figuratively, to keep her safe as sisters in community with one another. Her struggle is their struggle and vice versa. When Blanca does not return home until the wee hours of the morning, we can see how panicked the women are for their friend and fearing the worst. When Blanca finally returns, Elektra yells, "I thought he gutted and drowned you. We were five minutes away from calling the po-po," to which Blanca responds, "Aw, you really do love me." Once again, we see that despite their differences throughout the series, the women's bond and kinship for one another as Black trans women never waivers. In addition, throughout the trip, we see the four women bond and take care of one another — discussing everything from passing, protecting themselves as Black trans women, and grief to their hopes and dreams, love, and joy. It quickly becomes apparent that they are more than friends — they are sisters. The episode, written by Mock and Lady J, undoubtedly drew from their own lived experiences as trans women. To solidify these themes of caring and sisterhood, the episode ends with a quote by womanist author and poet Alice Walker "Is solace anywhere more comforting than in the arms of a sister?"

Intersectional activism

Through Blanca's storyline in "Access," *Pose* actively recognizes how Black and brown queer and trans individuals are continually marginalized in different ways, even within marginalized communities, through an intersectional depiction of the characters' lived experiences and activism. After sweeping the ball, Blanca invites Lulu to the "Boy Lounge," named the best gay bar in Manhattan for the past two years by *The Village Voice*, to celebrate her victory. As she enters, Lulu looks at Blanca skeptically, noting, "you do know they don't serve our kind here?" Just then, a white, gay man in a muscle tee comes up to the pair and mockingly hisses, "happy Halloween, ladies," signaling that to him, Blanca and Lulu's transness is just a costume. Soon after, the bartender comes over to take the ladies' order and to let

them know after this first round, they have to leave, saying, "I've got ten guys in here asking me if it's drag night." After telling the bartender that they are not in drag but women, Blanca asks to speak to the manager.

Lulu: Girl, why you always gotta pick fights you can't win?

Blanca: Because these are the ones worth fighting for.

After getting taken outside the bar to talk to the manager, a white, presumably gay man named Mitchell, Blanca and Lulu press him on why they are not allowed to patronize his establishment.

Blanca: How could you discriminate against me in my own community?

Mitchell: This bar is called Boy Lounge. We have a specific clientele — gay, under 35...

Lulu: White?

Mitchell: Frankly, yes. The New York City nightlife is segregated. Look, I've got a friend, she works at "The Cubby Hole." I'll call her. You guys can go, you can drink free all night.

Blanca: But I don't want that scene tonight...

Mitchell: I'm sorry, I'm not throwing a costume party.

[Mitchell walks away, back into the bar]

Blanca: [To Mitchell as he walks away] Oh, this is not over.

Lulu: Bitch, it was over before it started. Everybody needs someone to make them feel superior. That line ends with us, though. This shit runs downhill past the women, the Blacks, Latins, gays, until it reaches the bottom and lands on our kind.

[Lulu walks away angrily]

Despite being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, the scene reveals how Black trans women have historically still been discriminated against within the LGBTQIA+ community because of their Blackness and transness. Through the white, gay men in the bar's continuous remarks about them playing "dress up," we see their refusal to accept transwomen within the community. Black and Trans studies scholar Marquis Bey (2017) suggests the para-ontological fugitivity of both Blackness and transness makes it so that neither can be neatly captured and distilled, arguing "Black and trans* are both disruptive

orientations indexed imperfectly by bodies said to be black or trans* and thus can succumb to logics of white supremacy and cissexism. The anoriginal blackness and trans*-ness that bodies cite exceed bodyness and thus can never be "captured" in perfect entirety" (Bey, 2017, p.278). In this way, both Blanca and Lulu's Blackness and transness make them unrecognizable and thus illegible to the white, gay men in the bar who, despite being gay, still view the world through frameworks of white supremacy and cis-centered misogyny.

I read Lulu's comment to Blanca about the positioning of Black trans women in society as a Black trans woman's articulation of intersectional analysis through lived experience. In her seminal essay on intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) uses the analogy of a basement with a hatch to describe what an intersectional analysis looks like:

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked-feet standing on shoulders-with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that "but for" the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below-are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151-152).

Like Crenshaw's example of the hatch, Lulu's comments to Blanca tease out how she and Blanca will never be allowed to crawl up through the hatch due to their Blackness, womanness, and transness. There is no privilege they hold for which society will grant them a chance to escape the basement — they are poor, Black, transgender women — everyone stands on their shoulders and shits onto them. In this way, Lulu enacts first-level Black Feminist thought; her understanding of society through an intersectional lens comes directly from her lived experience as a Black transgender woman (Collins, 2000).

However, Blanca is not deterred. The following Saturday night, Blanca skips the St. Laurent Ball so she can return to the bar in protest "so that [her] children's world is better than the one [she] grew

up in.” After a second failed attempt at being served, Blanca is visited at her job by Elektra, who comes to express her anger for taking away her opportunity at a rematch. Elektra also warns Blanca, or as she calls her, the ”transvestite Norma Rae,” about the futility of her recent activism: ”these gay white boys don’t want anything to do with you, and never will.” In their exchange, other intersections are revealed: Age, class, and cis-assuming privilege. While Elektra, who at this point in her life has become the kept woman of a rich, white man, and holds cis assuming privilege, has become seemingly complacent in her life. However, Blanca, who is younger and does not hold these other privileges, still sees the need to fight for equality for Black trans women within the community:

Blanca: Now your generation got us to where we are, I’ll give you that, I’ll give you all of that. But I’m planning on moving our kind forward. Getting us access to worlds you wouldn’t dare dream about. I’m entitled. I have the right.

Elektra: All right, naive little girl. Fight that fight, learn the lesson we all learn eventually. When it comes to the life we lead there comes a point where you must accept disappointment.

In this exchange, Black trans woman characters’ diversity allows us to see that Black trans women are not a monolith. Though both Blanca and Elektra face discrimination for being Black and trans, their different positionalities have resulted in a chasm in how they approach this oppression: While Blanca is still ready to fight for access and a seat at the table, or the bar, so to speak, Elektra has not only come to accept the inevitable disenfranchisement that comes with being a Black trans woman but is also insulated from many of the struggles Blanca still faces because of her access to capital and cis assuming privilege. As Elektra succinctly puts it in a later scene, ”I can gain access to any bar, or country club, or department store in this city. Your struggle is not my struggle.”

The third and final time Blanca goes to the bar, Mitchell calls the cops on her. As Blanca waits to be served or for the cops to arrive, whichever comes first, she looks over at a young, gay Black man at the bar:

Blanca: have you noticed you’re the only one here with a year-round tan?

Man: What’s your point?

Blanca: They don’t want us here.

Man: No, they don't want *you* here.

After this exchange, the bartender apologizes to the man and offers him a free drink, but the question remains in the air — do they really want him there more than they want Blanca? While he is still served, it is noticeable that he is the only Black man in the bar. Given the manager's admission that they specifically cater to "white" gay men, we can assume it is only his cisgender privilege that has allowed him access. In the end, Blanca does not win her battle to be served at the bar —The bar calls the cops on her, she is misgendered by both the bar manager and the arresting officers, and finally, she is arrested and thrown in a men's jail. Ultimately, it is Elektra who bails Blanca out of jail, who said she did it because Blanca "is not being beaten within an inch of [her] life in that jail because [Elektra] needs her to be at the ball tomorrow." Thus, while Blanca is ultimately unsuccessful in her attempt to be served at the bar, what is most important is the messages communicated to the viewers about the intersectional oppression faced by trans women of color and the way it differentially shapes their lives and activism.

Again, the theme of intersectionality as activism comes up in the premiere episode of season 2, "Acting Up." At the beginning of the episode, we see the characters struggling to cope with losing so many of their friends and chosen family to AIDS while trying to combat the disease's stigma. Blanca and Pray Tell, who were both diagnosed HIV+ in the previous season, take a trip to Hart Island, a former tuberculosis sanitarium now used as a mass grave for the unclaimed deceased, to pay their respects to Pray's ex-boyfriend Keenan. On the Island, they find that Keenan, and all the other people who died from AIDS, are quarantined off from the rest of the bodies since, as Desiree, the station attendant, said, they "don't know how this thing is spread." As Blanca and Pray watch the wooden caskets spray painted with numbers and the marker "unk [unclaimed] male" unloaded into a mass grave by men in hazmat suits, Pray starts to reflect on the loneliness of Keenan's last days. This prompted Blanca to respond, "Mmm-mmm, I'm not settling for this Pray. We got to do something." A few scenes later, at his "210th" memorial for a friend lost to AIDS, Pray runs into Judy, played by Sandra Bernhard, a white lesbian nurse who helps treat and is a friend to Pray and Blanca. After witnessing Pray break down at the

funeral, she takes him to a place where he can put his grief to good use: An ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) Meeting.²³

[Judy and Pray walk down a dimly lit flight of steps towards a basement]

Pray Tell: Where are you taking me? I'm hungry

[Crowd chants in the background]

Oh no, no, no, no, no, no, my Black ass does not need to join your group of preppy white queens in ill-fitting gap chinos who have never had to fight for a goddamn thing in their lives.

Judy: Listen, there are dikes, too, running these meetings, of all shades. Pray, you have to put your pain to good use, or I swear to god it will eat you alive.

During the meeting, Pray not only finds out Judy's partner is a Black lesbian but is also moved to tears (and action) by the meeting speaker's intersectional approach to queer activism. Talking about an upcoming die-in to protest harmful rhetoric about AIDS by an influential Cardinal in the Catholic, the speaker yells, "We will not let his [the Cardinal's] racist, sexist, homophobic ideology to affect the health of every single person on this planet!" Like Blanca's experience protesting the gay bar, Pray's activism is grounded in an intersectional understanding and experience of the world. While Pray is initially hesitant about joining ACT UP because of its known association with privileged white gay men, he is finally moved to action when he recognizes the intersectional approach used to inform ACT UP's grassroots activism. For Pray, it is not only enough to advocate for the most privileges amongst the LGBTQIA+ community, but queer activism must invoke those within the community who are marginalized along the lines of race and gender.

Once again, through Pray's activism, we also see Elektra's lack of activism due to her privileged positionality within the community. After failing to show up at the Die-in demonstration, Pray Tell becomes annoyed with Elektra at the following weekend's ball:

Pray Tell: I'm gonna lay it out for you one time. Your community needed you at that protest and you didn't show up.

²³ACT UP, founded in 1987 by white, gay, LGBTQ rights activist Larry Kramer, is a grassroots political organization that engages in actions aimed at ending the AIDS crisis. ([Act Up](#))

Chatter erupts in the crowd

Elektra: I was working.

Pray Tell: Yeah, you work the night shift, the protest was in the morning. Don't give me that bullshit.

Elektra: Well, what did I miss? A bunch of f*gs holding hands, screaming into the wind?

Crowd gasps

Pray Tell: I went to jail. One hundred eleven people went to jail. You are more concerned about winning a trophy than you are about our government spreading lies about us, in an effort to kill us.

Crowd cheers

And you want to know why they want us dead? Because we're Black, and we're brown, and we're queer. They don't give a shit about us, so we better start caring about ourselves. Show up for your lives! Wake up!

Pray Tell's impassioned speech highlights how his activism is rooted in a distinctly intersectional experience as a Black, gay man, the importance of community care within Black and brown femme and LGBTQIA+ communities, and how Elektra's privileges often separate her from recognizing the importance of this activism. However, as Pray Tell aptly points out, at the end of the day, as a Black trans woman — mainstream society and the government does not care about Elektra either.

What it means to be "Real."

The final theme presented in *Pose's* second episode and throughout the series revolves around questions of "realness." In the first season of *Pose*, unlike in the subsequent seasons, the story of queer and trans Black and brown folk in the ballroom scene is intertwined with the story of a young, white couple from suburban New Jersey named Stan and Patty Bowes, played by Evan Peters and Kate Mara, respectively. In the pilot episode, Stan, a junior executive at Trump Organization attempting to climb the social and economic ladder, meets Angel while cruising the piers one night. Stan finds himself drawn to Angel's beauty. Following this moment, throughout the first season, we see Stan and Angel develop feelings for each other while negotiating the fear, guilt, shame, and loneliness that follows from the way

white heteropatriarchal society stigmatizes men's attraction to trans women. Three weeks after their first meeting, Stan can not stop thinking about Angel and goes back to the piers to find her. Upon learning that she is now working at a peep show in Time Square, he goes to visit her and expresses his discomfort at the fact that she shares her body with other men:

Stan: Why are you here? This place isn't right for you.

Angel: I make \$125 a night here. And no one touches me. Don't you want me to be safe?

Stan: I get jealous that so many men see you like this.

The interaction is telling of their relationship — while Angel's primary focus is her own safety and survival, Stan covets her and is focused on how he can have her to himself without disrupting the delicate balance of his white, middle-class suburban life. On Angel's break, the pair go for a cup of coffee to talk, at which point he offers her a deal: He will make her a kept woman. In exchange for a one-year lease on an apartment and pocket money, she won't engage in sex work anymore. Ultimately, Angel agrees, telling him, "I have learned to keep my dignity, even when I'm kneeling down for scraps under the table," and that while "dream" and "aspirations" are only words that hold weight in the suburbs what she does know is "Imma have a roof over my head, a little spending cash for clothes for the balls, and my chances of not getting killed in a gutter just increased considerably." However, Angel is still curious about Stan's attraction to her:

Angel: What's your deal here? Usually, the ones like you are either gay — won't admit it — or straight but too afraid to ask their wife to stick a finger up their behind.

Stan: *chuckles* Jesus. I'm neither of those things. I'm not gay.

Angel: I don't understand. You hadn't touched me. Not a blow job in the car or nothing. But you want to possess me. Why? What are you?

Stan: I'm no one. I want what I'm supposed to want. I wear what I'm supposed to wear, and I work where I'm supposed to work. I stand for nothing. I've never fought in a war, and I probably won't ever have to 'cause the next one's gonna kill us all. I can buy things I can't afford, which means they're never really mine. I don't live. I don't believe. I accumulate. I'm a brand — a middle, class white guy. But you're who you are, even though the price you pay for it is being disinvited from the rest of the world.

I'm the one playing dress-up. Is it wrong to want to be with one of the few people in the world who isn't? To have one person in my life who I know is real?

Angel: You think of me as a real woman?

Stan: You'd be crazy to choose this life if you didn't have to.

Through this exchange, the show asks us to more deeply interrogate the question of "realness" presented earlier in the ball. Society would tell you Angel is not a "real" woman because she was assigned male at birth. However, as Stan notes, "realness" is not about living how society defines you, as he does, but living in one's truth. In this way, what makes Angel a woman has nothing to do with her genitals but rather, is founded in knowing and living her truth as a Black woman, despite the potential costs. Realness is found in the self-definition of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000)

In the episode "Life is a Beach," the issue of realness is once again brought to the fore when the women clash with an over-privileged white woman at dinner. After realizing the summer house lacks any suitable booze, the women decide to treat themselves to a night out on the town filled with drinks, food, and fun. In the middle of their meal, the women are interrupted by a slight, white, blonde woman. The woman is dressed in a white polo shirt, a knee-length blue skirt, and pearls — she is undeniably meant to portray a stereotypical White Anglo-Saxon American (WASP), the epitome of whiteness and privilege.

White Woman: Hello, Ladies. I'm a loyal customer here out with my girlfriends, and we're having just the darndest time trying to relax into this peaceful summer evening.

Elektra: And what is it that we can do for you?

White Woman: There's nothing peaceful about your grating voices, cackling so loudly we can't even hear our own conversation.

Elektra stares angrily, swirling her drink

Lulu: Elektra, do not do it. This one right here is not worth it.

Elektra: I don't think my girlfriends and I are any louder than these other tables. Why don't you be frank with us? What exactly is it that you're trying to say?

White Woman: I'm no dummy. I work in The City, and I know a man pretending to be a woman when I see one, and I see three right in front of me.

Angel: oh shit!// **Lulu:** Bitch!

White Woman: This is not that kind of establishment.

Lulu: Wait a minute...girl.

[**Elektra stands up and begins walking towards the woman, towering over her**]

Elektra: God may have blessed you with barbies, a backyard with a pony, a boyfriend named Jake, and an unwanted pregnancy that your father paid to terminate so you could go to college and major in being a basic bitch.

Angel snaps

None of these things make you a woman.

[**Elektra pauses, puts her finger in the woman's face, and takes a sip from a glass of water handed to her by Lulu**]

Lulu: Mmm-hmm, clear your throat// **Angel:** Lubricate// **Lulu:** Read that bitch.

Elektra: Your uniform of ill-fitting J. Crew culottes, fake pearls, and 50 cent scrunchies can not conceal the fact that you do not know who you are. I know our presence threatens you. We fought for our place at this table, and that has made us stronger than you will ever be.

Lulu and Angel snap in unison

Now pick your jaw up off the floor and go back to your clam chowder and shallow conversation. My girlfriends and I aren't going anywhere. Y'all heard that!

Once again, the audience is presented with contesting notions of realness — one defined by society and one defined by a Black feminist framework of self-definition. Just because the white woman is cisgendered does not make her any more of a woman than Elektra, Angel, and Lulu. Their womanness is defined through their own truths and lived experiences which no white woman from the Hamptons has the right to define for them.

Resisting Black Trauma

Finally, a necessary part of the conversation around Black feminist messages in *Pose* necessitates exploring how the show deals with Black trauma. While the show rightfully engages in discussions around the way society marginalizes, disregards, and harms Black and brown LGBTQIA+ individuals, it

also centers the joy in these communities — even through moments of peril. One of the most prominent examples of this in the series is Season 2, Episode 4, "Never Knew Love Like This Before." The women begin to worry one night after Candy fails to come home after returning to prostituting herself to help make ends meet at The House of Ferocity, against Lulu's advice. Blanca and Lulu set out to find her, eventually learning that she was killed by a John, her body stuffed in the motel closet:

Lulu: Do they know who did it, Blanca?

Blanca: No, but they are looking.

Elektra: The NYPD doesn't care about a murdered transsexual. We've never been treated with respect or dignity. Candy's death isn't any different.

Angel: Well, it should be. Especially to us. No matter what, she was our sister. What is it, May? And 11 girls have been killed this year. We just keep sitting around here lookin' all sad. We're letting it happen. Candy would've wanted us to fight. Okay? She would have wanted us to stand up and say, this is fucked up.

Elektra: She would have wanted us to honor her memory.

Angel: So, then what do we do, Elektra?

Blanca: We plan a celebration of her life.

Throughout the rest of the episode, we see the characters grapple with Candy's death, not by focusing on the pain and suffering she surely endured in her last moments, but by focusing on her life. While the show clearly reveals its goal of bringing the epidemic of violence against Black trans women to the popular media,²⁴ It treats Candy's story with care and love.

One fundamental way the episode did this was by reanimating Candy's character through her ghost, who interacts with each of the other characters during her funeral. At this moment, we see Candy celebrated for the full human that she was, not another nameless, faceless trans woman in a list of victims. Candy is given her agency back. This agency is especially present in her exchanges with Pray Tell, with whom she had a loving yet adversarial relationship:

²⁴Angel's line in this scene was a nod to the fact that in the year the episode premieres, 2019, 11 Black trans women had been killed. The comment aimed to highlight the enduring nature of violence against Black trans women in the U.S. (Haylock, 2019)

Candy: Why were you such an asshole to me? You gave plenty of other people breaks when they didn't deserve it.

Pray Tell: Maybe...Maybe I didn't want to look at you. You are unapologetic, loud, black femme. All the things I try to hide about myself when I go out into the real world. You are all of them. I guess...I was just trying to protect you.

Candy: What good is everyone's opinions when you're gone. I'm a free bird now. No regrets.

Pray Tell: That — I was jealous of that bravery.

Candy: I never had a choice to hide who I was. My loudness walked into the room before I did. Not a damn thing I could do about that.

Even in her death, Candy owns, celebrates, and embraces all she is as a loud, Black, woman. Further, in exchanges with her estranged parents, we see them accept her for the woman she is. Commenting on how the show handled Candy's death, Ross said in an interview with Shondaland, "As an actor, I have never felt so respected and honored. The empathy, the love, and detail that went into this send-off for Candy was so beautiful" (Terrell, 2019). Further, when telling Ross they would kill off Candy, Murphy mentioned Mock and Lady J would be writing the episode, reinforcing the importance of centering on trans women's lived experiences when crafting this narrative (Terrell, 2019). Candy's send-off comes to an end as she finally gets to fulfill her dream of starring in a lip-sync category at the ball, singing Stephanie Mills' 1980's R&B dance ballad, "Never surrounded knew love like this before," embracing each of her friends as she gives her final performance [**See Image 8**]. It is sad and yet, at the same time, joyous, as she is remembered not for her trauma but for the light she brought into the world.

Is The Revolution Being Televised?

On March 5th, 2021, FX announced that *Pose* would be returning for a final, abbreviated 3rd season. In other words, FX canceled *Pose*. The announcement shocked many fans, given the show's early renewal for an original 3rd season in 2019 and Canal's previous statement that he originally envisioned the story of *Pose* running for five full seasons (Goldberg, 2021). In a video posted to FX's Twitter account, Canals tells fans that while the decision to end the show was difficult, they were ultimately able to "tell the story, the way [they] wanted to tell it." Canals goes on to say, "I, along with my incredible collaborators,



Image 8:

Angelica Ross as Candy in *Pose* Season 2, Episode 4, "Never Knew Love Like This Before."

never intended on changing the television landscape. I simply wanted to tell an honest story about a family, resilience, and love" (PoseFX, 2021). While the exact circumstances surrounding the show's cancellation are unclear, it does beg the question —while television networks may be more willing to create revolutionary Black feminist representation for short-term economic gains, are they truly willing to invest in it?

In exploring this question, it is important to unpack how both *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and *Pose* are encased in specific economic opportunities and capitalist impulses on the part of television networks that market and distribute them. First, both shows are marketed and distributed by cable networks, which due to decreased reliance on advertising revenue (and thus reduced pressure to appease advertisers) and a paucity of FCC regulations around objectionable programming, have historically been able to take

more "risks" with their content (Edgarton, 2008; Mullen, 2002). These networks' lack of reliance on the least objectionable content makes them particularly prime for understanding content that explores issues such as race, gender, and sexuality through a Black feminist lens as economically viable (Mullen, 2002).

HBO, or Home Box Office, which airs *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, was initially founded in 1972 by Time Inc. as a pay-cable service that used microwaves to transmit movies and sports programs to cable services in the Northeast. A few years later, in 1975, HBO gained the potential for nationwide viewership by leasing a transponder on RCA's *Satcom 1* satellite, growing subscriptions from 15,000 to 287,199 by 1976 (Edgarton, 2008; Mullens, 2002). HBO relies solely on direct consumer subscriptions for revenue as a pay-cable service, meaning it does not face advertiser or FCC pressure to create content for mass audiences. Instead, it has often marketed its content to niche audiences, emphasizing quality, encapsulated in its iconic tagline: "It's not television, it's HBO." Since HBO began focusing on developing original programming in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the network has historically used Blackness as a way to market its content as "urban" and "edgy," setting it apart from other networks (Fuller, 2000). However, like many networks that have used Blackness as a way to attract audiences, HBO began abandoning this strategy once it was able to develop successful, edgy shows that centered on whiteness —such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) (Fuller, 2000). In this way, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* can be ready as a form of distinct, niche content packages in a recognizable broadcast format — the sketch comedy — allowing HBO to attract a high subset of niche viewers while still being recognizable to mass audiences (Mullens, 2002). However, whether HBO will invest in the show long-term after bringing in what it may believe is a maximum number of new subscribers is yet to be seen.

FX, which airs *Pose*, is a basic cable station meaning it relies on both advertisers and subscriptions for revenue. While FX may face more advertiser pressure than HBO, as a cable station, it still has more discretion over content than a broadcast network allowing it to push the limits of traditionally "objectionable" content and market to niche audiences. In other words, shows like *Pose* can still be profitable for networks like FX. While the cancellation of *Pose* occurred during a pandemic, which may lead to the assumption FX canceled it due to profit loss caused by production delays, it also seems important to note that FX is owned by the Walt Disney Company, which like many large media conglomerates, owns several

networks across broadcast and cable. While Disney did lose profits at the beginning of the pandemic due to its park closures, the company's profits rebounded at the end of the year due to the successful launch of its streaming service Disney+, which offers premium, family-friendly, mass-audience appealing content (Richwine & Ventgattil, 2021). Thus, this cancellation may signal a shift from Disney away from less profitable content for Black women, femmes, and LGBTQIA+ individuals and back towards investment in larger, mass, white audiences.

In addition, both of these shows were spearheaded by known talent and producers in the media industry with proven records of success. As noted, it was not until Canals partnered with Murphy, a known, successful executive producer in the television industry with an existing overall deal with FX, that he was able to get *Pose* into development at a mainstream network. Affirming the link between Murphy's positionality in the industry and executing the forms of representation present in *Pose*, Mock commented to *The New York Times*:

Let's not kid ourselves. Only in a Ryan Murphy world could this happen, in a world where he's built up enough power to say: "I'm going to have this black trans girl who's never had any experience writing for television come and write on my show. Then I'm going to promote her to producer during the pilot shoot. And on top of that, Janet, you're going to direct an episode." (Galanes, 2018).

Without Murphy's attachment to the project, it is possible a show such as *Pose*, executed in the way it was, could have never existed?

Similarly, in the case of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, Robin Thede was a known comedic talent who had previously hosted her own late-night show on BET, *The Rundown with Robin Thede* (2017). Additionally, in pitching the show to HBO, she partnered with Issa Rae, who was successfully executive producing and starring in the network's hit show *Insecure* (2016-2021). Thus, Rae's increasing success in bringing in revenue for the network and Thede's known experience can not be ignored in the network's decision to greenlight the show. While individual Black women writers such as Rae and Thede, alongside other Black women writers/performers such as Amber Ruffin Ashley Nicole Black, have continued to make strides towards promoting Black women's voices in writers' rooms, according to the 2020 Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) Inclusion report, while television staff writers of color and women have

been consistently growing, systemic discrimination against staff writers from marginalized communities remains prevalent. (WGAW, 2020). Further, the report noted that while LGBTQIA+ writers have achieved representation in the writer's room on par with their national representation, "this does not mean LGBTQ+ writers no longer face discrimination," and that "The Think Tank for Inclusion and Equity's 2020 "Behind-the-Scenes" report provides evidence that LGBTQ+ writers experience the same forms of bias and harassment faced by other underrepresented groups," (p. 3). It is also important to note that this report does mention the number of writers from marginalized communities that hold positions of authority in these writer's rooms or the specific number of women of color or QTPOC writers present in these rooms— leaving open the possibility, that these numbers are even more lacking than general representation numbers.

To this point, it is also important to interrogate the degree to which inclusion necessarily equates to equity for Black women, femme, and queer writers within these legacy media institutions. Soon after the cancellation of *Pose*, at the show's in-person premiere of its third and final season at Lincoln Center, an allegedly drunk Mock gave a scathing speech in which she derided the industry, FX, and Murphy for the unfair way she felt they had treated her (Lattinazio, 2021). According to reports of the incident, in a 15-minute speech, Mock "complained about how much the network is paying her, demanded better treatment for the trans community, shouted 'F*ck Hollywood,' and critiqued the material written by Murphy and Falchuk, noting it was she who had pushed to "bring the girls in," (Greer, 2001). Despite delivery and personal elements of the speech aside,²⁵ Mock's renunciation of Murphy and the industry shows the cracks behind how legacy networks attempt to rearticulate and co-opt Black feminist-informed representations. While Fox and Murphy can lay claim to the increasingly inclusive nature of their work through shows such as *Pose*, they may still fail to value the actual Black women, femme, and queer creators who birth these inclusive representations. In this way, within a neoliberal context, Black women, femme, and queer folks are invited into these legacy networks because they have proved their market

²⁵In parts of the speech, Mock also confessed to cheating on her then-partner and *Pose* star Angel Bismark Curiel, and those present suggested the demise of her relationship may have been, in part, the catalyst for Mock's emotional state at the time of the speech (Greer, 2021).

value; however, once capitalist structures have spent this value, the people themselves become fungible; cast aside and mistreated.

The increased visibility of Black women, femme, and queer audiences online around their representation or critiques of their representation undoubtedly played a role in showing these networks the economic value of more diverse and authentic representation of these communities. Tweets about shows like *Scandal* and *Underground* or hashtags such as #NoConfederate, have increasingly allowed networks to see how Black women and femme audiences' perspectives on their representation can translate to very real currency in the form of subscriptions and advertising dollars. Additionally, the ability of audiences from marginalized communities to use the tools of digital media to create their own media that reject and resist stereotypes around Black womanness and femmeness proves there is a market for these representations. Thus, while both *A Black Lady Sketch* and *Pose* demonstrate how demand from television audiences for more authentic representation has led to more diverse, holistic, and inclusive representations of Black women, femmes, and LGBTQIA+ within the popular television, these representations are still encased in the economic impulses of the television networks that distribute them. However, while revolutionary in their representation of these communities, they are still impinged by the limits of neoliberal capitalist impulses. Therefore, while these shows present new ways of interrogating issues around race, gender, sexuality, and even class on mainstream television, the extent to which networks continue to invest in them beyond the determined point peak of economic profits remains to be seen. Begging the question—can Black feminist representation, which at its root is invested in deconstructing intersecting systems of power, ever genuinely exist in a western media market driven by neoliberal capitalist impulses that stand antithetical to these revolutionary goals? I argue the cancellation of *Pose* presents both the possibilities and limitations of Black feminist representation on television; these messages may be disseminated, but only to a point. While it does not negate the agency these communities hold, contemporary media markets continue to rely on Black women and queer bodies as a form of capital (Collins, 2006).

CHAPTER 5

Dirty Computers Learn to Make Lemonade**Commercial Black Feminism in the Popular Visual Album**

On the evening of April 23rd, 2016, I found myself at a birthday party on the lower east side of Manhattan, a trendy neighborhood known for a mix of trendy new bars and some of the city's most iconic restaurants. I was in community almost exclusively with Black women, femmes, and gay men, freely dancing and celebrating in the dark basement level of a stylish restaurant. Then, at 8:00 pm, the party abruptly ended as if someone had set a timer; we all had someplace to be. At 9:00 PM, recording artist Beyoncé was releasing her visual album, *Lemonade* (2016), on HBO, a visual accompaniment to her sixth studio album of the same title. It was only five days before that the "Queen Bee" herself had sent us, and the world, a message on Twitter advertising the film's release, continuing a pattern of viral guerilla marketing to accompany her musical projects (Harper, 2019). Yet despite the short notice, we planned accordingly; it was all anyone could think about or talk about, and throughout the evening, the air was thick with anticipation. When we left, we rode across the city on buses, trains, and taxis to once again gather in community in front of our televisions—separately but collectively bearing witness to the magic that would teach us how to "make lemons into lemonade." It was almost as if we could foresee the cultural significance of this moment for ourselves and our community.

Following the film's release, Black women film critics and scholars took to popular press outlets and blogs to praise the visual album for its radical and unapologetic depictions of Southern Black womanhood (i.e., Bale, 2016; Hobson, 2016; King, 2016; Quarshie, 2017; Robinson, 2016; Tinsley, 2016). Many of these pieces focused on the importance of the film's overwhelming Blackness for Black women audiences and fans. As race and justice reporter Jamilah King (2016) wrote for Mic, "*Lemonade* was everything that fans wanted, and more. It was epic, it was beautiful, it was salacious, it was sexy, it was honest

and it was not sorry. It was unapologetically Black.” Similarly, film critic Miriam Bale (2016) aptly noted in the *Hollywood Reporter*, “Beyoncé’s new visual album is a masterwork by a Black woman for Black women, about a subject they know well: how to turn nothing into something.” In other words, it was a manifestation of what Black feminist blogger Cashawn Thompson had termed, BlackGirlMagic, the ability of Black women to take the hurt, pain, and oppression life had given them and make it into something extraordinary. These writers praised the film for how it centered Black women and their culture with reverence and care, celebrating them in a way often not seen in mainstream media representations of Black womanhood.

However, as time went on, other Black feminists were less optimistic about “Bey’s” vision. In an essay published on her website entitled “Moving Beyond Pain,” Black feminist scholar bell hooks questioned if *Lemonade* could truly be the radical and revolutionary Black feminist film others professed it to be. hooks, who only two years earlier referred to the artist as a psychological “terrorist” for young black girls²⁶,” critiqued the video’s capitalist and patriarchal undertones, arguing “*Lemonade* offers viewers a visual extravaganza—a display of Black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It’s all about the body and the body as a commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary” (hooks, 2016). Further, hooks’ suggested that despite being a film about Black women, *Lemonade* was not necessarily a film *for* Black women, writing:

Viewers who like to suggest *Lemonade* was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color.

hooks’ critique grapples with the tension between Black feminism’s anti-capitalist theoretical roots and the film as an inherent commodity, created to be marketed to the masses. In short, in the words of

²⁶At a panel discussion at The New School in 2014 while discussing Beyoncé’s latest *Time Magazine* cover with writer and activist Janet Mock, hooks said “Then you are saying, from my deconstructive point of view, that she is colluding in the construction of herself as a slave. I see a part of Beyoncé that is in fact anti-feminist – that is a terrorist, especially in terms of the impact on young girls.” The statement was met with backlash from many black feminist scholars, including Mock, Brittney Cooper, Tanisha Ford, and Feminista Jones, who criticized hooks’ conflation of the artist branding with the loaded term “terrorism,” and as a way of policing of Beyoncé (and other Black women) that were not in line with hooks’ conception of black feminism. (King, 2014)

Beyoncé's sister, singer-songwriter Solange, while some may say "this shit is for us," hooks' statements highlight that this may not entirely be the case.

In the years since *Lemonade*'s premiere, Black feminist writers and scholars have continued to debate whether or not *Lemonade* is a Black feminist film. Most notably, political commentator and television host Melissa Harris-Perry coordinated a "Black feminist Roundtable," published on the website *Feministing*, in which Black feminist writers, academics, and public intellectuals penned essays that "called-in" hooks for her harsh criticism of the film (Adelman, 2016). At the same time, other Black feminist scholars have continued to critique the film for its problematic focus on Black women's bodies in its viral marketing, exploitation of other Black women's work,²⁷ and lyrical emphasis on achieving liberation through economic wealth (e.g., Bakara, 2016; Edwards, Esposito, & Evans-Winters, 2017; Olutola, 2019; Jackson, 2016; Wallace, 2017).

I argue these debates point to the inherent ambiguity and slipperiness that exists in the visual album format due to its location at the intersection of commercial culture and aesthetic creativity. This ambiguity allows the visual album to navigate and negotiate the tensions between liberatory political aesthetics and neoliberal capitalism. As Ralina Joseph (2018) has argued, Black women have taken up the tools of postracial politics to enact strategic ambiguity to resist racism and other forms of discrimination. These "safe" responses to racism and sexism allow Black women to speak back to the discrimination hurled at them. However, Joseph notes that while strategic ambiguity can shield Black women from the racist backlash, it "is not simply the safe choice," rather "it's a different, necessarily subtle form of resistance and risk that balances on an escape hatch of deniability" (p. 23).

Like Joseph, I suggest, ambiguity has made the visual album an important creative mode for Black women and queer artists, who within their art are attempting to negotiate their personal positionality with their larger image and brand within the music industry. The ambiguity of the visual albums allows Black women music artists to assert their politics, but in such a way that it can evade the harsh indictment

²⁷Following the release of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé was accused of sampling the voice of Messy Mya. Mya was a Black trans rapper from New Orleans who had previously been shot and killed in 2010. In 2017, Mya's estate sued Beyoncé for \$20 million in damages for "willful copyright infringement, false endorsement, unfair trade practices and unjust enrichments." A settlement was eventually reached in 2018 (Brasted, 2017). Then in 2018, another Black woman New Orleans rapper, Kimberly Roberts, accused Beyoncé of violating a contract for the use of footage she shot of Hurricane Katrina, by failing to pay her royalties (Vargas, 2018)

of being *too* radical by mainstream audiences and thus harmful to their existing celebrity. In this chapter, I use the visual album to create a framework of analysis for identifying and understanding the ambiguity surrounding Black feminist aesthetics in popular culture to clarify the rhetorical work films like *Lemonade* do to frame popular understandings of black feminism.

I conceptualize visual albums by Black women and femme musical artists as manifestations of "commercial Black feminism," for-profit Black feminist media that results from the packaging of Black feminist ideas and aesthetics into a neoliberal framework. Commercial Black feminism plays on economies of visibility, using Black feminism strategically as a form of branding. However, in line with feminist scholars such as Janelle Hobson (2018), I argue visual albums' commercial and celebrity branding impulses do not necessarily negate their work to bring a Black feminist consciousness to mass audiences. Visual albums have become a generative location for Black feminist intellectual production. These films draw from a lineage Black women's filmic work that utilizes a "womanist artistic standpoint," or their own intersectional lived experiences, to inform Black women's representation while remaining legible to the popular music industry (Baker, 2018). At the same time, they are also commercial products that premiere on legacy television networks and are born from the music video, which has historically privileged capitalist logics that have stereotyped and objectified Black women. As John Fiske (1989) suggests:

Popular art is progressive, not revolutionary. Radical art forms that oppose or ignore the structures of domination can never be popular because they can not offer points of pertinence to the everyday life of people, for everyday life is a series of tactical maneuvers against the strategy of colonizing forces. (p. 161)

And yet, this is exactly what I suggest Black women artist visual albums are attempting to do: merge the radical impulses of Black women's film with the commercial impulses of the music video. Thus, in this chapter, I think through what happens when the motivations of these two forms of filmic representation intersect in representing Black womanhood and the invariably changed politics that results.

I build my analytic framework throughout the chapter by examining two feature-length visual albums by Black women and femme artists: Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*

(2018).²⁸ I specifically chose these two visual albums for several reasons that mark their distinct similarities and differences: First, of the visual albums produced by Black women and femme artists in the last decade, these two have arguably received the largest audience proliferation due to their availability on high-profile television networks and streaming services. *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* both aired on nationally available cable television stations, HBO and BET/MTV, respectively, and were subsequently available for streaming on HBO (*Lemonade*) and YouTube (*Dirty Computer*) opening them up to a large number of potential viewers. Second, both Beyoncé and Monáe played a large role in shaping these films — signaling these films as being explicitly derived from a womanist artistic standpoint. Third, each of these films presents Black feminist aesthetics in distinct ways, allowing me to consider the range of ways Black feminism enters into the popular culture lexicon. While Beyoncé draws on what Kameelah Martin (2016) terms Black Voodoo aesthetic and pays visual homage to iconic Black women-directed films such as *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash, 1991), Monáe draws on Afrofuturist aesthetics as a way to think about the possibilities Black femmes and queerness. Finally, while *Lemonade*'s narrative exploration of Black womanhood remains within the confines of heterosexual love, *Dirty Computer*'s narrative is more expansive in its exploration of Black queerness. Through my analysis of these two films, I map out what happens to mass audience's understanding of Black feminism when translated through the lens of popular commercial culture.

Black Women Filmmakers & Aesthetics

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Black women directors have actively used film to resist dominant, hegemonic narratives about Black womanhood (Baker, 2018; Gibson-Hudson, 1998). The first known feature film directed by a Black woman in the United States was Tressie Souder's *A Woman's Error* (1922), distributed through the Afro-American Film Exhibitor's Company (Welbon, 2001). Another pioneering Black woman filmmaker was writer and Anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston, who used her

²⁸At the time of writing as well as when *Dirty Computer* was released Monáe publically identified as a woman. However, days before filing this dissertation project, Monáe publicly came out as non-binary and stated that their preferred pronouns are she/they (Pinkett Smith, 2020). While this shift in Monáe's public identity undoubtedly adds additional nuance to the analysis of their career and *Dirty Computer* explored in this chapter, I maintain Monáe's identification as non-binary textitdoes not put them outside of the bounds of the analysis in this chapter as they still exist and move through the world as an often femme-presenting Black queer individual

cultural anthropology background to make ethnographic films in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Baker, 2018; Bobo, 1998; Gibson, 2016). Since then, Black women in the United States have directed over 110 feature films, including Zeinabu irene Davis' *Compensation* (1999)], Kasi Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou* (1997), Kathleen Collins' *Losing Ground* (1982), and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), which was the first film directed by a Black woman given a national theatrical release (Baker, 2018; Welbon, 2001). These films focus on the lives of Black women characters in ways that push against controlling images and popular stereotypes to more fully represent what it means to live as a Black woman.

Many of these films were a part of the directorial aesthetic developed in the 1960s at UCLA film school. This period at UCLA, dubbed the "L.A. Rebellion," came to the program as part of an Ethno-Communications initiative to engage communities of color in the wake of the Watts Riots. The program fostered a two-decade-long tradition of avant-garde Black filmmaking in the 1970s and 80s (Baker, 2018; Field, Horak, & Stewart, 2015). Cinema studies Scholar Ntongela Masilela argues that the Black women of the "L.A. Rebellion," such as Julie Dash, Zenabu irene Davis, Barbara McCullough, and Alile Larkin, often drew narrative and representational inspiration for their films from Black feminist writers such as Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara. For instance, both Dash and Larkin directed adaptations of Walkers' short stories, "Diary of an African Nun" and "Different Images," respectively, which both center Black women and draw a social, political, and diasporic connection between the African woman and the African-American woman (Masilela, 1998). In this way, these Black women directors intentionally drew from Black feminist text and theory to build and structure their filmic and aesthetic vision. This connection creates an explicit link between the historical development of Black women's filmic work and Black feminist theory.

Jacqueline Bobo (1998) suggests Black women directors often draw inspiration from their lives, center Black women subjects, and actively interrogate dominant systems of oppression, resulting in narratives rooted in Black feminist politics and praxis. For instance, director Dee Rees has said her representation of Akile in the film *Pariah*, a coming of age story about a young Black lesbian, stemmed directly from her own emotional experiences as a young Black girl navigating her sexuality. Rees recalled, "That's how I felt...She felt not at home in the straight world and not quite at home in the lesbian world. I was reading

a lot of Audre Lorde at the time, and there was this one quote, ‘Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs.’ For me, that synthesized the whole journey.” (Tinubu, 2021). In this way, Rees’ work exemplifies how Black women directors often engage their own experiences and Black feminist text as their basis for conceiving and imagining dynamic and complex black women characters. In her essay “Artistic Integrity: Race and Accountability,” bell hooks (1996) argues that while being a Black woman director does not inherently necessitate making radical art about Black womanhood, artists from historically marginalized identity groups often feel a sense of aesthetic accountability to create work that challenges dominant racist and sexist assumptions. In filmmaking specifically, this sense of responsibility is ever more pressing by the lack of Black women’s representation outside of racist and sexist monolithic stereotypes.

Scholars insist that analyzing films by Black women directors requires us to use non-hegemonic frameworks of knowledge. In “The ties that bind: cinematic representations by black women,” filmmaker and scholar Gloria Gibson-Hudson (1994) argues that representations of Black women by Black women directors are drawn from various understandings of Black women’s cultural identity within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. Thus, Gibson-Hudson argues that scholars should analyze films by Black women through a Black feminist cultural analysis that accounts for the connection between the political and Black womanhood to recognize what these representations tell us about identity formation, resistance, and systems of oppression. In other words, in looking at representations of Black womanhood in films by Black women, we must consider their specific social, political, and economic location to see the relationship between the representational and the political.

Similarly, in her examination of films by contemporary Black women filmmakers, Christina N. Baker (2018) argues that their work exhibits a “womanist artistic standpoint.” Drawing from Alice Walker’s definitions of womanism, Baker defines a womanist artistic standpoint as nuanced and intersectional representations of Black womanhood that actively resist mainstream hegemonic controlling images. Black women filmmakers intentionally construct dynamic and complex representations of Black womanhood that upend the reductive stereotypes such as the mammie, sapphire, and the jezebel. A womanist artistic perspective also draws on the Black feminist idea that one’s epistemic is derived from one’s positionality.

Representations of Black womanhood are derived from the filmmaker's specific knowledge as a Black woman and lived intersectional experiences within society. In this way, just as Black feminist theory and intellectual production are derived from Black women's lived experiences, so are Black women's representations derived from a womanist artistic standpoint. In doing this, Black women filmmakers actively resist stereotypes by depicting the often unseen lived reality of what it looks like to be a Black woman at the intersection of multiple societal positionalities (Baker, 2018).

Even though Black women have actively been directing films for the past century, a paucity of distributional, scholarly, and archival investment still exists in these films (Baker, 2018; Bobo, 1998; Welbon & Juhasz, 2018). One notable exception to this is archival work done by Black woman director and film archivist Pearl Bowser (1982), whose early work cataloging films by Black women provided foundational knowledge about early Black women's films (Bobo, 1998). The lack of attention paid to these films can arguably be attributed to the fact that prior to *Daughters of the Dust*, films directed by Black women were often independently distributed with little to no theatrical release. As a result, these films often went unseen by mass audiences and have been hard to access for scholarly and archival purposes (Bobo, 1998). Additionally, it is important to note that *Daughters of the Dust's* ability to secure a large theatrical release was based on grassroots support of the film by Black women across the country (Bobo, 1995).

While these films created expansive representations of Black women in film, their Black feminist politics and aesthetics often made it hard for these filmmakers to secure financing. Funding sources, film festivals, and distributors' lack of investment in Black women's films stem from the media industry's assumption that mass audiences, specifically white audiences, would not be interested in films focused on non-stereotypical representations of Black women. For instance, while Kathleen Collins' directed *Losing Ground* with the intention of popular consumption, distributors did not give the film a large-scale exhibition (Bobo, 1998). While I do not mean to suggest Black women directors can't or have never found commercial success, historically, films by Black women directors have found less commercial success due to the way they privilege complex representations of Black womanhood that resist commercially legible stereotypes. As hooks writes:

Until both the colonizer and the colonized decolonize their minds, audiences in white supremacist culture will have difficulty "seeing" and understanding images of Blackness that do not conform to the stereotypes (hooks, 1996, p.90).

In this way, these Black women filmmakers often privilege Black feminist representational politics and aesthetics over appealing to mainstream funding sources and audiences. These films' aesthetics and narrative investment in representations of Black womanhood often precluded mainstream audiences from "seeing" their work both literally and figuratively. This is not to say that Black women filmmakers are not interested in commodifying their work, but rather that this impulse did not seem to supersede their sense of "aesthetic accountability" (hooks, 1996) to create narratives that pushed against stereotypical portrayal of Black womanhood.

While *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* also created counter-hegemonic representations of Black womanhood and femmeness, they notably did not suffer from this lack of investment and audience attention. As noted, both films premiered on major cable networks to sizable audiences. I argue this difference, in large part, is because both these are not only films but specifically visual albums—an extension of the music video.

Black Women & The Music Video

Since the establishment of the Music Television channel (MTV) in 1981, music videos have increasingly taken on important cultural significance within popular culture, impacting how audiences perceive everything from music and fashion to youth culture and body image (Firth, Goodman, & Grossberg, 1993, Perry, 2004; Railton & Watson, 2011). As radio Top 40 rotations and the dance club circuit became increasingly important to album promotion after the 1970s, record companies began placing increased importance on the single 45-rpm record as a marketing tool for the full album. Record companies used music videos to increase publicity around a specific single (Straw, 1993). Thus, above all else, music videos are commercial products for a particular commodity: the music track. The music video is a secondary product created to maximize revenue for the artist and the record company (Railton & Watson, 2011). For this reason, an analysis of music videos and, by extension, their successor, the visual album, can never truly be divorced from its commercial impulses.

Scholarship has noted how representations within music videos often reinforce heteronormative gender roles and hypersexualize women (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; Railton & Watson, 2011; Seidman, 1999; Wallis, 2011). Specifically, critical analysis of Black women's representation in popular music videos has pointed to the complex ways these representations both undermine and reinforce controlling images of Black women, especially within the Black popular music genres of Hip-hop and R&B. Within Hip-hop music, the hypersexualization of women has been a consistent lyrical theme since the late 1980s. An early example of this can be seen in Boogie Down Production's iconic diss track "The Bridge is Over," which uses explicitly sexual claims about Queens Bridge MC Roxanne Shante to undermine her skills as a rapper, asserting, "Roxanne Shante is only good for steady f*ckin." Further, Hip-hop scholars have noted that in the early 1990s, the increased commercialization of Black popular music shifted the content of Hip-hop towards one-dimensional narratives of 'ghetto lives' and song lyrics laced with misogynistic and homophobic undertones (Sharpley-Whitting, 2007; Rose, 2008).

Thus, not surprisingly, the music videos accompanying these songs often embrace sexist images of hypermasculinity, wealth, and opulence (Perry, 2004). One frequently noted example of this is rapper Nelly's *Tip Drill*²⁹ (2003) video, which viewers publicly indicted for reinforcing misogynistic ideas that degrade and objectify Black women (Brinkley, 2008). The video features rapper Nelly and his friends, covered in expensive jewelry, throwing money at scantily clad (and in some cases half-naked) women as they perform sexually explicit and arguably pornographic acts. Black women in these music videos are represented through a specific focus on their body parts, particularly their buttocks, reproducing hypersexualized representations of Black women (Collins, 2005). This ideological emphasis can also be heard in the song's lyrics which repeat the refrain, "It must be your ass, cause it ain't your face, I need a tip drill." This focus on women's butts props-up the hypersexual eroticization of Black women and reinforces ideological understandings of Black women as objects and other. Further, the conflation of the presence of these women's bodies and the rapper's wealth and masculinity is cemented in a now-infamous shot where the rapper swipes a credit card through one of the dancer's butt cracks (Durham, 2012). Like scholars such as Jennifer Nash and Joanne Morgan, I resist the urge to indict the music video's use of

²⁹A "Tip Drill" is a colloquial term for a woman who has an attractive body, but does not possess attractive facial features.

pornographic and borderline pornographic images as wholly oppressive to Black women, especially given the claims to agency since made by the dancers.³⁰ However, what is clear is that *Tip Drill* serves as an example of how hip-hop videos are perceived as perpetuating degrading stereotypes of Black women (Durham, 2012; Reid-Brinkley, 2008; Bailey, 2021).

At the same time, scholars have also noted the complex ways Black women music artists have used their music videos to push against these stereotypes. Robin Roberts (1991; 1994) argues music videos by Black women rappers such as Queen Latifah and Monie Love's "Ladies First," MC Lyte's "Lyte as a Rock," and (The Real) Roxanne's "Roxanne's on a Roll," express a Black feminist sensibility through explicitly calling out misogyny and asserting a sense of agency. Similarly, Nataki Goodall (1994) argues for a Black feminist reading of music videos by 90's R&B group TLC. At the same time, many Black women rappers, such as Lil' Kim, have capitalized on their sexualization to compete in a male-dominated industry. Highlighting the dialectical nature between the feminist lyrics of Black women rappers and the glamorous and sexualized representations they embody in their music videos. As Imani Perry (2004) notes:

When the women articulating subjectivity are increasingly presented in visual media as objects rather than subjects, as they are now, their statement to the world is ambiguous at best, and, at worst, the feminist message of their work will become undermined.

Emerson (2002) argues Black women's music videos featured exploitative and one-dimensional representations of Black womanhood and simultaneously showed moments of resistance to these dominant stereotypes by featuring multiple Black women in sisterhood. In this way, the concurrent portrayal of Black women as both independent and sexual subjects has created a complex, nuanced, and ambiguous representation of Black womanhood in their music videos.

Defining the Visual Album

I position Black women artists' visual albums as existing at the intersection of Black women's film and the music video. The term visual album was popularized in 2013 with the release of Beyoncé's self-titled album, "Beyoncé," and its accompanying "visual album" (Harper, 2019). However, musical artists

³⁰In a 2020 Interview with vlog "The focal spot," former video vixen "Whyte Chocolate," aka Monique Williams, the dancer whose butt Nelly swipe a credit card on, said everyone in that scene was "genuinely just having a good time," and said, "I didn't feel demeaned, I didn't feel degraded." (The Focal Spot, 2020)

have employed the visual album format to promote full albums since the Beatles' "Hard Day's Night," released in 1964 (Summers, 2020). While the definition of the visual album is opaque and contested, it is generally understood as discrete music videos that are visually and filmically connected to illustrate a longer narrative arc that runs throughout an entire record (Barrett, 2018; Summers, 2020). Thus, as opposed to the music video, which is used to promote one song, a visual album is a series of linked music videos or performances used to promote an entire album. Some scholars have also argued this understanding of the visual album necessitates that the visual album in question be released at or around the same time as the musical record, which has led to contestation around some visual albums, such as Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1982) (Barrett, 2018). As a working definition within this chapter, I define the visual album as a creative filmic representation of an entire album, created as a promotional tool for an album and/or artists. While visual albums can vary largely in length and narrative structure, what makes visual albums recognizable and distinct is how these films hybridize strategies from traditional film and music videos to create a new sonically-based artform. Further, like within music videos, I contend the representational and aesthetic politics of the visual album are not tied to and are often distinct from the lyrical politics of the song, creating a slipperiness between the sonic and the visual.

In the past decade, Black artists, especially Black women and femme artists, have used the visual album format to engage in visual explorations of their sonic artistry. In addition to Beyoncé's two visual albums, *Beyoncé* (2013) and *Lemonade* (2016), and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* (2018), other prominent visual albums by Black women include FKA Twigs' *M3LL155X* (2015), Tierra Whacks' *Whack World* (2018), Solange Knowles' *When I Get Home* (2019), and Beyoncé's third and latest visual album *Black Is King* (2020). In each of these visual albums, these artists utilize a womanist artistic standpoint, drawing from their own lived experiences to develop filmic narratives and visual representations of Black womanhood. For instance, in her discussion of *M3LL155X* by FKA Twigs, Barrett (2018) argues "Twigs' visual album is evidently concerned with an exploration of Black female agency and representation in popular culture" (p.44). In this way, Black women music artists have used the hybrid form of the visual album to discuss Black womanhood and Black feminism within a format that is still legible, recognizable, and marketable to their audiences. Like Barrett, I argue that in *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer*, Beyoncé

and Monáe, respectively, employ the visual album to create complex and layered representations of Black womanhood that draw Black feminist aesthetics and their personal experiences as Black women. However, my analysis also looks for those points of ambiguity, disjuncture, and interruption where these Black feminist aesthetics intersect with neoliberal and capitalist frameworks. Further, drawing from Gibson-Hudson and Baker, my analysis is motivated by a womanist framework that aims to identify how Beyoncé and Monáe's own social, political, and cultural location informs the film's resistant representations of Black womanhood.

Side A: Beyoncé Learns to Sell Lemonade

Track 1: From Respectable Girl Next Door to Black Feminist Icon

Before *Lemonade*, Beyoncé built her career by branding herself as a "respectable" Black girl. Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter first burst onto the popular music scene in 1997 as the de facto lead singer of R&B girl group Destiny's Child, with their hit single "No, No, No." However, it was not until two years later that the group ascended to full pop culture stardom with the successful release of their second studio album, *The Writing's on the Wall*. The album sold over eight million copies in the United States alone and earned the group two Grammy Award nominations and one win (Grammy's, n.d.). Over the next five years, the group released two more studio albums, achieved four number-one singles, sold 40 million records worldwide, and received five more Grammy Award nominations, including one more win. By the time the group released their final studio album in 2005, they were named the world's "best-selling female group" by The World Music Awards (Britannica; Walk of Fame)

Much of Beyoncé and Destiny's Child's success and wholesome public image can be attributed to Beyoncé's parents, Matthew and Tina Knowles. Matthew Knowles, a former IBM executive, managed the group since its founding in 1992; and Beyoncé's mother, Celestine "Tina" Beyoncé Knowles-Lawson, a former make-up artist and cosmetologist, styled the group — creating the basis for their public image. Under the direction of Matthew Knowles and the styling of Tina Knowles, the members of Destiny's Child were branded as the Black girls next door, a shining example of Black respectability (Gipson, 2019). This representation of Black womanhood can especially be seen in the lyrics of hit songs such as

"Bills, Bills, Bills," "Independent Woman," and "Nasty Girl," which correlated Black women's personal and romantic success with financial independence and sexual modesty. In addition, before disbanding, none of the group members were publicly linked to any romantic relationships, scandals, or acts of sexual promiscuity— helping them maintain an image of respectable Black women (Gipson, 2019).

This "good girl" image continued to shape Beyoncé's celebrity brand as she entered her solo career with her debut solo album *Dangerously in Love* in 2003. As Gipson (2019) argues, "So devoted was Beyoncé to her wholesome image for much of her life that in 2008 she felt compelled to introduce an alter ego, Sasha Fierce, to the public to justify having any sexually or creative liberation at all." In this way, much of Beyoncé's initial stardom was predicated on representing a model of Black womanhood that was palatable to mainstream, white audiences and neoliberal frameworks of capital and individual success. This begs the question: Could Beyoncé's feminist rise come without her pre-existing image of Black respectability?

It was not until 2011, after she fired her father as her manager, that Beyoncé's brand as a respectable Black woman began to shift. The firing, which occurred in the run-up to the singer's fourth solo studio album, *4*, precipitated a notable shift in the singer's public image. After firing her father, Beyoncé created her own management company, Parkwood Entertainment, which gave the singer more agency and autonomy over her music, branding, and public image (Kim, 2016). At this time, Beyoncé began significantly limiting interviews with the media, limiting the public's perception of her to media and marketing materials controlled by herself and her management team. One of the key ways Beyoncé attempted to regain control of her image at this time was through the release of an autobiographical documentary which she co-directed, entitled *Life Is But a Dream*. In the film, Beyoncé portrays her vulnerability, showcases her roots in Southern Blackness, and aligns herself with radical Black women singers such as Nina Simone. Throughout the film, the singer subtly shifted her image away from the hard exterior of the independent Black women and towards a new, softer, more relatable Black woman brand steeped in her Blackness. In this way, Beyoncé begins the transition of slowly introducing Black feminist elements into her larger branding and commercial strategy.

Going a step further later that year, with the release of her self-titled fifth studio album and accompanying visual album *Beyoncé*, Beyoncé began to shift her image to more closely align with what has popularly been termed "bottom bitch feminism," a celebration of sexual freedom and strong independent Black womanhood. While not completely distinct from neoliberal feminist ideology promoted through songs like "Bills, Bills, Bills," bottom bitch feminism is arguably an edgier and less palatable public image than the respectable girl next door. However, in "The Problem With Beyhive "Bottom Bitch" Feminism," authors Christa Bell and Mako Fitts Ward (2014) argue that in actuality, "What [Beyoncé] represents is an appearance of power within a structure of male dominance, but in reality, this "power" is merely vicarious and not a positional power in and of itself." In this way, while Beyoncé began to rebrand her public image to more aesthetically and rhetorically signal a feminist understanding of self, she was careful not to transgress socially acceptable understanding of feminism within larger heteropatriarchal structures. For instance, the songs "Drunk in Love" and "Partition" championed women's sexual freedom and promiscuity as a form of liberation but specifically within the confines of heterosexual marriage.

Further, scholars have often pointed to Beyoncé's samples of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TedX talk entitled "We Should all be Feminists" in the song "Flawless," to explicitly mark the song's "girl boss" message as one of feminist empowerment.³¹³² In "Flawless," these excerpts critique how women are socialized to strive for happiness through a partner over individual success. However, within Adichie's larger speech, these excerpts serve as one of the many examples of the systemic ways, specifically Nigerian culture, perpetuates misogyny. Thus, in decontextualizing and generalizing the excerpt in her

³¹In the excerpt in *Flawless*, we hear the following excerpt from Adichie's poem: "We teach girls to shrink themselves/ To make themselves smaller/ We say to girls/ "You can have ambition/ But not too much/You should aim to be successful/But not too successful/Otherwise you will threaten the man/ Because I am female/I am expected to aspire to marriage/I am expected to make my life choices/Always keeping in mind that/Marriage is the most important/ Now marriage can be a source of/ Joy and love and mutual support/ But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage/And we don't teach boys the same?/We raise girls to see each other as competitors/Not for jobs or for accomplishments/ Which I think can be a good thing/But for the attention of men/We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings/In the way that boys are/Feminist: the person who believes in the social Political, and economic equality of the sexes.

³²In 2017, After the release of *Flawless* (2014), Adichie faced backlash after doing an interview with Britain's Channel 4 in which she said she did not consider trans women "women," and instead considered them "trans women," because having been born male, trans women, in her estimation, have at some point in their life benefitted from patriarchy and male privilege (Crockett, 2017). In an apology, clarifying her statement, Adichie said her comments were not meant to be transphobic, but also maintained her position, writing "I think the impulse to say that trans women are women just like women born female are women comes from a need to make trans issues mainstream. Because by making them mainstream, we might reduce the many oppressions they experience. But it feels disingenuous to me. The intent is a good one but the strategy feels untrue. Diversity does not have to mean division." (Adichie, 2017)

song, Beyoncé vacates the words of their systemic critique in favor of a more neoliberal understanding: If women would just focus on individual success over or in equal parts to romantic success they will achieve social parity. Adichie has similarly suggested, "[Beyoncé's] type of feminism is not mine, as it is the kind that, at the same time, gives quite a lot of space to the necessity of men" (McHenry, 2016).

Other lyrics in "Flawless" support this more neoliberal reading of feminism. For instance, she sings "I took some time to live my life,/ But don't think I'm just his little wife," highlighting her own equal attention to career and marriage; and "This rock, flawless/My rock, flawless," which equates "this" her diamond "rock" to "my rock," a reference to her husband, rapper Jay-Z, and his record label, "Rocafella Records," which he often refers to as "The Roc" or "Roc Nation."³³ In this way, where Adichie positions feminism as societal and structural, Beyoncé positions feminism within the neoliberal framework of individualism. Nevertheless, the poem's use and its explicit reference to feminism marked the song, and Beyoncé, as an emerging feminist icon in popular culture.

This image of Beyoncé as a feminist was then further expanded to frame Beyoncé as a Black feminist during the singer's 2016 Superbowl performance. During the show, Beyoncé performed the first single from her then-forthcoming *Lemonade* album entitled "Formation." In the song, Beyoncé explicitly links her understanding of herself as a woman with her Blackness through lines such as "My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana/You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas Bama." The line references Beyoncé's Black southern roots stemming from her mother's lineage in the creoles communities of Louisiana and her father's Black Alabama roots that converged in Houston, Texas. The song also situates this understanding of her Blackness within her forward lineage as the mother of a Black child singing, "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils," praising the particularly Black American aesthetics of hair and facial features passed on through the lineage of her daughter. Further, Beyoncé and her backup dancers wore Black berets and vests during the performance, reminiscent of the Black Panther Party. This image of Beyoncé sets the stage for the release of *Lemonade*.

³³When Beyoncé says this line in the music video, she makes the "Roc Nation," symbol, a diamond formed by splaying your hands and touching your two thumbs and two pointer fingers.

Track 2: Beyoncé Shows Us Her Lemons

In line with Beyoncé's increased control over her artistic projects, the singer played a large part in both the construction and execution of *Lemonade*. Beyoncé is credited as the artistic inspiration behind *Lemonade* and as one of the film's seven directors. The film was also co-executive produced by Beyoncé and her management company, Parkwood Entertainment. This level of control over the film's creative vision and overall execution allowed Beyoncé to ensure that the film's representational depictions of Black womanhood aligned with the Black feminist brand she was building for herself. Throughout *Lemonade*, Beyoncé depicts her own journey of self-discovery, self-definition, and healing following the disintegration of her marriage to rapper Jay-Z after his infidelity. While a seemingly autobiographical narrative, the film's inclusion of other Black women and activists arguably frames it as part of a larger story of Black women's fight for self-definition and independence. This larger narrative can also be seen in how the film's narrative structure is guided by adapted poems by Warsan Shire, a Black British poet of Somali descent. In this way, Beyoncé draws from her own and others' womanist artistic standpoint to create a larger narrative about what it means to live and love as a Black woman.

Throughout the hour long film, the singer divides the journey from betrayal to acceptance and finally forgiveness into eleven chapters: "Intuition," "Denial," "Anger," "Apathy," "Emptiness," "Accountability," "Reformation," "Forgiveness," "Resurrection," "Hope," and "Redemption." Each new stage of the journey visually depicts a new phase of the artist's journey, with all but one stage doubling as a music video for a song on the album. In my analysis, I examine how the narrative and visual aesthetics utilized in "Denial," "Reformation," and "Hope" draw on Black Feminist aesthetics and Black woman's diasporic culture to tell a story of Black women's self-definition, community, and diasporic healing. In this way, the film aesthetically allows Beyoncé to extend her brand as a Black feminist. However, I also point to the ways neoliberal logic manifests in how *Lemonade* plays on the ambiguity between these visual aesthetics, the song's lyrics, and her reinterpretation of Shire's words. Further, I suggest these more progressive framings of *Lemonade* as a Black Feminist text are undercut by the singer's continued privileging of Black woman's liberation through neoliberal capitalist understandings of success as seen in "Emptiness" and "Formation."

Track 3: Black Feminist Narratives & Aesthetics in "Denial," "Reformation," and "Hope"

Verse 1/Denial: Self-Definition, Voodoo Aesthetics & Black Girl Joy

"Denial," the second chapter of *Lemonade*, begins with Beyoncé fully submerged in water after jumping off the roof of a building, too burdened by the weight of her partner's deception. As Beyoncé floats beneath the water's surface, we see her begin to remove the black hoodie she killed herself in to reveal a gold beaded bodysuit, as her long blonde hair floats and expands in the water. We hear a voice-over of her reciting a poem that features amended excerpts from Warsan Shire's "For Women who are 'Difficult' to Love." We watch as Beyoncé floats through an empty room, watching a drowned version of herself that lay in a bed next to her — this is the beginning of her journey to rediscovering herself on her terms. We are watching her rebirth into a new life and a new self that will no longer be defined and constrained by a man. In line with black feminist understandings of self-definition, in "Denial," Beyoncé begins her journey to reclaim who she is as a Black woman and as a Black mother on her terms.

Beyoncé's engagement with Shire's poetry in this section also points to the emergence of the singer as a new self-possessed and self-defined woman. The poem describes a woman who is too strong and too self-possessed for a man to hold onto, and thus he slips away. Beyoncé recites a version of Shire's lines in the scene, saying, "I tried to change/ close my mouth more/tried to be softer/prettier/less awake." These lines illustrate how Beyoncé, in her previous incarnation, like many Black women before her, had shrunk herself to fit the desired definition prescribed to her in a patriarchal society. This is what we see her moving away from throughout the rest of her journey. However, where Beyoncé's version of the poem centers on her personal narrative through the use of the word "I," Shire's original poem centered on an unnamed "you." While *Lemonade* places Shire's words within a neoliberal, individualistic framework of individual healing, in Shire's original poem, "you" could be identified as anyone, thus representing a collective experience. Therefore, while Beyoncé's overall message in "Denial" grapples with Black women's self-definition, its original expansive understanding is ultimately flattened —potentially limiting audiences' from seeing this as a resistant message about the experience of Black women more broadly.

The visual imagery in "Denial" also marks the first of Beyoncé's visual references to Black diasporic Orisha worship throughout the film. As she floats in the water, Beyoncé takes on the form of Yemoja or Yemayá, the River goddess in Nigerian Yoruba culture and Afro-Caribbean Santería, respectively [see **Image 9a & b**]. In diasporic African religions, Yemayá was brought over to the Western World with the African people on the ships of the transatlantic slave trade and is called upon to help with trauma, healing work, fertility, and self-love (Snider, 2019). Religious studies scholar Elizabeth Perez (2013) argues for an understanding of Yemayá as a fierce mother, used in Afro-Cuban religions as a counter to mainstream depictions of Black women as mammy. As Perez notes, "Yemayá exercises her command of space to advocate for her listeners' self-possession and enhance their ability to heal themselves." In this way, we can read Beyoncé's invocation of Yemayá at the beginning of her journey to signal the birth of her new healing path towards redefinition of herself and as a mother. In addition, Yemayá's pension for testing her followers could also signal the journey she will take us on will be long and hard but ultimately necessary to become the person she desires to be (Perez, 2013).

As the poem comes to a close, we now see Beyoncé emerge from two big double doors; she has now transformed from Yemayá into Osún/Ochún as a rush of water flows out from behind to begin the music video for "Hold Up." At the film's release, several scholars, film critics, and fans specifically noted Beyoncé's visual reference to Ochún in this scene in her flowing yellow Roberto Cavalli dress. [See **images 10a&10b**]. Ochún is often depicted as Yemayá's younger sister in the Yoruba tradition and sometimes as her sister in Afro-Cuban traditions. Folklorist Somilar Otero (2013) argues that within the Afro-Cuban tradition, the two orishas have a relationship based on aesthetic and ritual reciprocity. The orishas not only aesthetically lend themselves to one another, but the children of Yemayá often pray to Ochún and vice versa. In this way, through her transition, Beyoncé is not only exemplifying the reciprocity between the Orishas but performing various embodiments of Black womanhood. In other words, within *Lemonade*, what it means to be a Black woman becomes an unstable signifier shifting and changing — lending itself to the complexity of what it means to inhabit Black womanhood. This flow in her journey from Yemayá Ochún also follows their water-based connection in Afro-Cuban diaspora religions, with Yemayá belonging to the sea and Ochún belonging to the river. As Otero writes, "As the



Image 9a:
Beyoncé in "Denial," *Lemonade*

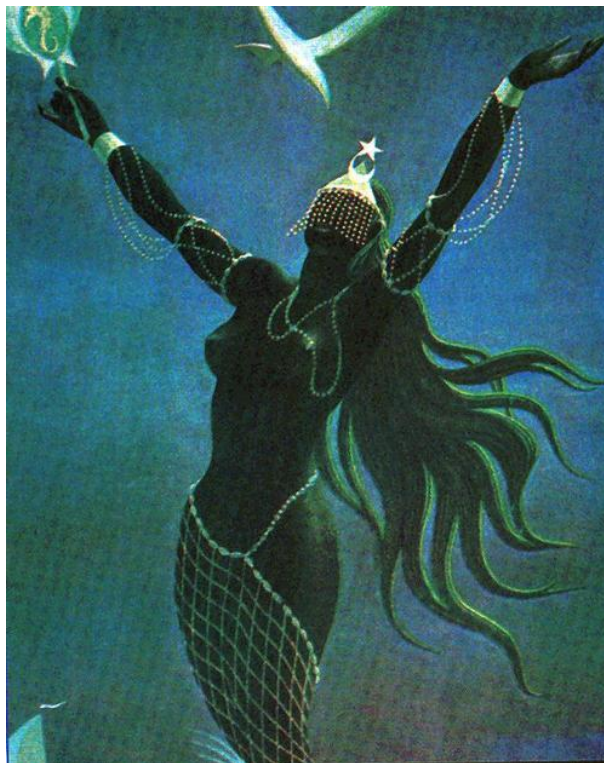


Image 9b:
Image of Yemayá

sea receives the overflow of the rivers...understand this merging as a starting point for developing a rich and layered spiritual life where she can embody a range of subjectivities to express and extend her agency in a

variety of realms.” (p.95). This representation of the “layered subjectivities” of Black womanhood is also punctuated by the physical contrast between the two orishas. Unlike the dark-skinned Yemaya, Ochún is often depicted as a lighter-skinned mulatta. Thus, Beyoncé’s creole roots and Ochún’s mulatta identity can be seen as destabilized hybridizations of Blackness, blurring and disrupting traditional boundaries of Black womanhood.

African American studies scholar Kameelah L. Martin (2020) argues Beyoncé’s continued engagement with African diasporic spirituality in *Lemonade* presents a Black Feminist Voodoo aesthetic. Martin defines a Voodoo aesthetic as “the inscription of African ritual cosmologies on the black female body (2016, pg. 3). Engaging a black feminist voodoo aesthetic in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé’s embodiment of the orishas represents a nuanced and respectful raced and gendered engagement with African diasporic religion. As Martin writes, “[*Lemonade*] is an unquestionable reverberation of what is possible when Black feminist Voodoo aesthetics are employed within articulations of Africana women’s definitions of themselves and the traditions that sustain them” (p.175). In this way, Beyoncé continually represents her journey of self-definition as a Black woman as belonging to and being a part of a longer lineage of the magic and resilience of Black women across the diaspora.

In the music video for “Hold Up,” we see Beyoncé, as Ochún skipping, down the street, laughing as she uses a bat to smash and break things around her. Scholars have previously read this scene as a representation of Black woman’s rage exhibited through her use of the bat for the destruction of property and lyrics that point to potential acts of violence, such as “I don’t wanna lose my pride, but I’m a fuck me up a bitch” (i.e., hooks, 2016). This understanding lends itself to familiar controlling images such as the Bitch Sapphire, which negatively frames Black women as angry and violent. Alternatively, I argue this perceived violence is not an expression of anger but represents the joy found in literally smashing and destroying the confines of a world others have created for you. As Beyoncé wields her bat, she does not look upset, but rather with each new act of destruction, she and those around her dance and celebrate the freedom created in the wake of her destruction. Beyoncé breaks open a fire hydrant so that young, Black children can dance and play in the water; she smashes a surveillance camera to free herself of the intrusive eyes of a white, male society that seeks to monitor and control her behavior; and she shatters

a beauty shop window to undo the historically white beauty standards that aim to dictate how Black women should look.

I suggest Beyoncé's destruction is not a form of violence but rather a tool for Black women's freedom towards self-definition on their terms. In other words, it is a recognition of Audre Lorde's (1984) refrain that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Beyoncé must tear down the white, patriarchal structures holding her in place to become who she wants to be. In this way, 'Hold Up' presents a visual representation of what Stewart (2021) terms "the politics of joy." Stewart defines the politics of joy as a Black writers and artists focus on Black Southern joy as a form of resistance against white supremacist structures that sought to weaponize Black joy. While Stewart reads *Lemonade*'s joyfulness through its engagement with Orisha worship, I further argue that this joy can be seen in 'Hold Up,' which alerts us to how what appears to be rage can be a manifestation of Black women's resistant joy.

Verse 2/Reformation: Self-Definition Through Rebirth

The seventh chapter, entitled "Reformation," continues Beyoncé's journey towards self-definition through staging a baptismal rebirth. The chapter begins by setting the mise-en-scène with images of in and around The Destrehan Plantation, right off the Mississippi River, and the landscape of the Louisiana Bayou. The shots are reminiscent of Julie Dash's *Daughters of The Dust* (1991). As noted previously, *Daughters of The Dust* was the first film directed by a Black woman to be given a national theatrical release in the United States. In the movie, set in the early 1900s, Dash tells the story of the Peasant family as they prepare to leave their home in the Gullah community of coastal South Carolina to migrate to the mainland — signifying a move away from their West African Yoruba spiritual roots. Throughout the film, the landscape of the coastal Gullah Islands becomes an integral character, shaping the Peasant family's connection to each other and their ancestral heritage in Western Africa. Dash takes care to linger on shots of the reeds of the sandy white beaches, the large willow oak trees, and waters from whence their ancestors came and through which they will again travel to go up North. Similarly, in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé roots her impending transformation in her own Black Southern heritage in the Louisiana Bayou. Shots linger on the underside of the large Louisiana willow oak trees and stalks of weed grass blowing at



Image 10a:
Beyoncé in "Hold Up," Lemonade



Image 10b:
Image of Ochún

the water's edge [See image 11]. In this way, Beyoncé, like Dash, makes ancestral homeland central to her understanding of who she is as a Black woman.



Image 11:
"Reformation," *Lemonade*

After taking us through the Bayou, the film abruptly cuts to a shot of Beyoncé lying in the fetal position dressed in all white in the middle of an empty Mercedes-Benz Superdome, previously known as the Louisiana Superdome. Following the touchdown of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, The Superdome housed 30,000 displaced evacuees for five days until the structure eventually gave in; it became a national symbol of the city's lack of preparedness and the misery faced by all (Scott, 2015; Carpenter, 2015). However, the restoration of the structure following the storm became a symbol of the city's rehabilitation and rebirth. In this way, Beyoncé's positioning in the middle of the restored Mercedes-Benz Superdome, curled up in all white as if a newborn baby, signals a parallel in her own journey. Like the Superdome, in "Reformation," Beyoncé is birthing a new version of herself — her despair has brought about a new hope. Further, this transition between the ancestral land of her Louisiana people and the brilliance of the

new Superdome highlights the same multi-generational journey of self-possession explored in *Daughters of The Dust*.

In line with this idea of rebirth, in the next scene set to the song, "Love Drought," we return to the Bayou to see Beyoncé dressed in all-white, leading a procession of Black women, similarly dressed, as they wade into the water. We are again met with images of the land as the woman walks deeper into the water. The fact that this baptism is happening in community with other Black women signifies that it is through community that Black women learn the power of self-definition. By the end of the song, we see Beyoncé standing in the middle of a circle of women; her face adorned with white face paint. In the vignette "Apathy," earlier in the film, we see these same facial markings on Black women surrounding Beyoncé, but they were notably absent from her own face. Thus, I suggest that bestowing these markings on Beyoncé at this point in the film is meant to symbolize the completion of her rebirth — she, like the women before her, has crossed over into a new self. In this way, *Reformation* represents a baptism on the singer's journey towards finding and re-defining herself on her own terms.

However, this visual allusion to rebirth is undercut by the song's lyrics, which focus on the power of reconciliation between her and her partner. In the lyrics to "Love Drought," Beyoncé acknowledges her husband's faults but also acknowledges how much she needs him: "Ten times out of nine, I know you're lying/ But nine times outta ten, I know you're trying/ So I'm trying to be fair/And you're trying to be there and to care." These lyrics point to a woman still grappling with her husband's infidelity, not a woman born anew. In this way, "Reformation" points to what I argue is one of the most important aspects of the visual album that lends itself to commercial Black feminism: ambiguity. Black woman singers like Beyoncé exploit this ambiguity between the aesthetic and the lyrical to brand themselves as a Black feminists while not necessarily promoting these same lessons through their music.

Verse 3/Hope: Black Women in Community

The tenth chapter, "Hope," moves back and forth between the Madewood Plantation House in Napoleonville, Louisiana, and Fort Macomb. Throughout the chapter, the sprawling former sugarcane plantation, which once held 250 enslaved peoples and was a former confederate holdout during the civil war, is transformed into a visibly Black femme space (Warner, 1993). We see Black women of various

shades and hair textures dressed in Victorian-era clothing gathered together in the kitchen, preparing a meal on the plantation. In the background, we can hear Beyoncé reciting the words to Shire's poem "Nail Technician as Palm Reader."³⁴ Throughout the poem, we see Beyoncé moving through the ruins of The Fort, as the poem describes the Black children that came forth from her body, leaving scars. As the music for the next song on the album, "Freedom," featuring rapper Kendrick Lamar begins to play, we once again return to the plantation as the women gather in front of a stage, watching Beyoncé sing. Featured among this group are actresses Zendaya, Amandla Stenberg, and Quvenzhané Wallis,³⁵ model Winnie Harlow, and Beyoncé's protégés, singers Chloe and Hallie Bailey. In the scene, the idea of freedom is grounded in diasporic Black women in community. This scene further draws on Black feminist understandings of Black women as community builders, activists, and organizers (Collins, 2019). By transforming these historical reminders of America's racist and sexist past into a space for Black women to build community, Beyoncé signals to the audience that it is through Black women that she finds hope.

Also in the audience are Samira Rice, Sybrina Fulton, and Gwen Carr, the mothers of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, respectively, three Black men murdered by police; they're also featured in the previous scene, "Reformation," sitting in the plantation house holding photos of their sons, as the track "Forward," sung by James Blake, played in the background. Collectively, these women are often referred to as the mothers of the Black Lives Matter movement. Their visible presence in the scene not only calls attention to the anti-racist activism, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the significant role that Black women and Black mothers play in this activism. In this way, the film once again centers on the role of Black women and femmes in anti-racist organizing and our perpetual hope for a better future.

Throughout the song, the audience is met with more visual homages to *Daughters of The Dust*. At the beginning of the scene, we see a group of women in white dresses, reminiscent of the white dresses worn by the women of the Peasant family, sitting on the stage. Then, throughout the song, we are met with images of the women staged both in and around the large willow oak tree, a visual allusion to a

³⁴"Nail Technician as Palm Reader" by Warsan Shire: The nail technician pushes my cuticles /back, turns my hand over,/stretches the skin on my palm/ and says *I see your daughters/and their daughters*. That night, in a dream, the first girl emerges/ from a slit in my stomach. The scar heals/ into a smile. The man I love pulls the stitches out/ with his fingernails. We leave black sutures/ curling on the side of the bath./ As I wake as the second girl crawls/ head first up my throat—/ a flower, blossoming/ out of the hole in my face.

³⁵Wallis is the youngest actress to ever be nominated for an Oscar.

shot in *Daughters of The Dust* where characters Eula, Yellow Mary, and Trula laugh and smoke in the willow tree [See Images 12a&b].

The scene reveals Eula's faith in the family's homeland and spiritual roots, Yellow Mary's rebuke of these beliefs as "backwater," and Yellow Mary's desire to find a good man to know there is someone she could depend on if she had to. *Lemonade* reveals similar tensions and desires in its narrative by recalling this scene—the importance of ancestral land and beliefs, the pull towards modernity, and the comfort found through having a dependable male partner. Thus, Beyoncé's continual visual allusion to *Daughters of The Dust* continues to ground the film's message in the visual history of Black feminist aesthetic and womanist artistic standpoints.

Track 4: A Black Independent Woman in "Emptiness" and "Lemonade."

Despite Beyoncé's visual and contextual Black feminist messages throughout *Lemonade*, these ideas are often undercut by lyrics that equate Black women's independence and liberation with individualism under capitalism. This can be seen in the fifth chapter, "Emptiness." In the preceding chapters, Beyoncé's journey moves from anger to apathy as she reconciles with her husband's infidelity. At the beginning of "Emptiness," which leads into the music video for the song "6 Inch" featuring singer The Weekend, we see Beyoncé in red, surrounded by a ring of fire. The chapter begins with a recitation of an amended excerpt from Shire's poems "Grief Has Its Blue Hands In Her Hair" and "Dear Moon," which allude to the spiritual power of sex, pleasure, and the female body. However, the song lyrics speak to the use of sex for purely capitalist gain. Accompanied by red-tinted scenes of Beyoncé inside a house surrounded by other Black women, in the back of a limousine, and on a stage reminiscent of a peep show. Beyoncé sings: "She stack her money, money everywhere she goes/(She got that Sake) Her Yamazaki straight from Tokyo/(Oh baby you know) She got them commas and them decimals/She don't gotta give it up cause she professional. Six-inch heels.../She walked in the club like nobody's business/ Goddamn...(goddamn)/(Baby) She murdered everybody and I was her witness/She works for the money (works)/She work for the money (works) from the start to the finish/And she worth every dollar (worth) /She worth every dollar (worth) and she worth every minute."



Image 12a:
Daughters of the Dust, Kasi Lemons



Image 12b:
Amanda Steelberg and Zendaya in *Lemonade*

In contrast to Shire's poem, which highlights the power of sex and sexuality for women, Beyoncé's lyrics speak to sex work purely for capitalist gain. My argument does not intend to demonize and vilify sex work as outside the bounds of Black women's respectability but rather calls attention to how Beyoncé's use of sex work in *Lemonade* is purely a capitalist transaction seemingly devoid of deeper agency or pleasure. Though seemingly different from earlier versions of her "girl next door," brand, in line with her earlier songs with Destiny's Child, such as "Bills, Bills, Bills," and "Independent Woman," "6 Inches," still positions Black women's liberation within a capitalist and patriarchal framework. Thus, the only way she attends to the liberatory power of sex work is through the neoliberalism capital and subsequent monetary independence of Black women. It is also possible that these lyrics develop from Beyoncé's womanist artistic standpoint, stemming from her own experience of "selling" her body to achieve success in the record industry. However, if this is the case, what would it mean for our understanding of Beyoncé that she potentially derived no pleasure from these experiences? What roadmap to success would Black women watching *Lemonade* take away from this?

This idea of freedom through capitalism is again taken up in the film's conclusion, in the music video for the album's first single, "Formation." Alongside an aesthetic focus on the beauty of Black women's hair and bodies, the song's lyrics continually make allusions to Beyoncé's wealth and opulence. For instance, at the beginning of the song, Beyoncé sings, "Paparazzi, catch my fly, and my cocky fresh/ I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress (stylin')/ I'm so possessive, so I rock his Roc necklace." Later in the song, she also asserts, "When he f*ck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay/ If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, cause I slay/Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up, cause I slay." These continual mentions of designer clothing, expensive jewelry, nice dinners, and private jets punctuate *Lemonade*'s hour-long journey of self-discovery. This ending suggests to the audience that Black women's ultimate liberation comes from participating and dominating in neoliberal capitalist systems. The song's final lyrics emphasize, "Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper." While for Beyoncé, a multi-million dollar recording artist, liberation is achieved through her controlling her capital, this is not necessarily the case for most everyday Black women. Rather, it is systems of capitalism that privilege white, cisgender men that often continue to oppress Black women.

By ending her film with an exaltation of capitalist systems, in many ways, Beyoncé undermines the Black feminist messages embedded throughout much of the film. These moments in *Lemonade* speak to hooks' critique that "[Beyoncé 's] vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination. It's all about insisting on equal rights for men and women. In the world of fantasy feminism, there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies that breakdown simplified categories of women and men, no call to challenge and change systems of domination." While, as hooks notes, Beyoncé "positively exploits images of Black female bodies," she simultaneously offers simplistic and neoliberal visions of Black women's liberation. The structure of the visual album, with competing visual and lyrical messages, allows for this messaging and ambiguity. This ambiguity enables Beyoncé to take up a womanist artistic standpoint through film while simultaneously creating songs and lyrics that are palatable to record industries and larger commercial audiences. Thus, as an example of commercial Black feminism, *Lemonade* places revolutionary Black feminist images within a capitalist-friendly neoliberal framework.

Side B: ArchAndroids & Dirty Computers

Track 1: Janelle Monáe 's TIGHTROPE

In contrast to Beyoncé, from the beginning, R&B/Funk artist Janelle Monáe spent her career tightly controlling her brand and pushing against those social norms that sought to define her. Whereas Beyoncé did not take control of her brand until a decade into her career, Monáe began her music career evading societal and commercial control, a difference that arguably stems from the fact that Beyoncé started her professional music career at a much younger age than Monáe, and thus was more susceptible to familial and outside influences. Nevertheless, despite their disparate initial trajectories, as Monáe reached the pinnacle of her fame, like Beyoncé, she too took up the visual album to engage in commercial Black Feminism.

Monáe began her music career in the early 2000s when she moved to Atlanta after leaving the American Musical and Drama Academy (AMDA) in New York City, where she studied to become a Broadway actress (Pflaum, 2006). Talking about her decision to leave AMDA, Monáe said she wanted to break free of the "uniformity" of the predetermined roles for Black women on Broadway, "I didn't want to be too

influenced by standardized teaching. I felt like we were all being deprogrammed, in a way. And I wanted to keep everything that was unique about Janelle Monáe ...That's why I left" (DeLuca, 2010).

In Atlanta, Monáe began to build a brand persona that elided "deprogramming" by any outside forces that would make her conform to preconceived notions of who she should be both as a singer and a Black woman. Monáe performed her music at local HBCUs and recorded original music. During this time, Monáe met like-minded songwriters and producers, with whom she formed Wondaland Arts Society, an artistic collective of singers, visual artists, dancers, actors, and videographers based in Atlanta (Lynsky, 2010; Powers, 2010). Monáe said she created her own music label, in part, because she "wanted a new energy to be out there, to focus on new ideas and the future. As an African-American, I wanted to show we are not monolithic. There are so many different sides to us that are not being represented in the music industry. And it's also important for young girls to have different options" (Knot, 2010). In this way, Wondaland allowed Monáe to explore her unique brand and offer a new representation of Black womanhood she did not see in mainstream popular music. Through independent production and artistic agency with Wondaland, Monáe honed and crafted her signature brand of funk, soul, pop, and Afrofuturism.

Monáe 's first big break came after Big Boi saw her perform at an Open-Mic night at Sean 'P.Diddy' Combs' Atlanta restaurant "Justins" (Knot, 2010). After seeing Monáe perform, Big Boi offered to sign her to his new label, Purple Ribbon Records. However, Monáe only signed after agreeing that she and Wondaland would maintain full control over her music (Knot, 2010). Under the mentorship of Big Boi and Andre 3000, the other half of Outkast, Monáe was featured on Outkast's compilation albums, *Got Purp? Volume 2* (2005) and *Idlewild* (2006). Speaking about her relationship with Outkast, Monáe emphasized their mutual respect stating, "they're inspired by what the Wondaland Arts Society is doing, and we listen to them" (Powers, 2010). (Knot, 2010; Powers, 2010). Thus, in contrast to Beyoncé, since the start of her career, Monáe has taken deliberate steps to tightly control her music, brand, and overall public image; and the brand she built rested firmly on the persona of a queer afrofuturistic androids.

Monáe's first solo project, *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)* (2007), was produced by Big Boi and released independently online by Wondaland.³⁶ (Lynsky, 2010). Like many of Monáe's subsequent albums, *Metropolis* was a concept album she developed with her writing partner Chuck Lightning (Knot, 2010; Lynsky, 2010). The concept was inspired by Austrian-German director Fritz Lang's 1927 science-fiction film *Metropolis*. Lang's *Metropolis*, made as a political commentary during Germany's Weimar Republic, is set in a futuristic society where stark class divisions separate citizens. Monáe said she identified with the film's social critique noting, "In the movie, you have the have's,' who live this good and care-free life and then on the opposite side, you have the 'have-nots,' who are kept underground and struggle to rise to the top" (Lynsky, 2010). In addition, Monáe said the concept for *Metropolis* was inspired by the work of prolific science fiction writers Octavia Butler and Issac Asimov, future theorist Ray Kurtzweil, and "The Twilight Zone," which she used to watch as a child with her Grandmother (Knot, 2010; Lynsky, 2010). These literary and pop culture references speak to Monáe's early interest in science fiction and created a narrative vehicle through which she could talk about issues of societal marginalization in her art.

In the album's narrative arch, Monáe casts herself in the role of Android #57821 aka Cindi Mayweather, an android living in the year 2719. Android control marshals are hunting Mayweather with "chainsaws and electrodaggers" for breaking the law and falling in love with a human. If caught and arrested by the marshals, Mayweather will be disassembled. In an interview, Monáe said of the character:

I chose an android because the android to me represents "the other" in our society. I can connect to the other, because it has so many parallels to my own life...just by being a female, African-American artist in today's music industry....Whether you're called weird or different, all those things we do to make people uncomfortable with themselves, I've always tried to break out of those boundaries. The android represents the new other to me. (Knot, 2010).

Monáe intentionally called upon the metaphor of the android to create social commentary about her own "othered" experience in society. Through the character of Mayweather, Monáe began to craft a brand that championed the socially marginalized. However, Monáe does not define how this otherness relates to her own identity, creating ambiguity around the representational politics of the android. One

³⁶The album was subsequently re-released in 2008 on Sean "P.Diddy" Combs' recording label, Bad Boy Records.

could understand her embodiment of Mayweather as representing the systematically marginalized or as representing all individuals who simply do not "fit in," such as the socially awkward white man. Thus, while we can read critiques of race and gender into Monáe's brand, these aspects of her performance are also implicit and can also be easily ignored.

Further, by taking up the imagery of the android, Monáe joined a lineage of Black American artists, including Sun Ra, George Clinton, John Coltrane, Erykah Badhu, and Earth, Wind, & Fire, that have called upon Afrofuturist aesthetic in their music to push against socially dominant and heteronormative understandings of Blackness (Murchinson, 2018). "Afrofuturism" is a term coined by Mark Dery (1994) that refers to "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future." Afrofuturist aesthetics takes up speculative fiction and the science fictive possibilities of new technology to reimagine, evaluate, and call into question what the material conditions of Blackness are and could be. In addition, as a space of possibility, Afrofuturist aesthetics allow artists to explore conditions of oppression from an intersectional perspective that interrogates the conditions of the future, not only through the lens of Blackness but also gender, sexuality, and class.

Musicologist Gayle Murchinson (2018) argues that Afrofuturism's boundary-pushing and experimental space allows for exploring *quare* Black performances. Drawing from E.Patrick Johnson's notion of 'quare' studies, Murchinson roughly defines quare performance as "music created, performed, interpreted, and so on by LGBTQIA African, African American, and African diasporic musicians" (p. 83). However, building on this, Murchinson also provides an expansive definition of quare Black performance as Black performances that push heteronormative understandings of Blackness. Thus, in her definition of quare Black performance, Murchinson detaches holding a quare or queer identity from performing queerness. Similarly, in discussing the queer possibilities created through Afrofuturist work, Kara Keeling (2019) positions "queer" as not just an identity but as a politic performed in "what one does" and "how one does it" (p. 71). In other words, queerness is not just about sexual orientation but about socially and politically pushing against heteronormative assumptions. Thus, in their work, both Murchinson and

Keeling understand the queerness created through Afrofuturism as not just being about one's identity but as an aesthetic perspective that takes up a particular social and political position. In short, queer performance is distinct from queer identity.

This understanding of the connection between Afrofuturism and queerness/quareness is important when thinking about Monáe's celebrity. By taking up Afrofuturist aesthetics early in her career, Monáe performed queerness by using the character of Cindi Mayweather to represent queer (non-normative) love between android and man, and the fight "for droid and cyborg rights to be recognized as fully human, capable of emotions, intellect, and love...paralleling the struggles of black quares" (Murchinson, 2018). However, this queer performance remained distinct from her own public sexual identity. Here I point to a deliberate and arguably strategic distinction Monáe created between the public's understanding of her on-stage performance brand and her off-stage celebrity.

While Monáe often performed queerness through her use of Afrofuturist aesthetics, she often took steps to publicly separate who she was off-stage from a queer identity. For instance, Monáe admitted that she would often 'duck' questions about her own sexual identity, instead giving the stock response, "I only date androids." (Spanos, 2018)³⁷. Through this response, Monáe used the character of Mayweather to separate her on-stage and off-stage personas, creating a distinction between her performance character and Janelle Monáe, the individual celebrity. To be clear, I am not suggesting that queer artists need to or should even feel compelled to reveal their sexuality publicly. Instead, I am saying that an omission of this identity can be used strategically to make queer artists more appealing and acceptable to mainstream audiences. However, in Monáe's case, she paired her lack of personal disclosure with the use of an Afrofuturistic character to push against heteronormative boundaries through quare performance. In this way, by performing quareness and explicitly taking up a queer politic, Monáe created a strategic ambiguity around her brand and public perceptions of who she is. This approach to branding stands in

³⁷In interviews, Monáe has said that some of her previous songs on ArchAndroid and Electric Lady made allusions to queerness. For instance, in the songs "Q.U.E.E.N." and "Mushrooms and Roses," there are references to a love interest named Mary, a precursor for Dirty Computer's Mary Apple. In addition, the original title of "Q.U.E.E.N." was "Q.U.E.E.R." and the word queer is still faintly spelled out in the song's background harmonies. However, in both of these cases, these references to queerness were intentionally buried and likely overlooked by most listeners (Spanos, 2018).

contrast to many artists, such as Beyoncé, who do not allow us to see any disjuncture between who they are on and off-stage.

Monáe also queers/quares her celebrity image by cementing her signature "look": a tuxedo and a pompadour hairstyle [See image 13]. The outfit, which Monáe often refers to as her "uniform," gives the singer a unique aesthetic that has become a staple of her celebrity brand. Monáe has said the outfit was inspired by German actress Marlene Dietrich and meant to pay homage to her working class parents "how they put on a uniform every day and turned something into nothing" (Milzoff, 2010). Further, noting the significance of the androgynous aesthetic the tuxedo provides, she wanted to redefine how women can dress outside of the confines of societally acceptable gender norms (Knot, 2010). African American Studies scholar Monica Miller (2018) suggests that Monáe's tuxedo offers an unstable signifier through which she can play with boundaries of race, sex, gender, and class, arguing, "When tuxedoed, the poor can pass for rich, women for men; class, gender, and racial hierarchies can be confused, unintentionally or deliberately transgressed" (p. 64). In this way, Monáe employed a queer aesthetic to break down stabilized identity categories, reimagining what women, specifically Black women, in society can and should look like.

However, similar to her use of the character Cindi Mayweather, while this outfit introduced a queer aesthetic into Monáe's on-stage persona, her continual reference to it as a 'uniform' rhetorically detached the symbolism of the outfit from who she was off-stage. As something that must be worn by mandate, a uniform is a requirement, not a choice. In other words, while Monáe's costumed performance was queer, in interviews and public appearances, she was clear to make sure this performance persona would not be conflated with who the public perceived her to be as a person. In this way, Monáe constructed her 'tightrope' — positioning herself as attractive to marginal audiences who identified with the boundary-pushing aspects of her performances and palatable to mainstream, white audiences who could detach this performance from their understanding of who Monáe was as an individual celebrity. This ambiguity Monáe created between her performance brand and the individual public celebrity allowed for her widespread appeal.



Image 13:
Janelle Monae in her signature "uniform."

Monáe's second and third studio albums, *The ArchAndroid (Suites II and III)* (2010) and *Electric Lady* (2013), continued the story of Cindi Mayweather, similarly taking up Afrofuturism to explore issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Monáe released these subsequent albums on Sean "P.Diddy" Combs' label, Bad Boy records. In an interview with *The New York Times*' Jenna Wortham (2018), Monáe said she had previously met with record executives who criticized her unique sound, androgynous style, and science fiction preoccupations; however, Combs showed an appreciation for her work. Combs' label provided funding and contacts for the album but left the creative artistry to Monáe and Wondaland

(Lynsky, 2010). With these albums, Monáe explored the concepts of social marginalization introduced in *Metropolis*, but with a larger backing — exposing her work and brand to larger, mainstream audiences.

And it worked — in the coming years, Monáe's popular success became evident. In 2012, following the release of *The ArchAndroid*, Monáe was announced as the newest "Cover Girl" beauty model, joining the ranks of beauty icons Jennifer O'Neill, Christie Brinkley, and Drew Berrymore, solidifying her androgynous uniform in the public imagination as a new standard of beauty (Monáe, 2012). Then, following the release of *Electric Lady*, Monáe was tapped to star in *Hidden Figures* (2016) and *Moonlight* (2016). These two Oscar-winning films explicitly grappled with racism, social inequity, gender-based discrimination, and sexuality. Like with her music, Monáe used these characters to attach her brand to social justice issues without explicitly attaching these politics to her individual public persona. However, as Monáe's public recognition increased, so did her willingness to connect her politics and activism to her celebrity. In 2015, in response to the racial uprisings in Ferguson and the establishment of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Monáe and Wondaland released "Hell You Talmbout," a song that recognized and paid tribute to the unarmed Black men and women killed by police and state-sanctioned violence. Then, in 2016, Monáe launched *Femme the Future*, meant to "advance the careers and create more opportunities for women in music and media and film and TV" (Fragoso, 2016). This moment in her celebrity set the stage for her fourth album, *Dirty Computer*. Thus, like Beyoncé, it was only once Monáe had solidified her commercial and popular success that she released what is arguably her most explicitly queer and personal piece of work, the album and accompanying visual album or "emotion picture," *Dirty Computer*.

Track 2: Janelle Monáe is a Dirty Computer

Like Monáe's previous works, *Dirty Computer* uses Afrofuturistic narratives to discuss race, gender, and queerness. Set sometime in the distant future, the visual album for *Dirty Computer* tells the story of Jane 57821, a Black, queer android who has been arrested for being a "dirty computer." In a voiceover, Monáe explains, "They started calling us computers, people began vanishing and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different, you were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all." As the voice-over plays, we see rotating digitally

simulated images of "computers" pop up on the screen, each labeled with a distinct five-digit number and subsequently marked in red with the word "DIRTY." As she did with Cindi Mayweather, Monáe draws a direct parallel between these futuristic androids and the socially marginalized. In the futuristic world she has created, anyone who deviates from the hegemonic norm is marked as other and must be made clean. Thus, as an Afrofuturistic narrative, the story in *Dirty Computer* "use[s] stories about the past and the present to reclaim the future" (Yaszek, 2013).

The run-up to the film's release was the first time Monáe explicitly linked her own positionality, particularly her sexual identity, to the film's main character. Speaking to *Rolling Stone*, Monáe publically identified herself for the first time as a "queer Black woman," identifying herself as pansexual and admitting that her failure to conform within a heteronormative society often made her feel like a "computer virus" that needed to be cleaned (Spanos, 2018). Through this description, Monáe drew a direct parallel between her own lived experience and the film's underlying concept, with explicit attention to how these experiences are informed by her raced, gendered, and sexed positionality —something she often elided in her description of Mayweather. Further, in the interview, Monáe acknowledged how she would strategically use costumes and characters to conceal who she was from the public, commenting, "It had to do with the fear of being judged...All I saw was that I was supposed to look a certain way coming into this industry, and I felt like I [didn't] look like a stereotypical Black female artist." Thus, as writer Brittany Spanos put it, "She overcompensated...leaving fans to puzzle over the sight and sound of a dark-skinned, androgynously dressed Black woman" (Spanos, 2018). In this way, the interview foregrounded the ways *Dirty Computer* developed from Monáe's womanist artistic standpoint and calls our attention to how Monáe had averted this explicit connection between herself and her work in the past.

Additionally, Monáe had a great deal of creative and editorial control over the film's production, paralleling Beyoncé's involvement with *Lemonade*. Monáe is credited with being the creative vision behind the film, providing story ideas, and being one of the film's Executive Producers (*Dirty Computer*, 2018). These credits signal that Monáe played a fairly significant role in the story's development and the film's overall production. While this level of creative control had been pretty standard for Monáe throughout her career, looking at these credits in conjunction with the film's narrative further reinforces

the connection between Monáe 's own positionality and Jane's story. To clarify, this is not to say that Monáe is Jane, but rather as a film developed from a womanist artistic standpoint, I read Jane's story as being drawn from and inspired by Monáe 's own lived experiences.

Dirty Computer explores Black queerness through Jane's memories. The film begins with Jane lying across a levitating table resembling a concrete slab inside "The House of the New Dawn," where "dirty computers" are sent to be cleaned. As Jane describes, it is a "place where they drained us of our dirt and all the things that made us special. And just when you thought you could remember something, just when you thought you could see the past clearly, they would hit you with "NEVERMIND." This gas would take over, and then you were lost... sleeping...And you didn't remember anything at all." The table rests in the middle of a large gray room with a large, two-way mirror against the far. As we move behind the mirror, we see two white men, dressed in all-white, sitting behind a desk and pressing buttons on a touch-screen projection in front of them. These are the people that will be responsible for "cleaning" Jane. Meanwhile, a person dressed in all-white with a gold gas mask places an abstractly- shaped helmet on top of Jane's head. Over a loudspeaker, we hear a woman's voice, "You will repeat after me. Your Name is Jane 57821. I am a dirty computer. I am ready to be cleaned." Jane repeats these sentences back to her one by one, except for the last one, which she refuses to say, "I am ready to be cleaned." At this point, the voice instructs the white men to initiate the "Nevermind," a system that uses the helmet to play and then erase Jane's memories of her past life. Throughout the rest of the film, the audience is introduced to Jane through a series of memories from before her capture, which double as music videos for each of the songs on the album.³⁸

Through these dream-like memories, I suggest *Dirty Computer* represents a future society that explicitly critiques the ways Black queer bodies are policed and celebrates the liberatory and erotic power of Black queer community and love. I look to the memories/music videos for "Crazy, Classic, Life," "Django Jane," "Pynk," and "Make Me Feel" to explore how *Dirty Computer* uses a Black feminist framing to

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While most songs are represented in the form of memories, one notable exception is "Take a Byte," the third song off the album, which is sung by Jane during the cleaning process.

bring the societal limitations and imagined possibilities of Black queerness into the space of popular culture. However, through *Dirty Computer's* continued focus on "American-ness" and in its ending, I argue that Monáe's Black queer future ultimately places the burden of liberation on the individual, encasing the film within a neoliberal framework in a way that is non-threatening to larger systems of structural oppression Black feminism historically seeks to deconstruct.

Track 3: Janelle Monáe's Black Quare Future

Verse 1/"Crazy, Classic, Life": Black Queer Futures in the Surveillance State

The first music video for *Dirty Computer*, "Crazy, Classic, Life," begins with a memory 78 days before Jane's arrest. Jane and her friend, another Black woman, drive down the highway in a red convertible, dancing in their seats to Monáe's "I Got the Juice," the ninth track off the album. Aesthetically the women's appearance can be described as futuristic avant-garde. They are each dressed in all-Black clothing, adorned with studs and chains, their faces covered in bright, vibrant makeup. Jane wears her hair in large Bantu knots and braids, while her friend has her dreadlocks pulled back into a large braid behind her head. Their dress signals both their beauty and their difference—this is what social deviance looks like in the future. Further, I read the distinct dress in this scene as signaling a distinctly queer aesthetic. Following scholars like Murchinson, Keeling, and Cathey Cohen, who define queerness not only in terms of sexuality but as a radical politic "inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle and upper-middle-class heteronormativity," (Cohen, 1997, p. 441). Through this understanding of queerness, the film calls upon this costuming and radical dress to signify their positionality outside of the bounds of white heteronormativity.

As Jane and her friend drive, we begin to hear the faint sound of sirens in the background. Annoyed, Jane pulls the car over. A floating robot flies up to their car and, in synthetic robot noises, asks them to show identification. Each woman pulls out a brightly colored yellow triangle, which the robot then scans as proof of identification. The robot then says something else to the women, scans Jane's eyes, and says "Jane 57821" before flying away. Drawing on the historical and contemporary ways Black bodies are subject to heightened surveillance, policing, and state-sanctioned violence in our contemporary society,

Dirty Computer imagines what future conditions these bodies may be subject to at the intersection of historical oppression and speculative technology (Browne, 2015; Benjamin, 2019; Ferguson, 2017). In this way, *Dirty Computer* calls upon Afrofuturism to ground our understanding of who Jane is and the systems of oppression she is subject to in her everyday life. If, as Surveillance Studies scholar Simone Browne (2015) asserts, ontological Blackness is a central condition to our modern apparatuses of Blackness, then Monáe asks us to consider what role Blackness plays in defining future surveillance conditions. After the robot flies away, Monáe and her friend get out of the car to reveal three more Black women hiding in the trunk. Now that the surveilling eye of the robot police is gone, the women hop back in the car and cruise freely down the open road.

Abruptly, we cut to close-ups shots of young faces, skin reflecting against the dark blue night sky. Though we can only see these people from the neck up, many are aesthetically reminiscent of Jane—their bodies are adorned with jewelry, glitter, and vibrant makeup. The last face we see is Jane’s friend, who was riding next to her in the car. Through their dress, the audience understands that they too are queer “dirty computers.” In the background, we hear the introduction to the song “Crazy, Classic, Life” with a man’s voice reminding us of America’s foundational promise: “You told us, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. ” While we can not see where this voice originated, the faces in the camera direct the gaze directly towards the viewer, visually indicating that the “you” being addressed is us, the audience that will be watching this film, white America. As we stare into the faces of these future Black and brown queer people, this call-back to the contemporary ideals of our society acts as a mirror back onto us: Are we truly keeping this promise? Then just as abruptly as the scene began, it ends, and we return to Jane and her friends driving in their car.

As the song continues into the first verse, the women sing along, celebrating the freedom that they feel from surveilling eyes: “Young, black, wild and free/Naked on a limousine (Oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh)/Riding through the hood real slow/I love it when I smell the trees (Oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh).” As they drive, the film cuts back and forth between the women driving and a party full of young queer people

dancing, their bodies intertwined. From the *mise-en-scène*, we can see the party is where we previously saw close-ups of Black and brown faces. Their queerness is signified aesthetically by playful, androgynous dress and explicit images of non-heterosexual touching and intimacy between various party-goers. We watch their bodies move freely as they intertwine, outside of the purview of oppressive forces that would make them conform. In this way, the party represents a futuristic queer utopian safe space in which queer bodies can be themselves freely and authentically. It is a critique of how white, heteronormative societies oppress Black and queer communities not only socially and politically but also spiritually — attempting to deny their truths and lived experiences.

In this scene, we also see Jane's queerness as a sexual identity through her romantic relationships with a male love interest Che, played by Jayson Aaron, and a female love interest, Zen, played by actress Tessa Thompson.³⁹ Jane engages in intimate touching with both partners, blurring the bounds of her sexual identity and heteronormative assumptions of monogamy. In particular, Jane's love for and attraction to Zen is a constant theme throughout the film. In a later memory, we see that Zen captured; she then later appears fully cleansed at "The House of the New Dawn," as Maryapple 53, a "torch" that will bring her "from the darkness into the light." Throughout the film, we watch their relationship transition from being full of hope and possibility, grow into love, and finally be obliterated by Zen's reprogramming. As the starting point of their relationship, the party scene is once again positioned as the nexus of possibility for Black queer futures and Black queer love. At the party, Jane is not only free to be herself but free to engage in any and all romantic relationships she desires, outside of the bounds of white heteronormativity.

Yet, through the song lyrics, Monáe often pairs these stronger critiques of systemic oppression with more tempered calls for a recognition of her "Americanness." As Monáe continually asserts, "I am not America's nightmare/ I am the American dream (Oh-oh, oh-oh)/ Just let me live my life." Like her incorporation of the Declaration of Independence, Monáe employs the metaphor of the American dream to call attention to how queer people, particularly Black queer people, have been historically excluded from this fundamental American promise. However, through this line, Monáe positions herself —and by

³⁹At the time of the film's release, Monáe was rumored to have been dating Thompson in real life, a discourse that encircled the release of the film, and arguably helped drive publicity audience anticipation of the film, especially in the queer community (Silman, 2018a, 2018b).

extension the collection of Black queer folks she is in community with—people as the new "American Dream."

I argue this line can be read in two ways: The first way this line can be read as Monáe rhetorically placing liberation for her and her community by their acceptance into the "American Dream," a neoliberal-esque dream that posits any person in America has the ability to achieve freedom and success through hard work and perseverance. We, the audience, are to recognize that Black queer people belong to and are not antithetical to America's neoliberal project, but the realization of the liberty and freedom the "American Dream," promises. Through this reading, the path to the Black queer utopia Monáe envisions comes from our collective recognition of the Black queer community's cultural citizenship in the American project.

The second way this line is as a subversion of the "American Dream." This subversion calls attention to the fact that the real "American Dream" is not an individual neoliberal pathway to freedom fashioned by white men, but the Black queer community we see in front of us. In other words, the real "American Dream" is a subversive dream of community that must incorporate Black queer subjectivities and acknowledge their humanity. Thus, if read as a queer of color critique that "opts for an understanding of the nation and capital as the outcome of manifold intersections that contradict the idea of the liberal nation-state" (Ferguson, 2004, p.3) here Monáe is rejecting the original American dream for a new one. The divergence between these readings within the film is both unclear and vast, creating a sense of ambiguity around what American Dream Monáe is pointing to. While setting this scene in a community of Black queerness can lend itself to thlatterer reading, her individual use of the word "I" could also suggest the former. Thus, I suggest Monáe creates ambiguity around how she attaches her project to the neoliberal concept of the American Dream. While it is possible that Monáe 's use of the term "American Dream," ' is distinct from its popular understanding, I suggest the message can be read either way, opening the film up to multiple interpretations to and engagements with neoliberal culture.

The scene ends (inevitably) with the return of the state. Police, both android and robot, raid the party, throwing flashbangs and assaulting party-goers. While Jane and Zen escape, others are not as lucky. We again return to the close-ups from earlier, except we now see each of these "dirty computers"

have been placed under arrest, handcuffed, and forced to their knees. The recontextualization of these earlier shots reveals how our understanding of who people are can shift based on gaze and framing—are these free Black and brown queer people living their truth or criminals? Further, the songs lyrics similarly interrogate how social and legal systems differentially structure the lived experiences of Black and brown people: "Me and you was friends, but to them, we the opposite/ The same mistake, I'm in jail, you on top of shit/ You living life while I'm walking around moppin' shit/ Tech kid, backpack, now you a college kid/ All I wanted was to break the rules like young/ All I wanted was someone to love me too/ But no matter where it was I always stood out." Thus, by describing how her Black queer body "stood out," Monáe highlights how despite being set in the future, technology and systems of surveillance have been able to maintain what Simone Browne (2015) terms "Black Luminosity" or a manifestation of panoptic power that acts as a form of 'boundary maintenance,' where "boundary maintenance is inextricably linked to knowing the black body, subjecting some to high visibility...by way of technologies of seeing," (p. 68). Thus, the memory engages Afrofuturism to think through both how the future might allow for the continued oppression of Black queer bodies and what the future for Black queer people may look like.

Verse 2/ Django Jane: The Impossible Future of a Black Women Liberation Army

"Django Jane" is the third memory the cleaners watch. As the scene starts, two large doors open onto a vibrantly lit room full of large green plants in full bloom. In the shadow of the door, we see two shadow figures who stand guard as Jane sits in the center of the room, surrounded on either side by Black women [See image 14]. The women's dress is aesthetically reminiscent of Black radical movements of the 1960s and 70's— each wears sunglasses and leather jackets as an homage to the Black Panther Party and yellow Kufi caps⁴⁰ in honor of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Jane similarly wears a yellow Kufi cap, but instead of Black leather and sunglasses, she wears a fuschia suit and a tie with large gold embellishments. The outfit is a brilliant, futuristic take on Moane's traditional "uniform," an androgynous ensemble that blurs race, gender, sexuality, and class lines. We see these women are a Black woman liberation army, and Jane is their leader.

⁴⁰A Kufi cap muslim is a prayer hat often worn by men

The staging of this world as a Black femme militant space is reinforced through the song's lyrics, which make continual references to the political power of [Black] "pussy" and Black femmes. The introduction to the song declares, "Yeah, this is my palace, champagne in my chalice/ I got it all covered like a wedding band/ Wondaland, so my alias is Alice/ And we gon' start a motherfuckin' pussy riot/ Or we gon' have to put 'em on a pussy diet/ Look at that, I guarantee I got 'em quiet/ Look at that, I guarantee they all inspired." In this world she has created, Jane centers herself as ruler and leader, both explicitly in taking ownership of her palace and implicitly referencing herself as the creator of Wondaland. In addition, her continual references to the "pussy" solidifies our understanding of this scene as signifying a (Black) femme space.



Image 14:
Django Jane, *Dirty Computer*

Here, I read Monáe's use of the word pussy, not as a literal reference to the biologically female body's vagina but rather as a reference to the social and political force of "pussy power," in this case, black pussy power. As scholars such as Jennifer Nash (2014) and Shaniqua Roach (2018) have noted, Black feminist scholars have historically resisted explicit images and references to the Black female vagina or "pussy power" as an expression of the white gaze that hypersexualizes and objectifies Black women. However, as these scholars note, these readings of explicit Black female sexuality presume heteronormative frameworks

of sex and gender that absolve Black women of their subjectivity and agency. Taking up these critiques, my reading of Monáe's use of and focus on the pussy in "Django Jane" is as "Black eroticism that do not eschew dominant notions of Black female hypersexuality, but rather harness Black feminine eroticism to secure nominal black freedoms, often inverting contemporaneous state-sanctioned logics of Black female sexuality as black freedom's impediment" (Roach, 2018). Here, the pussy is called upon as a site of liberation.

Later in the song, Monáe reinforces this idea as she sings: "Black girl magic, y'all can't stand it/ Y'all can't ban it, made out like a bandit/ They been tryin' hard just to make us all vanish/ I suggest they put a flag on a whole another planet/ Jane Bond, never Jane Doe/And I Django, never Sambo/Black and white, yeah that's always been my camo/It's lookin' like y'all gon' need some more ammo." In this way, Monáe links this space that Jane has created as being powered by Black Girl Magic, or the inherent power of Black women to thrive in a continually oppressive society. In this world, powered by Black Girl Magic, Black women, not white men, set the terms for how we understand and define this world. This inversion of power centers Black women and speaks specifically to a Black feminist counter-hegemonic understandings of society that center Black women, femme, and queer experiences. Further, in taking up the militant position of Black radical groups such as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam, Monáe positions Jane within a white popular culture framework of Black archetypes: the Sambo, the lazy, Black coon to that aims to appease white people, and Django, the spaghetti western character who fought back against his white slave-owners (Bogle,1973). Rhetorically, these references make two critical moves: First, it places Jane in a framework easily recognizable to mainstream white audiences; and second, it explicitly positions Jane and her cohort as strong Black women who will actively fight their oppression. Through this reliance on white popular culture stereotypes, we still come to understand Jane's version of Black liberation as rooted in being the Black woman Django, a Black person who fights for their liberation.

Further, in centering Black women in her vision of Black liberation, Monáe speaks back to the historical misogyny within these movements. As foundational Black feminists have historically noted, Black liberation movements often saw oppression through the single axis of race and the Black women within

these movements as beneath or subservient to their male leaders (Beal, 1969; Davis, 1981; Combahee; 1977). As the Combahee River Collective states of these movement, "It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men" (p.211). It is this same future Black feminist movement they describe that Monáe imagines through "Django Jane." By centering Black women in her Black liberation army, Monáe calls attention to these historical absences and the revolutionary potential of centering Black women in liberation movements. This idea is then reinforced by lyrics that ask the Black men within these movements to cease centering themselves: "And n*gga, down dawg/N*gga move back, take a seat, you were not involved/ And hit the mute button/Let the vagina have a monologue." In this liberation movement of the future, Black men are paused, and Black femmes have a chance to speak.

The memory ends in the reverse of how it began, with the doors closing back on this Black femme world Jane has created. Returning to the white men sitting at "Nevermind," confused:

Cleaner #2: I don't know what this is. Doesn't even look like a memory. Was that a dream?

Cleaner #1: You just pull the content and keep moving.

Cleaner #2: Uh, yeah, but what is it?

Cleaner #1: Delete it and move on.

Cleaner #2: What? Just delete everything.

Cleaner #1: Yeah, just delete it.

Jane's Black femme future is unrecognizable to these white men. Their confusion surrounding her memory points to its revolutionary nature and its impossibility within a white heteronormative framework. In a society where knowledge of what is and what could be is filtered through white, male lived experiences, Jane's Black femme Liberation movement is incomprehensible (Christian, 1994).

Verse 3/Pynk & Make Me Feel: Imagining Black Femme Queer Love

The next two memories, the music videos for the songs "Pynk" and "Make Me Feel," further explore the dimensions of Jane's sexuality as a Black femme queer android. In "Pynk," Jane, Zen, and their friends, all of whom are Black women, travel to a roadside motel in the middle of a hazy, pink desert. Like in the earlier party scenes, we see Jane and her friends having fun, free to be themselves outside of the watchful eye of state actors that would regulate their behavior; however, this is a community exclusively of queer Black women. Like "Django Jane," this video draws our attention to the Black femme pussy through continued visuals and lyrical references to the vaginas and cunnilingus. For instance, an image of Jane and her friends wearing underwear that reads "sex cells" and "I grab back," over fully-bushed vaginas conveys messages about women's power and resilience, and a shot of Zen sticking her head in between Jane's parachute-esque pants fashioned to look like a labia majora and minora visually implies these women are engaging in cunnilingus. In this way, "Pynk" not only continues to center visual representations of Black pussy power but also extends the enduring metaphor into the realm of the intimate and sexual. In this world Jane and her friends have created for themselves, men are not necessary for liberation, joy, or sexual gratification. As the lyrical refrain states, "'Cause boy it's cool if you got blue/ We got the pink," punctuating the deliberate absence and irrelevance of the male penis.

The video's narrative also focuses exclusively on the sexual relationship between Jane and Zen, centering on the potentialities of the Black woman erotic. In a bridge, interestingly not included on the album or in the stand-alone music video, the visuals focus only on Jane and Zen engaging intimately with one another, staring into each other's eyes and caressing each other's faces. There are potentially several reasons this interlude was not included in any other format of the song, including making sure the song is an optimal length for radio play⁴¹ and attempting to appeal to the different audiences who may be interested in watching the stand-alone music video versus the full film. Regardless, this visual and sonic interlude punctuates the scene's emphasis on Black femme queer love, imagining a world in which Black women freely engage in romantic love with other Black women. In this way, the film celebrates the erotic

⁴¹The optimal length of a song has been determined to be approximately three to five minutes (McKinney, 2015)

power that can exist between Black women. In her writing, Audre Lorde (1984) positions Black Lesbian sexuality and the erotic as a means of liberation and self-definition, suggesting :

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. (p. 53).

Jane and Zen's relationship taps into this erotic as a liberatory resistance. It is a love between these "dirty computers" that hegemonic and oppressive societies have continually attempted to suppress. Thus, the film offers itself as a counter-hegemonic space by celebrating their love.

Additionally, throughout "Pynk," there is a distinct focus on the Black female body. In one shot, Jane and Zen make lustful eyes at each other, separated by a row of bouncy Black female butts. In another shot, Jane and her friends wear form-fitting spandex and engage in suggestive workout poses such as spread eagle leg stretches, pelvic thrusters, and butt rotations—the sexual nature of each movement punctuated by the mid-close range of the camera. There are also continual close-ups of various women's body parts throughout the video—mouths, hands, fingers, feet, and pelvises. I suggest Monáe uses these shots to subvert popular understandings of the Black female body through the male gaze of popular culture. While Black feminist hip-hop and culture scholars such as Imani Perry have condemned this hyper-focus on Black women's bodies, particularly butts, in music videos as sexual objectification, I suggest in this video, that Monáe's focus on these features does exactly the opposite. In "Pynk," where there are intentionally no men and thus, no male gaze, we are allowed to view Black women's bodies and sexuality through the oppositional gaze of other Black women. In other words, instead of showing us what pleasure the Black female form generates for men, "Pynk" shows us the pleasure the Black female form can generate for other Black women and femmes. While here I am not suggesting that the film precludes male spectators from deriving pleasure from watching these images, I am contending that within the context of the film itself, this pleasure is specifically meant for other Black women. In this way, the film visually seeks to find a middle ground for Black women between passively absorbing or vehemently resisting their hypersexualization (hooks, 1992). This resistant focus on Black women's bodies also takes up Morgan's "pleasure politics"(2015) in that it asks, "what possibilities can a politics of pleasure offer

for black feminist futures?" (p. 36). In this way, by focusing on Black women's bodies for the erotic pleasure of Black women and Black women alone, *Dirty Computer* centers on a politics of pleasure that celebrates the ability of Black women to celebrate their sexuality for their gratification outside of the male gaze.

Dirty Computer then further explores the expansive and resistant nature of Black queer love in memory and music video that directly follows, "Make Me Feel." In this memory, we see Jane and Zen walk into a dimly-lit, neon-colored bar full of other "dirty computers." As they walk through the crowd, we watch Jane stare at Zen as she nods hello to people at the bar—her desire for Zen is palpable. Throughout the memory, we watch as Jane and Zen play with the contours of their relationship, exploring their desire for one another and others. In one shot, we watch Jane stare at Zen as she flirts with a masculine-presenting person at the bar. Jane walks over to the pair and nods, signaling to the person Zen was talking to that they are together, prompting them to walk away, leaving the two women to continue their flirtation. However, a few seconds later, while walking through the bar, Jane runs into Che and begins flirting with him as well. For the duration of the memory, we watch as Jane explores her simultaneous desires for Zen and Che, figuratively and literally moving back and forth between the two.

Building on its exploration of Jane's sexuality in "Pynk," through "Make Me Feel," we see Jane, and by extension, Monáe play with the boundaries that define her expression of queer love. Jane's Black queer sexuality exists outside the heteronormative confines of single-gender attraction and monogamy. This understanding of Jane's desires is further punctuated by the song's lyrics, in which Monáe exclaims, "That's just the way you make me feel/ So real, so good, so fuckin' real/ That's just the way you make me feel/ That's just the way you make me feel/ That's just the way that I feel now, baby/ Good God! I can't help it! Agh!" Here, the lyrical reference to the way you (or they) make her feel holds a double meaning—it refers to both her desires for Zen and Che and her desire for both of them simultaneously. The thing that Jane "can not help" is who she desires or how she desires them. In this way, the film represents Black queer love as that which exists outside and illegible to white, heteronormative understandings of love and desires—it is love at once both expansive and liberatory.

Track 4: The Dirty Computers are Neoliberal "Americans"

At the end of Dirty Computer, we see Zen— now Maryapple 53— take Jane on her "final walk" to be fully cleansed. Jane, now dressed in the all-white uniform of the cleansed, limps down the hall, followed by the attendants at the "House of The New Dawn." At this point, Jane is so weak she falls to the ground. Zen/Maryapple 53 runs over to help her up, supporting her weight as they continue their walk down the hallway. When they reach the end of the walk, Zen/Maryapple 53 takes Jane inside a large, empty, gray room. We see Zen/Maryapple 53 slowly step back and stare at Jane with panic as the room slowly fills with NEVERMIND gas that will induce one final cleanse and erase any small sense of self Jane has left. We are left with an image of Jane, scared and afraid, as the gas takes over. The screen goes dark. The next scene begins with someone walking down the same long hallway in the "House of The New Dawn," the torches and attendants smile and nod as they pass by. As we step inside, we see Che, dressed in all white, lying on a gray slab, just like Jane when she first arrived. As he wakes, the camera shifts to reveal the torch that just walked in was Jane, "Good Morning Che Achebe. Patient 06756," she says, "I'm Maryapple 54. I'm your torch. That means that I'm here to bring you from the darkness into the light." Jane has been fully cleansed, and she is no longer a "dirty computer." Further, her denotation as the 54th Maryapple implies that the last dirty computer to be cleansed before Jane was Zen. The screen goes black, and the credits begin to roll. This ending message is clear: There is no hope for the marginalized, the systems of oppression that dominate over you will inevitably win.

However, this is only a false ending— rendering what those in power would like us to believe. After a minute, the credits stop, and we are again in the room with Jane/Maryapple 54 and Che. The doors open, and a torch in a gold gas mask walks in and takes her hand from behind her back to reveal two more gas masks, which she tosses towards Jane/Maryapple 54 and Che. The torch takes down her mask to reveal her identity— it is Zen. "Let's go," Zen says. Jane turns on the NEVERMIND gas to fill the entire "House of The New Dawn," putting everyone there to sleep. As Monáe's voiceover notes, "I always used to say, I would never hurt a fly...but I would put one to sleep." After everyone is asleep, Mary, Zen, and Che escape as the final track from Dirty Computer, "Americans," plays in the background.

While this ending is inspiring, I would argue it offers no deep systemic analysis or solutions to the oppression the "dirty computers" face. While it is unclear if this was Zen and Mary's plan from the beginning or a plan devised after their re-meeting at "The House of the New Dawn," the plan does little to end their oppression or the policing and oppression of other "dirty computers." First, the plan only provides liberation for three people: Jane, Mary, and Che. There is no thought given to trying to rescue other torches who too were once free "dirty computers." Second, their escape plan takes no action to destroy or halt the mechanisms that allow for cleansing, thus ensuring the safety of "dirty computers," who may be captured in the future. Instead, the three androids just put everyone to sleep and leave. In other words, the mechanisms used to oppress them and others like them will still be intact when everyone wakes up, and their oppression will undoubtedly continue.

Further, the lyrics of "Americans," the final track of the album/emotion picture, illustrate a dream of liberation based on individual understanding and acceptance, not societal and systemic change. In the song, Monáe sings: Love me baby/ Love me for who I am/ Fallen angels/ Singing: "clap your hands"/ Don't try to take my country/I will defend my land/ I'm not crazy, baby, naw/I'm American. Like earlier, through these appeals to "Americanness," *Dirty Computer*, in one sense, argues for cultural citizenship through acceptance and recognition; in other words, we are all the same in our American ideals and belief. Here, I would suggest Monáe's framing of the "American Dream" is made less ambiguous through the line "love me for who I am," calling on appeals to colorblind humanity to combat difference through systemic marginalization. Additionally, the idea of "defending [her] land" calls upon liberal notions of equity produced through America's eternal promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," which in its original form was "life, liberty, and the pursuit of property." More directly than earlier, these lyrics feed into a neoliberal notion that the answer to equality lies in individual acceptance, not in larger systemic change. If we then read Monáe's earlier references to "Americanness," through this later framework, I argue one could easily read *Dirty Computer* as a Black queer trojan horse for the promulgation of neoliberal understandings of success and freedom; further punctuated by how "liberation," comes about in the film. In this way, *Dirty Computer* becomes more palatable and ultimately more marketable to larger white audiences and record labels, who would rather not interrogate how they may feed into these systems

in our world. While much of *Dirty Computer* interrogates how state-sanctioned violence, surveillance, and institutionalized, systemic oppression impact Black queer lives, and in particular Black queer women's lives, in thoughtful ways, presenting counterhegemonic representations of what it means to be a Black queer woman or femme, its ultimate argument undermines these Black feminist representations in favor of surface-level solutions and marketability. Thus, similar to *Lemonade*, as a form of commercial Black Feminism, *Dirty Computer* plays on the ambiguity produced between representation, lyrics, and messaging to create Black feminist representations that still fit into commercial and neoliberal capitalist frameworks.

Unpacking Commercial Black Feminism

When examining *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* in tandem, we can see how both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe played on the ambiguity of the visual album format to create messages that about the world from a Black feminist perspective *and* were amenable to neoliberal capitalist culture. As Black feminist texts, the narratives in both films drew from the singers' womanist artistic standpoints to imagine a world that centered on the intersectional experiences of Black women. In *Lemonade*, the film directly references Beyoncé's personal and cultural experiences, including her Black southern roots, motherhood, and marital struggles with her partner, to craft a film that narratively and aesthetically centered on what it means to inhabit the world as a Black (Southern) woman. Similarly, Monáe drew from her experiences as a Black, queer woman to envision the world of *Dirty Computer* and imagine what the world may look like for those who inhabit these intersections in the future. Through these specific womanist artistic standpoints, these films presented nuanced explorations of what Black womanhood can look like against historical stereotypes that reduce these experiences to unrealistic binaries in the service of hegemonic ideology.

At the same time, these films also utilized the ambiguity of the visual album to undercut these messages and place them within a neoliberal framework. In *Lemonade*, visual messages about Black women's self-definition and collective joy as a form of resistance existed alongside lyrics that championed neoliberal ideologies of empowerment through individual hard work and economic success. Additionally, *Lemonade*'s narrative, for the most part, stayed within the confines of heterosexual love. Within *Lemonade*, Beyoncé

often used its lyrics to subvert more women-centric visuals with messages about achieving spiritual and sexual liberation within the confines of heterosexual monogamy. Thus, similar to Joseph's (2018) notion of strategic ambiguity, these films use ambiguity to communicate anti-racist anti-sexist messages in ways that also produce plausible deniability; or in other words, do not outright deny mainstream, neoliberal logic.

Similarly, despite the ways *Dirty Computer* points to the systemic ways Black queer people are oppressed in society, it ultimately imagines liberation not through radical, systemic change but through the escape of a few and appeals to recognize the "Americaness" in the other. Thus the film ultimately argued that freedom from oppression will occur through individual-level actions. While *Dirty Computer* arguably had a greater potential for radical Black feminist messaging as a text that not only centered on Black womanhood but queer Black womanhood, that "contests the historical construction of black female sexualities by illuminating how the dominant view was established and maintained and how it can be disrupted," (Hammonds, 1994 p.137). However, in failing to attend to the disruption, it faltered. This slippage between radical Black feminism and commercially acceptable neoliberalism allows for these films to at once appeal to both the Black women and queer individuals who feel acknowledged and seen by these films, and commercial record companies looking to promote their music to mass audiences who would rather not interrogate the systemic nature of Black women's oppression.

In this way, these albums represent what I term commercial Black Feminism. Commercial Black Feminism offers us a framework for thinking about how commercial culture takes up messages specifically about Black Feminism in often surface level and superficial ways. If we think about Black Feminist theory as an examination of how people's lived experiences are differentially shaped by the dynamic intersection of various forms of systemic oppression, then Commercial Black Feminism gives us the "what" without the "why." It narratively and aesthetically calls attention to the lived experiences of Black women and femmes without asking us to interrogate "why" this is their lived experience. In other words, It is black feminism as symbolism as opposed to black feminism as a liberatory politic. Instead of focusing on the systemic nature of this oppression, it ultimately brings the solution back into a neoliberal framework where the onus is on the individual. In this way, Black women and queer artists have been able to utilize

the visual album, as a form of Commercial Black Feminism, to speak about their lived experiences within the space of popular culture in a way that is still acceptable (and profitable) to the record labels looking to profit from their art. While here, I am not suggesting that it is necessarily the intention of these artists to take advantage of this slippage and ambiguity, the increasing trend of Black women and queer artists utilizing the visual album format does suggest some recognition of the advantages this format may hold.

Further, I argue that this dual-messaging of commercial Black Feminism that makes it so lucrative: it allows media companies to access Black audiences that appreciate this visual messaging without alienating larger mass audiences. As noted in the previous chapter, Black people, particularly Black women, have increasingly been viewed as a lucrative and coveted audience for television networks. Comparably, according to the Record Industry Association of America (RIAA), in 2020, Black people made up the second-largest group of music consumers across (RIAA, 2020). While these numbers pale in comparison to the overall number of white artists, taking up Commercial Black Feminism allows these record companies to appeal to their second-largest market without alienating the first. However, despite the intentions of these larger commercial industries, we are still left with the question: Despite this framing, what messages about Black Feminism are audiences taking from these visual albums and other representations of Black Feminism and Black Feminist Thought explored thus far in this project?

Part 3

Popular Black Feminism Audiences and Fans

CHAPTER 6

Don't @ Us:**Negotiating Black Feminist Representations**

So let's stop criticizing the shows and instead engage more thoughtfully with their stylistic and narrative elements. If we did, we'd find women eschewing traditional definitions of what it means to be a wife or a mother. We'd see queer people casting aside conventional modes of gender. We'd recognize men suffering under the burden of patriarchy. And we'd know that all of them are constantly walking a fine line between being self-aware and having agency, and being obligated to perform for the networks that employ them.
- Racquel Gates

On a special bonus episode of Refinery 29's *Unbothered's Go Off, Sis* podcast, released in May 2021, a roundtable of Black women sat down to discuss their favorite throwback media from music to film to fashion (Sanders, 2021). As *Unbothered* VP Chelsea Sanders, former *Unbothered* Managing Editor and Head of Editorial Content for Netflix's "Strong Black Leads" Danielle Cadet Wiggins, and *Unbothered* Senior Editors, Kathleen Newman-Breman and Stephanie Long, reflected on their favorite (and not so favorite) throwbacks, they repeatedly turned to some of film and television's most prolific and complex representations of Black women. At one point, the conversation turned to an iconic scene in NBC's sitcom *A Different World* where Dwayne Wayne, a geeky math prodigy from Brooklyn, disrupts the wedding of his ex-girlfriend Whitley Gilbert, a light-skinned Southern belle, to Byron Douglas III, a Virginia State Senate Candidate, by professing his love for her. Looking back, Sanders noted the problematics of this scene, namely the misogynistic undertones of Dwayne thinking (and ultimately correctly assuming) his desire to be with Whitley superseded her stated desire to be with Byron. However, in response, Cadet references an article she wrote on Whitley for *The Undeclared*,⁴² entitled "Whitley's World: A brief history of Bad and Boujee Black Girl Style" (2017), in which she highlighted how rare it was at that time to see a Black woman on television in a wedding Gown; interrupting the sexually a-moral way (at

⁴²*The Undeclared* has since changed its name to *Andscape*.

least by heteronormative American standards) Black women have historically been presented in media. The women simultaneously acknowledged, debated, and negotiated the simultaneous heterosexist and progressive ways Whitley as a character came to represent women in the popular culture imagination.

Later in the conversation, the women return to discussions of Black women's representation in media when Cadet inquires about the group's feelings on an impending remake of *Waiting to Exhale* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1995). Based on the novel of the same name by author Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale* tells the story of four African-American women supporting one another through friendship and sisterhood as they deal with the trials and tribulations of work, love, motherhood. In line with Black feminist scholar bell hooks, who decidedly declared *Waiting to Exhale's* representations of Black womanhood to be anti-Black feminist, Cadet, Sanders, Long, and Kathleen Newman-Breman reflected on how the film's homophobic undertones and consistent focus on heterosexual relationships are not the kinds of representation they are looking for in 2021 (hooks, 1992). At the same time, the women recognized how important and ground-breaking a film focusing on the lived experiences of Black women was at the time. As Cadet remarked:

Waiting to Exhale crawled so *Insecure* could run. We had these stories of Black women, the Terry McMillan-esque⁴³ stories of Black women that have now very much evolved... you take that storyline of Gloria's husband being gay, right? And you modernize it to when it to when Molly dated that guy who was bisexual, so we are having an evolved conversation about that.

Here, Cadet refers to a storyline on *Insecure* (2016-2021), where the character of Molly, a heterosexual, cisgender Black American woman played by Nigerian actress and comedian Yvonne Oriji, navigates how to date (or whether to date) a Black cisgender male-partner who is openly bisexual. Cadet's comment points to how representations of Black women in popular culture are increasingly informed by Black feminist frameworks that take account of race, as well as sex, class, and compulsive heteronormativity in Black women's lives. Cadet's comment also attunes us to how representations gain meaning through their audiences' social and political location. For Black women, especially middle-class Black women in 1995, *Waiting to Exhale* was one of the few films that reflected their lived experiences; in 2022, Black

⁴³Here, Cadet is making a descriptor out of the name Terri McMillan, the author of the book *Waiting to Exhale* was based on of the same name. McMillan was known in the 1990's for authoring books about Black women's romantic and sexual relationships.

women are hungry for a more expansive representation of Black womanhood (Bobo, 1995). In this way, while *Waiting to Exhale's* portrayal of Black womanhood is arguably heteropatriarchal, its value lies not only in the characters on screen but in what audiences made of it in a specific cultural and historical moment (Gates, 2018).

This discussion on *Go Off Sis* does two key things: First, this conversation illustrates the interplay between Black feminist Journalism and Black feminist entertainment media. Black feminist news creators call on events in popular culture, such as the announcement of a *Waiting to Exhale* reboot, as a jumping-off point to discuss Black women and other marginalized communities' lives and experiences. Thus, using podcasting and the format of discussion, *Go Off Sis* unveils a Black feminist reporting praxis that *destabilizes* notions of a singular Black woman perspective through their roundtable approach to reporting and shows how a story can be newsworthy because of the way it allows them to *dive deeper* into the issue of Black women and representation.

Second, the conversation on *Go Off Sis* highlights the role of audiences in shaping popular understandings of media representations, especially as it relates to representations of Black womanhood. Throughout these conversations, Sanders, Cadet, Newman-Breman, and Long are not just media creators and podcast show hosts—they are audience members. Like millions of popular media audiences, as fans, they utilize conversation, whether interpersonally or through digital media, to critique, negotiate, make sense of, and give meaning to complex representations of Black women in popular entertainment media.

While much of this project has focused on how Black feminist concepts are mobilized in media production and content, these readings and understanding have mainly been through my lens and interpretation as the researcher. Thus, in this chapter, I turn to the audiences of these media texts. To understand how audiences of the media I talked about in earlier chapters read these works, I conducted a survey study to elicit feedback about a range of media texts explored throughout this project, specifically: *Hear To Slay*, *Refinery 29's Unbothered*, *The TRiiBE*, *Essence Magazine*, *Marsha's Plate*, *Prism*, *A Black Lady Sketch Show (ABLSS)* (HBO), *Pose* (FX), *Lemonade* by Beyonce, and *Dirty Computer* by Janelle MonÁje. From responses, I argue that audiences of popular Black feminism (news and entertainment media) often decode the representations in these media as being about complex and nuanced Black women, femme,

and queer experiences, sometimes through an oppositional or negotiated readings. Further, I suggest the specificity of representation of Black women, femmes, and queer folks in this media can often be a source of pleasure for these audiences, especially those who identify with the communities represented. However, the heavy concentration of these audiences within Black femme and queer communities and on entertainment media holds significant implications for the focus and reach of this messaging content.

Every roundtable discussion on the *Go Off Sis* Podcast closes with a segment called "don't @ me." On Twitter, the @ symbol allows users to mention and respond directly to one another in a post or comment. Hence, the term "don't @ me" is used colloquially in AAVE when someone does not care to hear others' responses or opinions to their statement. It is a statement that does not invite judgment, response, or critique: it just is. I find the phrase "don't @ me" uniquely suited to describe the complex relationship between media representations and audiences, especially Black women, femmes, and queer folks. Audiences are constantly "@ing" media representations, especially online, by discussing, responding to, and critiquing how characters, storylines, and events are presented in television shows, movies, books, and on the news. While this "@ing" will be explored more in the next chapter, it is also important to note how, in some instances, audience commentary is more than just an opinion. These opinions and readings are rooted in who they are, their positionalities, and their lived experiences. Thus, the term "Don't @ me" recognizes how audiences, like the women of *Go Off Sis*, both invite and resist conversation around media representation. Their commentary both opens the floor to response and is also rooted in a place that others can not always debate. Therefore, throughout this chapter, I ask what happens after news and entertainment media construct representations of Black women? What conversations are opened up? And what conversations are not?

Representation, Audiences, & Positionality

Media Studies scholars have long noted how the audience's understanding of popular media is informed not only by the content and texts, but also by the audience members' positionality and lived experiences. Often utilizing Stuart Hall's emphasis on audience decoding practices in shaping media messages, these studies name and give specificity to the ways viewing practices are contextualized and

informed by audience members' everyday lives, recognizing how audiences assert agency in their engagement with media (Ang, 1991). This agency shapes how non-white, male audience members differentially engage with and understand popular media.

In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, Janice Radway (1982) argues that to fully understand media texts, we need to know how people read and interpret those texts. Empirically examining middle-class, suburban (predominantly white) women's reading of popular romance novels, Radway suggests there is no overall intrinsic message in a media text. While the words or images in a media text somewhat limit audiences' understanding, audiences make their own meanings of media texts by reading themselves into the narratives in ways that are often informed by their social class, gender, race, and sexuality. In the case of the Smithton women that Radway focuses on, these women opt to read these novels as stories of strong, fierce women who desired within the bounds of loving, monogamous, and heterosexual relationships, contradicting more popular readings of these texts as trashy and misogynistic.

Similarly, in her examination of the global phenomenon that was the soap opera *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) in *Watching Dallas*, Ien Ang (1982) argues that part of the show's resonance with audiences comes not from the denotative storyline but from audience's connotative understanding of the emotional and psychological storyline. Ang, like Radway, notes, this can even allow for seemingly paradoxical identifications and pleasures derived from watching the show. For instance, Ang spends a great deal of time unpacking why, despite popular narratives about sexist representations within the show, it is often popular amongst women audiences. Ang suggests that while within the show's text, the melodramatic framework does not ultimately allow for feminist liberation of the women characters from their male counterparts, the emotional pleasure that comes from viewing resonates and is what ultimately leads to pleasure for these women viewers.

In this way, both Ang and Radway are preoccupied with the role of pleasure in structuring audiences' choice to engage with media. Both authors base their analysis on the fact that, in large part, what makes these texts popular is the fact that people consume them and thus, on some level, must find them pleasurable. This approach to the study of popular culture stands in direct contrast to early theorizations

by theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno and Karl Marx who argue audiences' relationship to media is wholly capitalist and manipulative. Instead, Radway and Ang posit that audiences can gain something from popular media unintended by its capitalist purpose. In this way, Radway and Ang's exploration of audience decoding practices foregrounds agency in ways that pushes against a commercial capitalist framings to reveal how audiences can find new liberatory messages outside of dominant structuring ideologies.

Similarly, discussing Black audiences' engagement with popular media Catherine Squires (2002) argues, "African Americans have long looked at both entertainment and news media text differently than Whites, and that this pattern often results in conflict over media representation and ownership," (p. 46). Robin Means Coleman (1998) suggests Black audiences of black situational comedies often engage in oppositional readings of these shows that resist negative stereotypes of Blackness. In other words, while Black audiences are often aware that these shows perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black people, they will either negotiate their understanding of these messages or actively push against them. Coleman found Black women, in particular, will often engage in negotiated readings of Black female characters through their identification with the characters' strong and independent nature. Coleman suggests:

The tie that seems to bind all these female characters together is their depicted interaction with men. These characters held equal status to their male counterparts. They were as self-sufficient, as capable, as smart, and as hard working. They were not reliant upon men for validation or worth; rather, they were self-possessed, never submissive, and appeared to have high self-esteem. These women, it was argued, were more like real Black women" (p.152).

Thus, like the white women Radway spoke to in her study, Black women similarly identify themselves with Black women characters, choosing to focus on the positive and aspirational qualities, sometimes overlooking some potentially problematic elements of characters. However, the Black men Coleman interviewed did not purport a similar sense of identification, a difference she argues, is also based on their differential lived experiences. As Coleman writes, "It is uncommon for Black men to enter barbershops doing an energetic, one-legged shuffle while screaming "Whoeee! I got it!" as seen on *That's My Mama*" (p. 152).

In *Black women as cultural readers*, Jacqueline Bobo (1995) suggests Black women constitute a particular interpretive community that uses their lived experiences to understand Black women's media representation. In her interviews with Black women around their viewing of *Waiting to Exhale*, the *Color Purple*, and *Daughters of the Dust*, Bobo notes how Black women audiences often engage in negotiated and oppositional readings of these texts in ways that resist the presumed ideological domination and stereotypes of these texts. Thus, while Black women consume media that media scholars and critics argue is oppressive and even misogynistic — Black women do not necessarily read it as such (Bobo, 1995; Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati, 2019).

Within this chapter, I am interested in exploring audience agency around the decoding of popular Black feminist media. Additionally, I want to understand how an audience member's positionality impacts their reading of this media. As popular representations of Black women, femmes, and queer folk have evolved to be more expansive while simultaneously situated within neoliberal frameworks, how do today's audiences decode these representations? To what extent does the continued limitations and ambiguity around Black feminism within this media impact audience's decoding practices? Further, like Radway and Ang, I was also interested in the role of pleasure in the audience's engagement with these various popular media and to what extent these decoding practices are tied to a sense of viewing or listening pleasure. In this next section, I turn to audience interpretations and co-viewing tweets around media that I argue actively attempt to engage and mobilize Black feminist frameworks in its representational construction to unpack the role of race, gender, sexuality, and pleasure in their viewing practices.

@PopularBlackFeminism: Audience Responses Survey

To answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative audience response survey using the secure online survey platform Qualtrics. To be eligible to participate in the survey, respondents had to verify that they were over the age of 18, could understand English, and were familiar with *at least two* of the nine news outlets, television shows, or visual albums, specifically: *Hear To Slay*, *Go Off Sis/Unbothered*, *The TRiIBE*, *Essence*, *Marsha's Plate*, *Prism*, *ABLSS* (HBO), *Pose* (FX), *Lemonade* by Beyonce, and *Dirty Computer* by Janelle MonÁe. After identifying which of the nine media they were familiar with, survey respondents could give qualitative, written feedback on *up to three* specific news show(s) or entertainment

media of their choosing. After selecting the show they wanted to discuss, I asked respondents to answer four open-ended questions about each show they chose to evaluate: (1) Why did you originally choose to watch/read it?; (2) What do you perceive to be the main message(s)?; (3) What do you think about its representation(s) of Black women, femmes, and/or queer individuals?; and (4) What do you like or find pleasurable about it? These questions aimed to identify their decoding processes around these media text(s), especially related to representations of Black womanhood, femmehood, queerness, and pleasure. I also asked survey respondents to self-identify their race, age, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, and age. Though respondents were not required to disclose this information to participate in the survey, collecting this data allowed me to examine how their positionality may influence their readings of the representations in question.

I distributed the survey online in July 2021. The survey was advertised online via the social networking sites Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Reddit; and was also shared by *The TRiiBE* in their weekly subscriber newsletter. This recruitment strategy elicited 54 unique responses (attributed R1...R54). Of those respondents who chose to disclose their demographic information, the majority identified their race as Black (36 or 66.7%), their gender identity as cisgender woman (39 or 72.2%), their sexual orientation as heterosexual (33 or 61.1%), their socio-economic status as middle class (25 or 46.3%), and their age as 18-35 (32 or 59.25%) (see Appendix Table 2). While the demographic make-up of these survey respondents could have been influenced by many factors, including selection bias, who saw the recruitment materials, and access to the technology required to participate in the survey, this demographic make-up could arguable indicate that the majority of audiences interacting with these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums are Black women and femmes.⁴⁴

Of the nine media texts respondents were allowed to answer questions about, most respondents chose to discuss entertainment media over news media. Regarding the entertainment media — 20 respondents chose to discuss *Lemonade*, 18 respondents chose to discuss *ABLSS*, 16 respondents chose to discuss *Pose*, and seven respondents chose to discuss *Dirty Computer*. Whereas a significantly smaller number used the prompts to discuss news media — seven respondents chose to discuss *Marsha's Plate*, five respondents

⁴⁴The second-largest gender-identities held by respondents were Nonbinary Femme (5 or 9.25%) followed by Genderqueer (4 or 7.4%).

chose to discuss *Go Off, Sis/ Unbothered*, four respondents chose to discuss *Hear to Slay*, and two respondents chose to discuss *The TRiiBe*. This discrepancy between entertainment media and news media responses may speak to the limited commercial reach of Black feminist journalism compared to commercial Black feminist entertainment media. As I argued in the previous chapter, these entertainment media often place Black feminist-informed frameworks and aesthetics into a commercial neoliberal logics that strategically aim to attract marginalized audiences as a growing consumers base and may not attend to the sites of power that cause inequity, placing the burden of liberation on the individual. Thus, this higher engagement, and arguably higher exposure, of respondents to commercial Black Feminism may hold significant implications for these audiences' understandings of Black feminist frameworks and aesthetics, namely a predominant understanding of Black feminism as rooted in an intersectional analysis of experiences, without a larger discussion of systemic liberation.

Respondent's open-ended survey responses were analyzed using grounded theory and an open-coding schema, using the qualitative coding Software Atlas.ti. Throughout my analysis, I also engaged intersectionality as an analytical framework to consider how respondents' positionality regarding their race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, and age may inform their interpretations and feelings around a specific representation (Collins, 2019).

Audience Responses: Messaging, Representation, & Pleasure in Black Feminist Popular Media

What Brings Audiences To These Media Texts?

Often, survey respondents said they came to these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums for a specific reason. Only two respondents said they came upon this media coincidentally, suggesting that audiences often do not stumble upon these media texts during casual viewing but come to them for a specific reason. Many respondents noted how they first came to a news outlet, television show, or visual album because of a specific actor or artist involved in the production. For instance, many respondents said they watched *Lemonade* or *Dirty Computer* because they were fans of Beyonce or Janelle MonÁe, respectively (e.g., R3, R7, R8, R9, R36, R54) or watched *Pose* because of the involvement of trans

activists and actors such as Janet Mock and Dominique Jackson (e.g., R1 and R50). Further, several respondents said they came upon a news outlet, television show, or visual album via recommendation from a specific person, such as a family member or friend, or generally from those around them who had spoken positively of it. Many respondents also said they were generally interested in the show's content or storyline (e.g., R4, R5, R33, R45, R47, R49). Most notably, several respondents said they were drawn to this media because of its explicit and deliberate focus on Black and brown women and queer people.

Focus On Black Women

Many respondents said they initially watched or read a certain new outlet, television show, or visual album because of its explicit and seemingly authentic focus on Black women's lived experiences. For instance, R22 said she chose to read *Essence Magazine* because she liked that it "catered toward Black women," and R2 said he originally read *Essence* because it was "All about Black women." In a similar response about R40, said she initially decided to listen to *Hear to Slay* "Because it talks a lot about Black women's sovereignty." These responses call attention to the fact that these news outlets' specific focus on how news events shape and are reflected in the lived experiences of Black women and femme communities is a draw for their audiences, both Black and white.

Further, in talking about entertainment media, such as *ABLSS*, respondents noted how they were initially attracted to the fact that the comedy was written and performed by Black women (e.g., R1, R3). In this way, these shows' choice to specifically focus on and tell stories through Black women's lived experiences was a major draw for audiences, especially those respondent audience members who identify as Black women. This finding further underscores my argument in Chapter 4 that the increased push for more nuanced and arguably authentic Black women and femme representations is, in part, due to the increased recognition of the value of Black women audience members and the power of these nuanced representations to draw them in as consumers.

Focus On The Black Trans Folks

Parallel to these responses, several respondents said the explicit focus on the Black trans and queer community experience on *Marsha's Plate* and *Pose* attracted them to these shows specifically. For

instance, R27 said she first started listening to *Marsha's Plate* because "There aren't much Trans shows or podcasts today, yeah? It appeals to me personally and gives that special sense of belonging, like the world could really have a special place for people like me." In this way, as a Black transgender woman, the show's focus on a Black trans perspective in news and politics resonated and validated R27's lived experience.

Likewise, discussing *Pose*, respondents discussed how the show focused on and told the story from the perspective of Queer and trans people of color. R6, a Black, heterosexual, upper-middle-class, cisgender woman, suggested it was not only the show's positive reputation in her network that made her want to watch it but also that "it showcases queer/trans woc stories." Similarly, R18 said he first started watching *Pose* because:

I am a queer man who studies LGBTQ culture and loves to learn about the history of LGBTQ people, especially those who are part of the ball and drag scene. I also heard that the show was going to cast trans women of color to play trans roles, which is rare in media.

Additionally, R20 decided to watch *Pose* because "they actually cast trans actors to play trans characters." These responses point to the importance of *Pose's* contextual focus on queer and trans people of color in attracting audiences to this show.

R18 and R20's responses, in particular, highlight the importance of having queer and trans actors of color portray these characters. As noted in previous chapters, a consistent critique of historical representations of transgender characters in television and movies is that these characters are often performed by cisgender actors, perpetuating the idea that transgender identity is a chosen performance that can be undone, a belief that often results in real-life violence against transgender women fueled by underlying homophobia (Feder, 2020; Real, 2018). Thus, the underlying authenticity of this representation was paramount for respondents who identified as queer or whose gender identity lay outside of a gender binary. In this way, for many respondents, the representational focus on Black women, femme, and queer people and the seeming authenticity of these representations initially brought them to popular Black feminist media. This especially seemed to be the case for audience members who personally identified with the characters and individuals represented.

Focus on Black Feminism

A handful of participants also said they sought out these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums due to their "Black feminist" nature. R3 said she listened to *Marsha's Plate* "Because [she] admire[s] this trio for talking about current events and social justice from the perspective of pro-Black trans feminists." In labeling *Marsha's Plate* as a pro-Black trans feminist, R3 signals that she actively identified the show's reporting practices as engaging a Black feminist lens through their active centering of this community. R39 similarly said she listed to *Hear to Slay* because of its "Black feminist views on politics, pop culture, life, and love," and R11 simply called *Lemonade* "Black feminist." While it is not entirely clear from their answers how these respondents define Black feminism, these responses highlight that, at least for some respondents, there is an identifiably Black feminist nature of these media that draws them in.

What Messages Are Audiences Decoding From These Media Texts?

Decoding Messages in Black feminist news

When asked about what messages they decoded from Black feminist news outlets, while some respondents generally talked about these platforms as "news," others pointed to how they focused on current events and pop culture through a specific or unique lens. For instance, R42 said *Go Off, Sis/Unbothered*, "Covers everything from WFH life and social alienation to the very real, widespread impact on our communities around the world." While it is unclear what R42 means by "our communities," contextually, as an Indigenous person, he may be referring to the show's specific focus on issues within the BIPOC and Black community. R32, a Black cisgender woman, wrote *Hear to Slay* is "a platform to educate women about politics," again noting how the news content is rooted in specific women-focused community perspectives. Likewise, R47, a Black, lesbian, cisgender woman, said *Marsha's Plate's* main message was "a discussion of current events and social justice from a pro-black transgender feminist," and R27, a Black, bisexual, transgender woman said it was "seeing the world through the lens of a Black Trans and feminist." In this way, both R47 and R27 point to how *Marsha's Plate* grounds its analysis of news and current events from the perspective of the Black queer and trans communities. These answers indicate

that respondents, as audiences members, recognize that the approach to news and editorial offered by these platforms aims to address the needs of intersectionality marginalized communities.

Decoding Messages about Black women

Many respondents also pointed to the nuanced ways these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums portray the lives, experiences, and culture of Black women, queer, and trans people. Commenting on *Go Off, Sis/Unbothered*, R44 said the platform was about "facing the brutal truth about Black women in America," and R25 said the podcast was about "confronting the hard truths and pain points around being a Black woman in America." While these comments about *Unbothered* point to how the news platform gives credence to the struggles and hardship Black women endure in our society, other responses pointed to more positive messages about Black women's experiences. For instance, R22 said the main message of *Essence Magazine* was "that Black women are doing amazing work in every field. #Black-GirlMagic," calling on this hashtag to highlight the feats Black women can accomplish. Additionally, R4 and R5 said *Go Off Sis/Unbothered* and *ABLSS*, respectively, pointed to the "joy" in Black women's lives; and R18 said that *Dirty Computer* "celebrate[s] Black women's femininity, power, and sexuality."

These comments speak to the range of messages that audiences can decode about Black women's lives across and within these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums. Speaking to this breadth, R23 wrote, "the intersection of generations of Black women of different skin colors, body shapes, sizes, and backgrounds makes the "Black Lady Sketch Show" very special." R23's comment points to how these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums open up space for multidimensional and dynamic messages about Black women's experiences. As R23 alludes to, these media often showcase the heterogeneity within Black women communities. Thus, the multiplicity of messages about Black womanhood encoded within these media texts allowed respondents to decode a heterogeneity of messages about Black women's experiences that reveals pain and suffering as well as triumph and joy.

I argue these audience decoding patterns connect back to the intentional way the creators of these media texts draw on Black feminist theory to highlight the heterogeneity of Black women. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 4, the writers of *ABLSS* explicitly said because all the writers and main actors are Black women, it allows them to show "the most annoying, the weirdest, the worst..." of Black women

and everything in between (Writers Guild Foundation, 2020). Similarly, as noted in Chapter 2, Chelsea Sanders' suggested *Go Off, Sis*, as a form of Black-women centric news, gives Black women the space to discuss their different experiences. Thus, since producers intentionally encode a heterogeneity of Black women's lived experiences in this media, audiences can later decode these media messages through a similarly nuanced and dynamic lens. However, it is also important to note that many of these observations, including those mentioned above, came from respondents who identify as Black women and thus may be particularly attuned to more complex media messages about Black women's lived experiences.

This arguably Black feminist decoding of these media texts opens up the possibility that despite what I suggest is the need to appeal to neoliberal commercial markets to sustain themselves, audiences are still decoding important, counterhegemonic messages from Black feminist entertainment media. As another example, R10 wrote the main message of *Dirty Computer* lies in the album's final track, "about her recovery and redefinition of American identity." In my analysis of this song the previous in chapter, I suggest Mon'je initially leaves her appeals to "Americanness" ambiguous, allowing for a neoliberal or queer of color reading of this line; however, I also suggest, by the end of the film, the narrative suggest the American Dream she proposes may be an individualistic one. Yet, R10, who is Indigenous and lesbian, still reads this line through a queer of color lens that sees Mon'je as redefining what it means to be American through a Black queer lens. In this way, viewers such as R10 still decode *Dirty Computer* through a counter-hegemonic lens which offers a subversive take on a neoliberal concept of freedom and success.

Decoding Messages About Black Queer And Trans Experiences

Many respondents said the main message of *Pose* was to show the lived experiences of Black queer and trans people, especially in the face of oppression. For example, R20 said the message of *Pose* was that "ballroom was explicitly Black, brown, trans + queer and that the people involved are just as deserving of respect and adoration as anybody else; that the societal and governmental response to aids [sic] was cruel and deliberate," speaking directly to the role of sites of power (the government) in bringing harm to the Black and brown trans and queer community. Similarly, R21 wrote that the main message of *Pose* was "Black queer people can build community in the face of oppression and create new family structures

and dynamics.” This statement similarly highlights the role of systemic oppression in shaping the lives of Black queer people but also calls our attention to resistant acts of community care and other-mothering highlighted in Chapter 4. In this way, these responses show how audiences explicitly see the messages of *Pose* as the unseen experiences of Black and brown queer and trans people and highlight their humanity through a systemic and counter-hegemonic lens.

Another vein of responses also saw *Pose*’s message as being more generally about the larger LGBTQIA+ community. For instance, R22 said the main message of *Pose* was ”that the LGBTQ community has had a lot of hardships, but they are resilient and find joy.” Similarly, R1 said the show’s main message was that ”Trans people are human.” Notably, these responses from R22 and R1’s responses seemingly overlooked the role of race in informing the show’s messaging about trans queer people. Additionally, in their focus on ”hardships” and ”humanity,” these readings seem to take a less systemic and more individualistic approach to understanding oppression and acceptance within these communities. The differences in how audience’s understand *Pose* points to the ambiguity that can often get created through the mobilization of Black feminist concepts in popular media. When complex messages about systemic oppression and intersectional understandings of lived experiences are commercialized, the Black feminist impulses of these messages can get diluted, leaving room for ambiguity in reception. In these particular cases, these different interpretations of the show’s message may stem from the fact that R20 and R21 are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, whereas R22 and R1 are not, making them more attuned to the specifically *racialized* dynamics within this community.

What Do Audiences Think Of The Representation(s) Of Black Women, Femmes, and/or Queer Individuals On These Media Texts?

Many respondents said these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums portrayed the nuance and complexity of Black women, femmes, and queer folk instead of portraying them as belonging to fixed and monolithic stereotypical categories.

Complex, Expansive Representation

Several participants said representations of Black womanhood in these shows deviated from what is typically seen in mainstream media. Writing about *ABLSS*, R35 wrote, "Though a sketch comedy show, the characters are often much more nuanced than other media portrayals of Black women." Similarly, discussing the visual albums *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer*, respectively, R53 wrote, "Lemonade is a beautiful representation of the range of emotions Black women can show. We are not "angry Black women," we have range;" and R54, a Black, genderqueer person wrote "Excellent. Janelle doesn't speak for all of us but does represent a segment of our experience." In highlighting the dynamic way Black women, femmes, and queer folks are represented in these media texts, these responses levy a critique of how popular media often relies on limited or stereotypical representations of Black women, such as the "angry Black woman." Further, R53 and R54's use of the words "we" and "us" signals that these critiques are based on their own experiences as members of the Black woman and Black queer community, respectively.

Respondents specifically noted representations of Black women, femme, and queer folks in this media moved away from mainstream stereotypes by focusing on the heterogeneity and breadth of identities within Black femme communities. For example, discussing Black women and femme representation in *Pose*, R7 commented:

I think it's great! There are such a wide range of fully developed Black women and queer folks! None of them are the same, many are of different ethnicities, so it represents that black folks are not a monolith, and all have a full range of emotions, strengths, and flaws, so it feels very real and develops a lot of empathy.

Here, R7's response acknowledges how the range of Black women and femme experiences present on the show allows audiences to see this community is not a monolith and encompasses people with a breadth of positionalities and characteristics. This enables the representation of Black femme and trans women on *Pose* to move away from the historical singular and token representations of (Black) trans women often seen in popular media. In addition, for R7, this expansive representation lends to the "realness" with which these characters are represented.

Like R7, other respondents similarly noted how *Pose* presented a complex, expansive, and non-stereotypical portrayal of the Black queer and trans communities. R6 wrote:

I think it's one of the best representations to date of queer and femme black/poc folks in television. It mostly shows the complexity of the characters instead of painting them as stereotypes. That said, I think there is a slight lack of depth in the way that dark skinned women specifically are portrayed. They aren't given the same amount of sympathetic light as some of the other characters. (R6, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman).

Here, R6 draws a direct comparison between *Pose's* representation of the Black queer community to other popular media representations, specifically noting how *Pose* gives complexity to these characters and their lives. In this way, R6, like R7, calls our attention to how in its expansive representation of the Black queer community, *Pose* invokes a depth and empathy not often seen when depicting the queer community in media.

In particular, R18 links *Pose's* representation of Black trans women onscreen to the inclusion of trans women of color in the show's production:

I was glad that the show cast trans women of color to play trans roles. The show also allows its characters to have successes, triumphs, and struggles without reducing them to the stories we hear so often about trans women of color and trans black women, which is news reports about their murders. As a person who works with LGBTQ college students, it is important to me that we have access to these kinds of stories, this kind of representation, and to the histories of those who came before us.

In their response, R18 highlights *Pose's* interventions in moving away from "stereotypical" representations of the Black queer and trans community. First, the casting of Black and brown trans women of color underscores the authenticity of the experiences shown on screen, deviating from historical representations of trans people in popular media by cisgender actors. Second, one of the key ways *Pose* not only focuses on this community's struggles and pain but also on their triumphs and successes. As R1 echoed, the show allowed them to have "narratives that didn't center pain and trauma even if pain and trauma were a part of their lives." In this way, these respondents elucidate how *Pose* presents a new take on the Black queer community in popular media.

Uplifting Representations

Several respondents said that they found the representation of Black women, femmes, and queer folks in these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums overwhelmingly positive and uplifting.

Discussing *Lemonade*, R7 wrote:

I think there's a through line in the album that is basically like no matter what Black women as a whole or Beyoncé as an individual woman have gone through, there is an inner power and strength within their identity, and I think that's powerful to see.

R7 highlights how both on an individual and community level, *Lemonade* highlights the strength of Black women in an uplifting way. Further, R42 said *Go Off, Sis/ Unbothered*, "confronts the hard truths around being a Black woman in America; championing dialogues and creating a community that celebrates Black Voices." Thus, like R7, sees the way Black women are represented on *Go Off, Sis* as being positive and celebratory.

R18 also connected representations of Black women and femmes in *Dirty Computer* to a longer lineage of Black women's and feminist writing, especially in the Afrofuturist tradition:

I find Monae's approach to a kind of queer, femme black futurism interesting. It draws on a long history of Black queer women writing and engaging with sci fi [*sic*], and a long feminist theme of thinking about women in relation to cyborg features. Monae makes these figures the center of her work while mixing all these historically Black and queer music forms that also teach us about Black representation.

In this way, R18 frames *Dirty Computer* as part of a larger project of theorizing Black hope.

In an interesting response about *Pose*, R20 wrote, "I don't feel it's my place as a non-Black person to speak on racial representation but positive transfem rep is vitally important." As a white-identified person, R20 acknowledges they may not be as equipt to comment on representations of the Black women, femme, and queer community— as they have not held these experiences and can not fully assess the authenticity of these representations. However, even still, R20 can recognize that the representations of Black and brown trans femme people on *Pose* are generally positive and important to those within these communities and, more broadly, within our society. This response illuminates the complicated readings of these representations by those outside of the Black women and femme communities being represented

in these instances and points to how those outside these communities may still be able to decode the important positive nature of these representations.

What do respondents like or find pleasurable about these media texts?

Respondents found these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums pleasurable for a plethora of reasons. While occasionally dependent on the media itself, respondents most often drew pleasure from resonating with the show's general content or storyline, the show's comedic humor, the show's musical elements, and the show's representational focus.

Pleasurable Content

Often, respondents said they got pleasure from some general element of a news outlet, television show, or visual album's content or storyline. For instance, discussing *The TRiIBE*, R12 said, "It reads like a digital diary. It tells what it means to be young and Black in Chicago. It's cool, energetic, and connected," and R22 said she is "interested in most articles," in *Essence Magazine*. Regarding the television shows and visual albums, respondents pointed to specific characters or storylines. For example, R16 said they found *Pose* pleasurable because they "Like the story of the protagonist."

While these comments point to pleasure drawn from an interest in the media's general content, they also point to how this interest or resonance may be, in part, derived from the respondent's own identity. For instance, as Black cisgender women, R12 and R22's interest in *The TRiIBE* and *Essence Magazine* may be due to their focus on the Black and Black woman communities. Further, as an Asian, nonbinary femme person of color, R16 may find resonance with the protagonist of *Pose*, a Black transgender woman. Here, I do not mean to suggest that *only* those whose identity aligns with a media message or storyline derive pleasure from its content. In fact, R11, who identifies as a white cisgender woman, wrote her pleasure in watching *Lemonade* comes from the "poignant and fascinating stories about the lives of women of color." Rather I intend to highlight how an audience member's positionality plays a role in where and how they derive pleasure from the content.

Some respondents were more explicit about the role of a character's identity in the pleasure they received from the content or storyline. In one response, R31, a Black and genderqueer person, wrote in

Pose, "a self-selected family that provides support to LGBTQ youth who have been rejected by their birth families is a pleasurable idea." Similarly, R1, a Black cisgender woman, said of *ABLSS*, "seeing Black women together in the comedy space is rare, I also like the short skits together," In both of these responses, R31 and R1 allude to how both focus on *specific* racial, gender, and sexual communities acted as a source of their pleasure when engaging with these shows.

Pleasurable Comedy

When discussing *ABLSS*, many respondents wrote that what they found most pleasurable about the show was the comedic humor, which aligns with the show's premise as a sketch comedy. Some of these responses pointed to the general humor of the show. For instance, R17 wrote, "It's so funny. I laughed until my stomach hurt," and R26 wrote, "It's a very humorous show actually, and I watch it when I can do with a good laugh." However, some respondents also noted how they derived pleasure specifically from the show's Black woman and femme-centered humor. For instance, R45 responded, "I can capture every unapologetically Black and hilarious episode," and R54 responded, "Laughter is joy. Black women being carefree. Just watch Black Lady Courtroom, that *basically* sums it up on so many levels." While R45 and R54's responses highlighted the pleasure that the show's humor provided them, they also called attention to the specific Blackness and Black womanness in which this humor is grounded. Further, R54's references to the Black Lady Courtroom sketch, a sketch where a Black women judge, bailiff, stenographer, defendant, and lawyers become joyous after arriving in an all-Black lady courtroom, points to how audiences find may similar pleasure and joy in watching the all Black women comedic utopia created by *ABLSS*.

Pleasurable Music

Similarly, respondents often pointed to the musical elements, including the music composition, lyrics, and singing, as a specific site of pleasure when watching the two visual albums, *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer*. Discussing *Lemonade*, R7 said she got pleasure from "The music, the poetry, the dancing, the cinematography [*sic*];" and R53 said, "The thoughtfulness behind the visuals and the music itself is some of her best work." Similarly, talking about *Dirty Computer*, R38 wrote, "In terms of lyrics and

material, this album is too bold and brilliant, far beyond the first two,” comparing the music quality and lyrics in *Dirty Computer* to Monáe’s first two full albums, “The ArchAndroid,” and “The Electric Lady.” Like the responses about comedy as a site of pleasure, while these responses were more general, others pointed at the way the music addressed themes of Black femmness and queerness. For instance, R18 wrote about *Dirty Computer* “The music is fun to listen to, the styles are so varied and engaging, and the songs address Black, queer experience in such poetic terms,” explicitly connecting the pleasure they derived from the music with its lyrical themes of addressing Black femme queer experiences.

Pleasurable Representation

The final key reason respondents seemed to derive pleasure from these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums was how they represented Black women, femme, and queer folks. Here, the pleasure was not necessarily derived from the fact that the shows focused on communities but rather *how* these communities were represented. For instance, R6 said she derived pleasure from “the fact that I don’t worry about characters being portrayed as gross stereotypes, the storylines, the setting and sense of place/time.” In this way, the nuanced, authentic, non-stereotypical way Black women were represented was pleasurable for R6, especially as a Black woman. Similarly, R20 noted that for them watching *Pose*, “community and authenticity can bring immense joy. It’s beautiful to (mostly) see transfem people not cast in a negative way or as a punchline. just as people.” Further, discussing *Lemonade*, R11 said, “we experience poignant and fascinating stories about the lives of women of color,” and R5 said of *ABLSS*, “The performance was very real.” In each of these answers, respondents call attention to how specificity and authenticity in the representation of Black women, femme, and queer folks can, in and of itself, be a site of pleasure for viewers of the shows — especially those from within these communities.

Don’t @Us

Black feminist aesthetics, concepts, and terms in popular media, especially in entertainment media, can often flatten the complex understanding of systemic oppression they offer in favor of neoliberal and commercial logic that makes this media more “marketable” to mass audiences. However, the representational intention of media producers is only part of the larger messages that flow into the public sphere.

Rather, as media studies scholars have long noted, audiences can decode media messages in ways that negotiate and push against the media's intended messages to create new meaning. Self-identified audiences of popular Black feminism often come to this media because of a stated representational focus on Black women, femmes, queer folks, and in some cases, due to their understanding of this media as "Black feminist." Additionally, the messages audience members decode from this media are about the dynamic, nuanced, and systemically-informed lived experiences of Black women, femme, or queer folks; pushing against monolithic messaging about these communities in popular media that relegate them to racist and sexist stereotypes.

Responses also elucidate the role of pleasure in attracting audiences to these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums. The pleasure that audiences get from these shows is often directly linked to the intentionally Black feminist-informed ways they represent Black women, femmes, and queer folk on screen. Audiences members' ability to identify with the identity-specific content mixed with the perception that these shows' representations of Black, women, femme, and queer folks are not racist or misogynistic allows them to enjoy and get pleasure from this media. In other words, while the representation of Black women, femme, and queer folks on these shoes is why respondents came to them, the nuanced and Black feminist-informed way these representations is why they stay.

Thus, I suggest, despite the potential neoliberal impulses of popular Black feminism, this media still offers audiences members new Black-feminist informed frameworks for understanding the lived experiences of Black women, femme, and queer folks. Audience's reading of popular Black feminist media aligns with Black feminist and intersectional frameworks that forefront the role of positionality and heterogeneity within these communities (Crenshaw, 1989, Collins, 2000, Combahee, 1979). In other words, many audience members understand these media as showing how multiple sites of power and oppression can come to bear on Black women, femme, and queer communities, as opposed to portraying them through a singular axis of race or gender, or sexuality. In this way, respondents illuminate how audiences actively decode Black feminist messages and ideas from these shows. In this way, as popular forms of media, these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums open up new opportunities for audiences to engage in a more complex understanding of these communities, potentially opening them up to more acceptance

and new avenues for cultural citizenship. Additionally, then popular Black feminism can act as a tool to teach people about the role of systemic oppression in the lives of Black women, femme, and queer folks.

At the same time, responses also highlight significant implications for how audience's engage with popular Black feminism. The overwhelming higher responses about Black feminist-informed entertainment media versus Black feminist news media may indicate that more audiences come into contact with Black feminist media through entertainment. As I argue in previous chapters, while Black feminist journalism is intentional about its operationalization of Black feminist praxis in news production, Black feminist entertainment media often fit Black feminist concepts and ideas into individualistic and neoliberal frameworks that translate to larger corporate and commercial interests. Thus, if the main form of popular Black feminism audiences come into contact with is entertainment media, this may mean the spread of Black feminism through media is limited.

Further, the fact that the majority of respondents identified with and are a part of the communities represented may make them more attuned to the nuances of these representations and indicate that they make up the majority of the audiences engaging with this media. Audiences from within these communities may be more willing to engage in potentially negotiated and oppositional readings of these media at points because of an identification with the representation. Further, many of the audience members who expressed pleasure from these nuanced representations also identified with the communities being represented, again highlighting the fact that while Black feminist-informed representations may be a source of pleasure for some audiences around these media texts, this may not apply to potential audiences members from outside of these specific communities.

It is also interesting to note that within these responses, class did not appear to play a large role in shaping how survey participants understood these popular Black feminist media, especially in comparison to other markers of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality. These findings depart from previous studies on audience media engagement, such as those by Janice Radway (1982) and Robin Means Coleman (1998), which have found class to be a key factor in how audience's decode media messages. While these difference could be due to several reasons, including the sometime shallow nature of survey responses and the specific group of people who self-selected into this study, this difference may also indicate that within

the context of popular Black feminist media race, gender, and sexuality play a larger role in shaping audience's understanding of the media than class.

While these findings begin to construct a preliminary basis for considering how the audiences decode popular Black feminist messages, the survey is limited. First, while this was not meant to be a representative sample, it is unclear if the demographics of the survey respondents fully match the demographics of these shows' audiences. However, given the incongruous ways demographic data is collected across these news outlets, television shows, and visual albums, it is not possible to know the exact demographic breakdown of each viewership as it relates to the identity categories listed in the sample. As noted previously, the larger number of Black people, cisgender women, and femmes in the sample may be because these identities are over-represented in the audiences of these shows or due to other biases such as selection bias or exposure bias. Thus, to look more broadly at who may be engaging with this media, in the next chapter, I turn to audiences of Twitter.

CHAPTER 7

@Us:

Co-Viewing Popular Black Feminism on Social Media

While surveys can demonstrate how audiences engage with popular Black feminist media, the responses are limited to a specific subset of audiences who chose to participate in this study. Thus, it is unclear if the respondents' views in the previous chapter truly represent the full scope of audience ideas, opinions, and thoughts on these shows. Further, the extent to which these audiences actively engage with this media, outside of being prompted by the survey, is unclear. Thus, in this final chapter, I look to Twitter co-viewing practices around popular Black feminist media, particularly the entertainment shows: *ABLSS*, *Pose*, *Lemonade*, and *Dirty Computer*.⁴⁵ Within this chapter, I frame my analysis of these tweets within the larger literature on fandom, and Black woman fandom in particular, to understand how audiences actively engage with popular Black feminism in real-time and the sense-making and critical viewing practices they employ.

Looking at co-viewing tweets also allows me to examine the breadth of potential responses related to these shows. Many of the participants who self-selected into the survey identified as Black or a woman, potentially indicating that their own identification with these shows prompted them to participate. However, looking at Twitter co-viewing tweets allows me to see a larger breadth of who may be watching and engaging with this media. In this way, incorporating these live tweets into our understanding of how audiences decode popular Black feminist media expands the potential scope of knowledge around who is engaging in discussion around these shows, and, in turn, how they are decoding the show's messages.

⁴⁵I specifically chose to collect co-viewing tweets for only entertainment media in the data set for two key reasons: 1) practices of co-viewing and live tweeting lend themselves more to wide-reaching entertainment media, which typically have larger audiences compared to smaller, intersectional news outlets; and 2) As opposed to the news media explored in this study, which often releases episodes and posts sporadically, all of the entertainment media in this study aired publicly at one particular date and time, allowing me to identify the 24 hours in which most audiences would have access to, and in turn, participate in public discussion around this content.

Co-viewing tweets also reveal how fans of popular Black feminism engage in collective sense-making practices around these shows. As a complement to surveys, which asked respondents about their *individual* understanding of these media messages, examining co-viewing conversations allows us to see how audiences and fans use digital platforms to *collectively* produce collaborative interpretations about the potential messages embedded in these media texts (Jenkins, 1992; Baym, 2001, Chatman, 2017). Unlike the sentiment of ‘don’t @ me,’ which denotes a closed discussion and understanding of media and representations, people who actively engage in Twitter co-viewing engage the “@” symbol to actively invite others into their decoding process. I position these conversations as representing the initial formation of fan communities around these shows to examine the dynamic and broadly networked conversations that frame popular discourse around how audiences and fans alike ultimately come to understand popular Black feminist media.

Co-Viewing, Second Screening, and Popular Black Feminism Fans on Social Media

Second Screen Co-Viewing & Online Fandom

The term ‘co-viewing,’ or what de Sa (2015) refers to as ‘co-viewing 1.0’, was initially developed in the age of broadcast media to describe peer-to-peer interactive viewing practices. Early conceptions of co-viewing were understood within the context of family and the household around television content (Valkenburg et al., 1995). Similarly, Henry Jenkins (1992) describes how television fans in the late 20th century would use print media such as Zines, newsletters, and face-to-face events, such as conventions and fan club meetings, as forums to collectively engage in critical conversations around media texts and co-construct social meaning. In this way, audience viewing practices have long intersected with *social* viewing practices. Audience decoding practices of mass media texts do not happen in a vacuum but are often influenced by socially-situated viewing practices that allow audiences to co-construct and negotiate media messages.

These moments of collective meaning-making have been further enhanced by the development of the internet, allowing audiences to more readily engage with one another as they decode media messages

(Baym, 2001; Doughty, Rowland, & Lawson, 2011, 2012). In her study of online soap opera fan communities, Nancy Baym (2001) suggests fan engagement on online Usenet newsgroups allowed audiences to build relationships across online networks and create social meaning from popular mass-media texts through collaborative interpretation. As Baym posits:

If one understands soap viewing as a game of making meanings from clues, then the collaborative provision of multiple readings and multiple clues has obvious benefits. No longer limited by one's own time constraints and limited knowledge, the game becomes bigger and more fun to play. The more players, the better" (p. 94)

While Baym's focus is specifically on the soap opera genre, her insights allow us to understand how the vast, networked nature of the internet opens up mass media texts to a plethora of potential new social meanings for fans.

This interpretive collaboration has increased following the development of digitally enabled mobile technologies, such as laptops and cell phones. The term 'second-screening,' the use of a 'second screen' such as a computer or phone to engage in interactive viewing practices while watching television affords audiences the ability to create 'backchannels' through which they can engage in conversation about a specific media text with a network of people, beyond those who are directly around them (Doughty, Rowland, & Lawson, 2011; Finger & De Souza, 2012; Giglietto & Selva, 2014). The use of second screens has also allowed for what de Sa refers to as co-viewing 2.0, a co-viewing environment developed by the proliferation and addition of Web 2.0 technology to our current media environment, which facilitates the ability to share and learn around media content, especially television shows (de Sa, 2015).

In today's media landscape, many of these online co-viewing conversations have shifted to social media. As inherently social public spaces, the online engagement practices facilitated by social media platforms allow audiences to engage with one another as they watch popular media content, facilitating collective practices of media decoding. Specifically, on the social media platform Twitter, where co-viewing has become extremely popular, potentially due to the text-based nature of the platform, users can engage specific tools available on these platforms such as using specific hashtags and @-ing to purposefully develop these conversations (Wohn & Na, 2011). As described in the previous chapter, the process of "@" ing allows fans to directly address each other in a tweet, building on each other's posts in comments to

create conversation and discourse. Similarly, the hashtag function, initially created by technologist Chris Messina to form an online public sphere, allows topically related posts to be discoverable and accessible to those who may want to join (Messina, 2007). In this way, as Lee Humphreys (2018) suggests, the transition from offline fan interpretive practices and ‘covieing 1.0’ to online fan communities and ‘covieing 2.0’ presents another instance in which we can see offline social sharing practices replicated within an online, digital context.

Studies have shown that most audiences engage in second-screen co-viewing on social media to connect and foster discussion with those with similar interests. Second screen co-viewing also allows viewers to engage in collective conversation and information gathering about media (de Zúñiga et al., 2105). Second screen co-viewing also provides connection and a larger social context for those who consume media in isolation or asynchronously (Cohen & Lancaster, 2014; Nee & Baker, 2020; Pittman & Teffertiller, 2015; Schirra, Sun, & Bentley, 2015). For instance, second screen co-viewing allows for collective meaning-making around popular streaming content, even though audiences can watch these shows asynchronously. Additionally, on Twitter, “live-tweeting” or tweeting about a television show or event in real-time allows audiences and fans to create a forum to engage in co-viewing with other interested audience members. The use of a show-specific hashtag also makes these conversations discoverable to those interested in engaging in the discussion, as well as show producers (Schirra, Sun, & Bentley, 2015). In this way, co-viewing allows audiences and fans to replicate once-in-person discussions around media in a virtual space, where discussion participants no longer need to be physically co-located or even know one another to engage in co-constructed meaning-making. Examining co-viewing allows us to see how audiences use digital media to contextualize and recontextualize their understanding of this media.

Who’s Live-Tweeting?: Viewers v. Fans

Within this discussion of second-screen co-viewing, it is also important to discuss different audiences who may choose to *actively* engage in co-viewing communities. While presumably, any audience member can passively engage in the process of ‘co-viewing 1.0’ deSa describes as a result of their co-located nature with others while viewing, the specific kinds of co-viewing Jenkins and Baym describe is around intentional fan communities. Stemming from the word root word *fanatics*, Jenkins (1992) defines fans

as those audiences who "treat popular texts as if they merited the same degree and of attention and appreciation as canonical texts" (pg. 17) and "raid mass culture, claiming its material for their own use, reworking them as a basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions," (pg. 18). In this way, while audiences, more broadly, can be seen as passive viewers of media, fans actively seek out materials and forums through which they can engage with others in critical conversation and discussion around the meaning of media texts. Here, I do not mean to suggest that fans are limited to those who engage socially in fandom. As Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (2017) highlight in their essay introduction to their edited volume, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, conceptualizations of 'fans' in fan studies while initially based in fan communities, has extended to discuss the individual psychology of fans and fan engagement. However, my emphasis here is on the fact that fans, as opposed to the general audience, *actively* and *purposefully* engage with media text in a productive way that can lead to new meaning and understanding. Also, going back to the discussions of pleasure in the previous chapter, Matt Hill (2017) notes the affective dimensions of fan engagement that may not be present in more passive audience viewing experiences. Based on these understandings of fandom, I interpret those who engage in live-tweeting or second-screen co-viewing on Twitter as fans through their intentional choice to use these platforms to engage with others in active, social, and often affective conversations around popular media.

[Black] Twitter & Black Women Fans Online

Fan studies scholars have previously highlighted how fan communities engage with media texts to call attention to the often unbalanced and hegemonic dimensions of popular media (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2017; Jenkins, 1992). As Jenkins describes them, these 'textual poachers' often write and create from the margins, pulling into focus those elements of the text that are hidden or overlooked within the dominant narrative structure. In this way, Black fans, particularly Black women, femme, and queer fans, have often engaged in co-viewing and fan communities to create, critique, and construct meaning around their communities' representations in popular media. However, as Rebecca Wanzo (2015) points out, the particular subject of race has historically been ignored in fan studies because the *racism* (and, I would further suggest, sexism) that has appeared within fan communities troubles some of the

claims at the heart of fan studies —namely that fandom represents a struggle between the hegemonic structure of cultural industries and marginalized fans. In work to recuperate African American cultural criticism within our understanding of fan studies and fan criticism, Wanzo suggests we apply an identity hermeneutics which places "a particular identity at the center of the reading or interpretative practice— and explores the possibility that a different kind of fan, as well as different issues of concern to fans, might be visible if we focus on African Americans" (para. 1.6). Particularly, Wanzo contemplates how the concept of fandom as self-selected otherness in the way Jenkins theorizes it "ignores the ways in which a fandom that is not a cult fandom can be considered somewhat normative, and it also fails to address the fact that sometimes social justice projects call on identity groups to become fans as an act of politics" (para. 2.1).

Black audiences have used Twitter and the function of second screen co-viewing as an opportunity to call attention to or critique certain media to call attention to the politics of representation. Looking at the use of Black Twitter by Black women fans of *Scandal*, Dayna Chatman (2017) draws on Jonathan Gray's (2005) definition of anti-fans as those who have a negative affective yet still productive relationship to a particular media text to examine how fans and anti-fans come together to express both pleasure and critique of television representations of Black womanhood on *Scandal*. Chatman observes how anti-fans often police these representations for failing to fully represent their lived experiences as Black women, demonstrating how "hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and "effects" or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture," (Gray, 2005). However, unlike Black women viewers of early Black women representations whose oppositional readings were confined to their own homes and individual communities, the oppositional readings of *Scandal's* anti-fans on Black Twitter are circulated widely in ways that have the potential to influence production.

Further, these Black anti-fans online can be seen as new age manifestations of Black audience protesters, using their voices to critique harmful representations (Wanzo, 2015). Through Chatman's work, we see empirical evidence for Wanzo's assertion that:

Black Twitter has provided evidence of Black antifan hate watching, with fans consistently tuning in to watch and comment on shows that they hold in contempt...These activities have been important to the long civil rights struggle. Fandom and antifandom can make African Americans part of the black community and fulfill a political duty.

While Wanzo does maintain that the affective relationship to the political stakes may differ within the context of Twitter, taken together, Wanzo and Chatman illustrate how Black women can engage Twitter, and particularly Black Twitter, in their fandom to productively critique self-identified representations as part of a larger political project of anti-racism and anti-sexism.

Likewise, Apryl Williams and Vanessa Golan argue that Black women co-viewing *How To Get Away With Murder* (*HTGAWM*), another Rhimes show, on Twitter form collective, cultural understandings of the show's depiction of Black womanhood and form supportive communities in line with a Black feminist ethics of care. Specifically, the authors note how Black women had a strong emotional reaction to the show's main character, Analise Keating, played by Black actress Viola Davis, taking off her wig to reveal her natural hair. Twitter allowed Black women viewers to engage with and validate this moment's perceived authenticity and political resonance.

Black transgender women have also used Twitter to critique how they are represented in popular media. Speaking back to mainstream film and television depictions that predominantly represent trans women as people in dress-up — through the casting of cisgender actors to play trans individuals or casting them victims of violence, Janet Mock created #GirlsLikeUs to bring visibility to the authentic, everyday lives of trans women (Feder, 2020; Bailey, 2021; Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020;). The hashtag, created in reaction to the disqualification of Jenna Talakova from the Miss Universe pageant for not being cisgender, gave Black trans activists like Mock and actress Laverne Cox a tool to directly engage with inaccurate, harmful, and dangerous media representations and discourses about trans women, particularly trans women of color (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles, 2020). While unlike the examples of tweeting about *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* #GirlsLikeUs does not present audience engagement around one particular show, it still demonstrates how Black trans women, in particular, have used Twitter to engage in public discussion about how they are represented in popular media.

Drawing on this foundation of fan studies and second screen co-viewing, particularly as it relates to audience and fan engagement with popular Black feminist media, I was interested in how audiences, and particularly active fans of this media, use Twitter co-viewing to socially construct meaning around these media texts that then circulates within public discourse across our vast, networked culture. Further, in considering Wanzo's identity hermeneutics, I was also interested in the role of Black women's representation in shaping how fandom develops around popular Black feminism.

Collecting The Tweets

To collect co-viewing tweets, I used the Twitter API to scrape all of the tweets explicitly marked each shows' hashtags within 24 hours of the movie or television show's initial premiere, #Lemonade, #ABlackLadySketchShow, #DirtyComputer, and #PoseFX.⁴⁶ In collecting tweets posted within the 24 hours of each of these airing, I aimed to examine how sense-making around this media took place in real-time as a function of live-tweeting, as a particular kind of second screen co-viewing. For the two visual albums, I collected tweets with #Lemonade or #DirtyComputer within 24 hours of each movie's initial television premiere date and time, April 23rd, 2016, at 9:00 PM EST and April 27th, 2018, at 12:00 AM EST, respectively. Similarly, for the two television series, I collected all tweets marked with #ABlackLadySketchShow within 24 hours of the pilot episode, which aired August 2nd, 2019, at 11:00 PM EST, and all tweets with #Pose tweeted within 24 hours of Season 1 Episode 2 'Access,' which originally aired June 10th 2018. I chose to observe live-tweeting conversations around these particular episodes because they served as a cornerstone of my analysis of these shows in Chapter 4.

This data collection process resulted in 50,000 referencing *Lemonade*, 16,454 referencing *Dirty Computer*, 2,948 referencing *ABLSS*, and 4,145 referencing *Pose*. I then created a sample from each data set to further analyze. To construct the sample, I made a script to remove any retweets from each data set so that my findings would not be biased towards highly retweeted tweets that would oversaturate the initial data set. The script removed all tweets from the initial data set where "RT@" was present in the tweet, indicating it was a retweet. I also observed this removal process, marking and then manually reinserting any quote tweets, which similar to retweets also contain "RT@," but in these instances, the tweet consists

⁴⁶See appendix for code used

of both a retweet and an original tweet commenting on or referencing the tweet being retweeted. This process reduced my data set for each show to only original tweets. After removing the retweets from each data set, I then constructed my final sample by using a script to construct a new data set consisting of every 10th tweet, leaving me with 10% of my dataset consisting of only original tweets; this resulted in a final sample of tweets composed of 1554 tweets referencing *Lemonade*, 667 tweets referencing *Dirty Computer*, 180 tweets referencing *ABLSS*, and 116 tweets referencing *Pose*. While proportionally, there is a predominance of tweets about *Lemonade*, both in the original data set and in the sample, I suggest this imbalance speaks to the predominance of Beyoncé fans and/or *Lemonade* fans in shaping the discourse around popular Black feminist media online.

I analyzed the final sample of tweets using qualitative thematic coding using the coding software Atlas.ti. Using the frameworks of "fan" and "anti-fan," codes examined tweets for references to conscious co-viewing activity, fandom, and anti-fandom. I also left the coding scheme open to allow new codes to arise, particularly around Black women, femme, and queer representations and tweeters' potential views or feelings around these issues.

Before considering the content of these tweets and my analysis, it is important to make two notes about my choice of data collection and the way it necessarily influences my findings. First, except for *Pose*, all of the live-tweeting conversations explored in this chapter mark the first time audiences encountered this particular visual album or television show. Thus, as opposed to prior studies that examine fans within the context of fully formed, ongoing fan communities, this study looks at a particular moment in the formation of fandom, or in other words, the moment when viewers become fans (or anti-fans). Thus, while for some of these shows, I can not situate my analysis within the context of existing fan theories, conventional and generic preferences, and narrative preferences, I can examine how audiences become fans of these television shows and visual albums and on what grounds. Furthermore, while fan communities around these *particular* media texts may not have previously existed, as Jenkins argues, fan followings often develop around pre-existing communities and modes of fandom. In this way, I can still situate fandom for these shows and visual albums within the context of pre-existing fan communities

around these particular Black woman artists or the Black women, writers, and actresses who work across these television shows.

Second, it is important to note the limitations of my chosen data collection strategy. Using hashtags as an identifier to collect co-viewing tweets only allowed me to see tweets by users who specifically marked their commentary with the hashtag, leaving out tweets by users who may have used the platform to engage in co-viewing but did not mark the comment as such with a hashtag. However, if co-viewers actively aim to engage in public discussion with others, then using hashtags to identify these tweets also allowed me to specifically find social media comments that sought connection and co-viewing community.

The Tweets

A word cloud of the words in the corpus of tweets gives some insight into the key themes and ideas in Twitter discussions around popular Black feminism [See image 15]. Looming large in the center of the word cloud are the hashtags themselves, most notably, #ABlackLadySketchShow, #Dirty Computer, #Lemonade, and then to a lesser degree, #Pose. The size discrepancy between #Pose and the other hashtags is likely due to the smaller number of tweets sampled from this show, resulting from the smaller number of co-viewing tweets about this show overall. It is also notable that the names of the Black women artists who created the visual albums, Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe, are towards the center of the word cloud, though smaller than the hashtags, highlighting the key role of these artists in shaping how audiences make sense of their work. As we extend out, other keywords and themes related to how people understand these media begin to emerge, most notably words such as "watch," "watching," and "listening," noting active engagement with the media at the moment, as well as "black," "woman," "visual," "emotion," "queen," "love," "beautiful," "white," "amazing," and "powerful." These words begin to encapsulate many audience responses in reaction to watching popular Black feminist media. Overwhelmingly, those who chose to engage in Twitter co-viewing conversations around these shows or visual albums enjoyed the content, visual artistry, or the artist; and, in some cases, felt an emotional connection with the work. Further, in some instances, viewers recognized the predominant role of Blackness and Black womanhood in their overall meaning.

These tweets not only act as public declarations of viewers' own active viewing engagement but also, as in the case of the last tweet, implicitly and explicitly invite others online to join them in their viewing experiences.

Many viewers also posted about their emotional reactions to these shows to connect with other fans in the co-viewing process. *Dirty Computer*, *Pose*, and *Lemonade*, in particular, seemed to elicit strong emotional reactions from viewers who tweeted comments such as:

Barely five minutes into @JanelleMonae's #DirtyComputer and already sobbing. #iamdirtycomputer (@visticuffs)

Just started Pose and dammit, that dance school scene had me blubbing. This show is so good. #PoseFx (@justwhatheather)

I'm in tears I am crying. I'm an emotional wreck. 😭😭 #sandcastles #LEMONADE (@ginzimas)

One *Dirty Computer* viewer even noted the visual albums perceived impact on their mental health:

I have no idea why, but I think @JanelleMonae just substantially improved my subjective mental health by releasing #dirtycomputer As a music fan, I'm deeply moved when someone puts together a great album. #imlistening. (@HenkkaHypponen)

In her study of online soap opera fan communities, Baym (2001) argues that collaborative interpretation allows fans to express their emotional responses to content to a willing and understanding audience. Specifically, she observes how sharing emotions around media creates pleasure and enjoyment for the sharer by giving them an outlet to vent or release their emotions and create pleasure for other fan readers who can empathize with others. Similarly, here, live-tweeting around these shows acted as an outlet through which some fans could connect over their emotional reactions the shows elicited to those they knew would understand. In turn, responses to these tweets show the empathetic dimensions of other fans. For instance, this response to @visticuffs tweet about being brought to tears by *Dirty Computer* said:

Samesies. I cry even MORE with every subsequent listen lololol 😭💖🌈🌍😭 (@Coffin-FlopEra)

This response exemplifies how these fans could use collaborative interpretation through live-tweeting as an avenue to find pleasure and emotional connections with one another. For these viewers of popular Black feminist media, the co-viewing experience was not only about sociality but also about *emotionality*.

The co-viewing experience allowed them to publicly share the emotional connection they felt to these shows and visual albums.

While, from these tweets, the exact reason for these emotional responses is not clear, it is apparent that something within the content and messaging of these shows was meaningful to these audiences' lived experiences. For example, the song and video "Sandcastles" from *Lemonade* is about someone mourning the loss of a relationship. While the song's lyrics describe someone who has realized that they need to leave a relationship to heal, we see Beyonce reconciling with her husband in the visual album. While, on the one hand, this discrepancy between the lyrics and the visual creates ambiguity around the message of the song as it relates to love and relationships, on the other hand, it opens the scene up to several points of connection through which viewers like @ginzimas may emotionally connect to it: Some viewers may connect to the idea of losing love. In contrast, others may connect to the hope and possibility of reconciliation the visuals allude to. In this way, the ambiguity of *Lemonade*, as a form of commercial Black feminism, may reflect that same ambiguity and open up more potential points of emotional connection within audience decoding practices.

Social Sense-Making

Many tweets also declared active viewing as gateways to engage others in their meaning-making process. For instance, one *Pose* viewer asked:

I'm curious as to if Blanca is an amalgamation of Angie Xtravaganza with some parts of Pepper LaBeija? #PoseFX" (@AstroMarvaroso)

Here, this fan is asking others to weigh in on his own reading of *Pose*, specifically his interpretation of Blanca and representing pioneering members of the Ballroom community. The tweet offers a question about the authenticity of representation of the Black trans characters within the show — calling into question the representational impulses behind these characters and highlighting how the show makes mainstream those communities and histories that once only existed within hidden counterpublics.

In the case of *Dirty Computer*, some viewers took to co-viewing to discuss their understanding of the film's preoccupation with "Americanness." As one viewer tweeted:

Never thought I'd be jamming out to a song called "Americans" in 2018, but here I am.
#DirtyComputer (@DtCamJansen)

This tweet not only tells others that this person is watching *Dirty Computer* but, more specifically, the sense of contention they may be feeling about enjoying a song titled "Americanness" in the aftermath of the 2016 election two years prior, in which the concept of American and American values were debated in terms of their proximity to whiteness and neoliberalism. While the above tweet seems to suggest ambiguity around this specific viewer's feelings towards the idea of Americanness, other tweets suggest admiration for and pleasure in listening to this aspect of the visual album, again suggesting they read Monae's use of "American," through the lens of a queer of color critique.

Listening to @JanelleMonae #DirtyComputer "I am not America's nightmare. I am the American dream." 🍆🤖👩⚡️🌟💖👉 (@SARussellwords)

"I'm not the American Nightmare, I'm the American Dream" YAAAAS. *raises hands*
80s synths that are fantastic and amazing. #dirtycomputer #cindiplay (@jamfish728)

In this way, these declarations of co-viewing become windows through which online audiences of popular Black feminism publically attempt to analyze and create meaning around these texts. In the case of the "Americans," viewers negotiate their feelings around this aspect of the visual album, with some viewers expressing potentially negotiated readings of the song's lyrics and others focusing more on how the film may be attempting to redefine the concept of "Americanness."

Similarly, when viewing *Lemonade*, many tweets centered on understanding if the narrative reflected in the film was fictive or an autobiographical depiction of Beyoncé's relationship with her husband, confirming long-time rumors of Jay-Z's infidelity. Some viewers necessarily believed the visual album to be art imitating life:

Actually loving @Beyonce's #LEMONADE. It's so real to her relationship with J/ his cheating/ her life. #badass (@Maryyag_)

Beyoncé is airing some dirrrty laundry in #LEMONADE . 🍊 #donthurtyourself #giv-ingmelife 🙌 (@marie_lizbeth)

Watching #LEMONADE and thinking about the amt. of ppl dat use to refer to bey and jay as relationship goals 🙌🍊🍊 (@frexlopez)

@TheBESTthatdidi @lonj91 @Byg_Tymer @40ozforte @starrisking @Beyonce ok so my final assessment of #LEMONADE = tabloid rumors confirmed ¹⁰⁰ (@KIENDYGURL)

Others questioned the challenged the idea that the narrative was reflective of the artist's real life:

Ion care what y'all say, I refuse to believe this is about Hov. No! #Denial #lemonade (@Ooduan1)

Most R&B singers dont even write all of their songs. Keep that in mind..just saying dont read in 2 much. #LEMONADE (@stealthdabomber)

Specifically, the narrator is not the same as the author. I think its a mistake to assume #LEMONADE is an autobiography. (2) (@erikakmeyer)

Y'all dummies really think #LEMONADE is about Jay-Z cheating hmmmmmm..... (@TatiannaNicole)

In between these two opposing viewers, other tweets aimed to open up a larger conversation around how to make sense of the film's narrative and the larger messages it may hold about Black women and infidelity:

Maybe I missed it but have we discussed why Bey chose to reconcile with Jay vs getting divorced? Why do you think she stayed? #lemonade (@happymessworld)

Jay-Z is the most hated man in America. True or false? #LEMONADE (@otherblackgirl_)

I think I'm the only 1 that has no clue what's going on with this new Beyoncé Music.. Hov cheated?#lemonade (@THEREALIRONMIC)

So instead of leaving Jay-Z after he cheated, Beyonce went to work & created #LEMONADE. Working through how I feel about this... #whosbecky (@ehnovelty)

@lovebscott Reaching. Now, every white girl ever photographed with Jay Z....could be the "Becky". Lawd Have Mercy! #LEMONADE (@jenniferclmn)

As feminist media scholar Stephanie Patrick (2019) suggests, Twitter provides a critical space through which fans can present diverse opinions and understandings around media, connecting people from various backgrounds as they simultaneously engage with and enjoy the same media text. These tweets similarly point to how Twitter became a space through which viewers of *Lemonade* could publicly and collectively engage in deconstructing the film's central narrative. Co-viewing, in this instance, became a way for fans to socially engage others in their process of sorting through and understanding what the film's message was or could be. Further, I would suggest that this 'diversity' of opinions not only allowed fans to share their own readings but also to contest and negotiate others' reading of this same visual album. In this way, the audience's co-viewing responses to *Pose*, *Dirty Computer*, and *Lemonade* highlight how digital and networked media allow audiences to question, negotiate, and contest different readings of these shows and visual albums publicly.

Black Feminism as a Sense-Making Framework

A handful of tweets also pointed to the specifically intersectional or Black feminist dimensions of this media in framing audience's understanding of these shows and visual albums. For instance, one fan of *Dirty Computer* highlighted how the visual albums centers on the lived experience of historically marginalized communities:

#DirtyComputer is an album that champions living who you truly are. No matter your gender, race, color, sexual orientation, religious belief. @JanelleMonae has really outdone herself. It's an anthem for a generation of bullied, forgotten, and marginalized. It's a must hear 🙌 (@REALJacSantos)

In this tweet, @REALJacSantos calls attention to the raced, gendered, and sexual dimensions of the characters and experiences featured in Monáe's film. Similarly, in a tweet referencing the scene for the *Pose* episode "Access," where Blanca and Lulu get kicked out of the gay bar, one fan tweeted:

Everybody needs somebody to make them feel superior 😏 #POSEFX (@PrincessJTK)

In using this line to frame their discussion of *Pose*, this user calls attention to the intersectional dimensions of Black trans womens' existence elucidated within the episode. Using line, which punctuates Lulu's statement to Blanca that Black trans women are often the most marginalized in society, as a lens through

which to understand and engage with *Pose* necessarily invokes a conversation about intersectionality and Black feminist politics into the collective meaning-making process around the show.

In some cases, viewers' connection between this media and Black feminism was even more explicit. For instance, in a co-viewing conversation about *Lemonade*, one fan decidedly referred to the visual album as a womanist project:

@thetrudz Yasssss come on Sis. This is about Womanism. #Lemonade (@luvthispayne)

In this way, @luvthispayne is unambiguously linking the story and representations within *Lemonade* to womanism, publicly denoting the film as residing within a longer history of Black feminism and Black feminist intellectual production.

Fans

Fans of the Content

Overwhelmingly, co-viewing tweets were used to signal viewers' enjoyment of, pleasure with, and fandom around popular Black feminist media. These tweets expressed how much audiences enjoyed these shows and visual albums, with tweets such as:

#ABlackLadySketchShow I LOVE THIS. SO MUCH (@Lulufall)

I witnessed greatness today. @JanelleMonae's #DirtyComputer is EVERYTHING!! Watch/listen as soon as you can!! (@byraffy)

Omgeez I'm so addicted to this show it's amazing #PoseFX (@SpeakinOfMonroe)

Oooooof... That #LEMONADE quenches my soul (@Kyleesie)

In each of these tweets, fans actively use the platform to publicly express their fandom for the content and representations presented. Further, fans' enthusiasm through these tweets can be read as a digital embodied affect. In his work examination of music fans, Mark Duffett (2017) suggests that through screaming to project an incommunicable, emotional response these fans "collectively create a unique version of their hero that is sonically expressed as an embodiment of their own affect" (p. 371).

Similarly, I suggest in the above tweets, these fans use ‘textual’ screams through their use of exclamation points and capitalization to express an embodied affect towards popular Black feminism in textual form.

As an expression of their fandom, many viewers called attention to specific scenes, lines, or storylines that they found pleasurable or resonated with. Fans of *ABLSS* often took to Twitter to rebroadcast the episode’s most memorable scenes and quotes, including:

The security is tighter than jada pinkett’s mom’s abs #ABlackLadySketchShow (@ReelTalker)

’Breathe when you die honey, ok?! #ABlackLadySketchShow (@MDwightKeller)

And, of course, one of Dr. Haddassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman Pre-Phd’s many enlightening statements:

”See I reject Geometry....A triangle is just the white body upside down, its top heavy”
whoever wrote this line on... Issa’s new show 🖐🖐 #ABlackLadySketchShow. (@StellaThuku)

Across the corpus of tweets, fans often drew on quotes, narratives, and storylines from these shows and visual albums as an entry point to engage in public discourse about the show’s content. In this way, these content-specific tweets allowed fans to publicly and socially share what it was that they appreciated or found pleasure in when watching popular Black feminist media.

Fans of the Creator

In many instances, fan tweets specifically called attention to or praised the Black women behind these representations. In the case of the two visual albums, *Dirty Computer* and *Lemonade*, tweets often expressed specific praise for Monáe:

@JanelleMonae is amazing. #dirtycomputer (@mjclery)

the new @JanelleMonae is stunning🔥I’m moved and excited by this music, by this strong, proud, and confident woman (@SageOfForest)

and Beyoncé:

Beyoncé the Queen has once again slayed the music scene with #LEMONADE 🙌
(@Bowenea234)

Beyonce is a legend #LEMONADE (@ad7f583c84ca48e)

While these audience members took to Twitter to extoll the artist outright, other tweets specifically praised these artists for the representational vision, presumably of Black women:

#DirtyComputer is fucking incredible. @JanelleMonae is the artist of a GENERATION," "@JanelleMonae THANK YOU FOR PUT YOUR ART IN THIS FUCKED WORLD WE DONT DESERVE YOU!!!! YOU TOO GREAT!!!(@beaTROPiX)

@JanelleMonae that was an amazing visual movie. The outfit, the theme, the originality . I love everything about it. It really inspired me thank you #DIRTYCOMPUTER (@@JSwayArt)

This is genuine, raw, powerful emotion and creative work. @Beyonce is reawakening an era of expressive storytelling with #Lemonade. ❤️' (@amras)

Power. Pain. Truth. I salute you @Beyonce 🙌👏 #LEMONADE (@lynnatweets)

In this way, fandom around Black women artists' visual albums extended beyond the film's content and towards the artist as a recognition of their influence on the meaning and messages embedded within the work. It is interesting, though not surprising, to note how most of the tweets attributed authorship to the central artist. However, there were a few tweets that also called attention to the work of other artists and collaborators in their praise of these visual albums, mainly within the context of *Lemonade*:

Beyoncé + Jack White = a collaboration I didn't know I needed but hoo-boy did I. #LEMONADE (@kejames)

Move past any scandal folks. Check out the incredible talent behind those images on Beyoncé's visual album #Lemonade (@silkyd67)

WARSAN SHIRE SHOWING THE WORLD HOW SOMALIA IS THE NATION OF POET'S YES SIS DO US PROUD 🍊🍊🍊🍊 #LEMONADE (@envythesea)

In this way, while fandom sometimes extended to the collective creative team behind a piece of popular Black media, on the whole, it was less common.

In some instances, fans would also express their fandom by drawing a direct connection between Monáe and Beyoncé and other legendary Black artists. For instance, many viewers drew comparisons between Monáe and her mentor, Prince:

The spirit of Prince is all over #DirtyComputer. This made me so....idk. I really have no words. This project is amazing. (@staceyJ_____)

Some of the songs on #DirtyComputer remind me of Prince. I like it. Try not to

dance. I dare you. I'm sitting her measuring hematite plates trying not to...It's hard.
(@LeftyGeologist)

The last song ("American??") sounds like "Let's Go Crazy." #DirtyComputer (@DrennaB)

These direct comparisons between Monáe and Prince provide a framework through which these fans came to understand, relate to, and find pleasure in Monáe's music. Similar comparisons were also made between Beyoncé and Prince:

Really interested in thoughtful, loving, #revolutionary, side-by-side comparisons of #PurpleRain and #Lemonade. #Prince + @Beyonce = ??? (@NelsonVision)

It is absolutely a matter of timing, but I don't think it's out of line to consider Beyoncé Prince's artistic heir. #LEMONADE (@LVshewontstop)

In part, as the latter tweet alludes to, many of these comparisons between Beyoncé and Prince were grounded in the fact that Prince died days before the release of *Lemonade*, which some viewers saw as representing a kismet connection between the two artists. Additionally, other comparisons were often made between Monáe, Beyoncé, and other Black women and queer artists such as Janet Jackson, Frank Ocean, SZA, and Michael Jackson. In this way, fans networked these artists within a larger constellation of Black, Black women, and Black queer artists as a way to interpret and understand these visual albums and their potential impact.

Similarly, when tweeting about *Pose* or *ABLSS*, co-viewing tweets would call out specific actors or writers involved with the show's production. For instance, tweeting about *Pose*, one viewer wrote:

Just give Indya Moore her fucking Emmy already #PoseFX (@xoxorubenangel)

The tweet celebrates Moore's performance as a Black non-binary actor on *Pose*. Likewise, many of the tweets about *ABLSS* highlight the plethora of Black women actors utilized throughout the show's skits, such as:

Angela Bassett, Laverne Cox!!!! I'm losing it! #ABlackLadySketchShow (@revlaurelj)

@KELLYROWLAND lit up the screen in #ABlackLadySketchShow (@TheeParagon)

I saw @Punkiejohnson FINE ASS too!! Congrats, sis! Job well done!!! The talent coming out of NOLA is something (@roxieewil)

Nicole Byers from *Girl Code* is on #ABlackLadySketchShow I'm fan girling (@BlkArMatters)

Or, simply, as one person tweeted:

They got EVERYBODY in #ABlackLadySketchShow and it's hilarious 😂👉 (@Kinzie_Kinz)

In this way, the expanse of Black women actresses and, in turn, Black woman comedic representation throughout *ABLSS*'s pilot episode can be one of the key reasons for fandom around the show. Collectively, these tweets point to how popular Black feminist television show fandom often coalesces around the Black women and femme actresses on the show and the variety of representations that they offer viewers.

Identity & Popular Black Feminist Fandom

Engaging Wanzo's identity hermeneutics to the study of fandom around these particular shows, I was interested in examining how these shows' representations of Black womanhood, femmeness, and queerness were discussed and related to conceptualizations of fandom in these co-viewing conversations. Further, while we can never take for granted that without talking to the user in question, we can never truly know their offline identity, I was interested in how a user's *represented* online identity may influence how they expressed their fandom (Wanzo, 2015).

Tweets that called attention to representations of Black womanhood within these shows and visual albums often framed these representations as a key point through which fandom developed. For instance, tweets about *ABLSS*, *Dirty Computer*, and *Lemonade* pointed to how these shows resonated with Black women fans' lived experiences and gave them a sense of empowerment:

#ablackladysketchshow” is making me feel seen right now! And the apocalypse is a nice touch #hbo #badbitchsupportgroup (@chelseafdesouza)

Yo!!! Black Women have been taught that silence is innately good. I'm exhausted and clearly we're over it #Kelis #DIRTYCOMPUTER (@iamsaintrose)

There has never been a greater time to be a black woman. Restoration of our brilliance has began. They will recognize. 🌈🍋 #Lemonade (@shwIt_jellYtIT)

In these tweets, fans highlight the show's representation of Black women as grounding both their understanding of the shows' message and their own fandom. Further, all three of the above Twitter users present themselves on the platform as Black women. Thus, in line with Wanzo's argument about Black

fandom, I suggest we could see these specific expressions of fandom as "political act" in that their fandom is tied to push for, and economic support for, a particular kind of Black woman representation that they see present in popular Black feminism (Wanzo, 2015).

For some Black woman fans, this particular expression of fandom also led to a defensive posture around who had the right to shape dominant understandings of these media texts. In particular, fans of *Lemonade* often critiqued those who argued the film was about the struggles of *all women* or *women of color*, as opposed to specifically *Black* women.

I'm so sick of people taking the narrative of #LEMONADE and making it about "all women" or "POC" when it's clearly about black women (realdwn2marzc)

I actually saw an ALLWomen post and all I can do right now is SMH! That train always comes. cc h/t @addyB #LEMONADE (@digitalsista)

For black women by a black woman 🍌🐝 #LEMONADE (@AbstractSha)

Not going to sully my eyes w/any lower level analysis of #Lemonade This is art for, by, about Black women. We can discuss amongst ourselves. (@Tia_Oso)

Jennifer Nash (2018) argues defensive rhetorical practices such as this by Black women can be read as a form of agency "that is seemingly exercised on behalf of black women's intellectual production... and one that does its work through an exertion of ownership," (p. 26). While here, Nash is specifically talking about the defensiveness of Black women scholars within the academy around Black feminist intellectual production, I suggest there is a clear parallel here in the affective reactions and rhetorical strategies being deployed. In this instance, Black women fans are engaging in a defensiveness around Black feminist intellectual production within popular culture— protecting it from co-optation by white women and other people of color who aim to generalize its arguably Black feminist message.

Similarly, *Pose* and *Dirty Computer* fans used co-viewing conversations to discuss their fandom around the Black queer representation these two media offered. Fans of *Dirty Computer* seemed to identify and resonate with the Black queer woman representation it provided:

#DIRTYCOMPUTER reminds me of my infinite power as a queer black woman. It reminds me just how proud of myself I am. (@heybrittanyj)

Omg a musical afrofuturist pansexual love story!

I've never felt so seen!
 What did we do to deserve Janelle Monaé?!?!?!
 Yall betta not fuk this up!!!!
 #DirtyComputer (@BlackMajjik)

Like tweets that expressed the development of fandom around a larger Black women identity, these tweets show how Black queer women identified with and built their fandom from the representations of Black femme queerness offered in *Dirty Computer*. These manifestations of fandom highlight how the nuanced representations of Black women, femme, and queer folks popular Black feminism offers around the lived experiences of Black women and femmes are often reflected in how fan communities around this media develop. Further, these co-viewing statements allow us to see how these representations still provide a strong basis for identification despite potential problematic points.

Similarly, co-viewing tweets around *Pose* called attention to the Black and of color trans representation the show offered:

EVERYONE PLEASE WATCH #POSEFX. A REALLY GOOD SHOW THAT HAS TRANS WOMEN OF COLOR AS MAIN CAST. PLOT IS REFRESHING, THE CHARACTER'S STORIES ARE AMAZING AND SUPER POSITIVE STORIES ABOUT THE TRANS CHARACTERS AND DOESN'T FEED OFF TRAUMAS LIKE ON OTHER SHOWS, PLEASE WATCH IT (@weshiicks)

#PoseFX is so good. It truly captured the struggle and life of trans poc in the '80's. (@Derpnutz)

Compared to the tweets about the other three shows, these tweets seemed to have less of an emphasis on the fan's own resonance with the experiences depicted in the show. This may be reflective of who posted these comments. As opposed to the Black women who posted about representations of Black womanhood, femmeness, and queerness, the Twitter pages for the above two users identifies them both as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, but not women or of color, and thus not trans women of color. Thus, the role of identity in the formation of fandom around *Pose* may be less tied to specific identification with trans women of color, and a larger identification with the queer community. In her discussion of the relationship between queerness and fandom, Wanzo writes:

part of queer politics is a commitment to queering the normative. LGBTIQ subjects have traditionally been socially and politically other, and like other subordinated and invisible populations, in mass culture they are often interpellated by queer characters. As with

other groups that are often negatively depicted or not absent in popular culture, queer subjects are more likely to be drawn to representations that may have *some relationship* to their identities or experiences. (italics added for emphasis).

Specifically, here, I want to call attention to her use of the phrase "some relationship" in describing LGBTQIA+ fan communities. Thus, the relational identification that forms between queer men and the trans women of color on *Pose* is rooted in their similar membership within the LGBTQIA+ community. This relationship then becomes a new point of discussion, understanding, and fandom around the show.

Fan Critics or 'Fan-tics'

As fan studies scholars have noted, a hallmark of fan culture is not only engagement with media texts but *critical* engagement with media texts (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Patrick, 2019; Wanzo, 2015). As Jenkins notes:

Organized fandom is first and foremost, an institutional theory of criticism, a semi-structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers can speculate about the nature of mass media and their own relationship to it. (p. 86)

These fan critics, or what Stephaie Patrick (2019) playfully refers to as fan-tics, maintain their fandom for these television shows and visual albums while also leveraging pointed and productive critiques of the representation and content.

Within the context of live-tweeting popular Black feminist media fan critic tweets often pointed to how viewers of this media, especially those who may identify with the representation presented in the content, try to hold space for both the pleasure and displeasure in their viewing experience. For example, in this one tweet about *ABLSS*, the viewer wrote:

Yeaahhhhhh a few funny parts but ehh. I'll still watch and support. 😞 #ABlackLadySketchShow (@kierajanae___)

This tweet exemplifies how critical fans of popular Black feminism negotiate holding space for the gratification they get from the Black woman-centric nature of the content while also holding space for their displeasure regarding the humor. Similarly, critical fans tweeted about *Lemonade*:

Ok so #LEMONADE is deff unique & artistic but it's not as amazing as everyone is making it out to be...👀👀 (@IAMDANIELBARR)

but it makes me give up on black love #lemonade (@amicix96)

Again, this tweet directs our attention to how critical fans attempt to navigate the positive and negative affective relationships they develop with these shows and visual albums. These critical fans recognize what is pleasurable and generative for them in this content while still holding space for those aspects they dislike or deem unpleasurable. In this way, critical fan tweets help highlight the ambiguity some audiences may feel around engaging with popular Black Feminist content.

While the above tweets focus on how critical fans negotiate the content of popular Black feminist media, other critical fan tweets expressed their lack of pleasure around the artist while also finding pleasure in the content. Tweets such as:

I'm not a big Beyoncé fan, though I've respected her talent for years. 15 min into #LEMONADE and I cannot look away. This is amazing. (@HollyDuGotti)

Okay, so I'm not a Beyoncé fan, but I gave #Lemonade a shot & I respect it. Loved the aesthetics (@shaycotts)

Exemplify how for critical fans, their engagement with this media often implores them to separate the artist from the art as they negotiate their overall assessment of this media.

In the case of *Lemonade*, some critical fan tweets also situated their feelings about the visual album within the context of Beyoncé's past work. For instance, some critical fans tweeted comments such as:

My opinion after listening to #Lemonade twice. The album is great, not a masterpiece on the whole, but superior to Beyoncé (2013)⁴⁷. (@@___gean) I've heard a few songs from #LEMONADE and where is Sasha fierce gone???? Is she dead??? (@tomisfierce)

This latter tweet comparing Beyoncé's presentation of herself in *Lemonade* to her more sexually explicit alter-ego Sasha Fierce highlights how for some fans, their critical engagement stems from their intense fandom. In these cases, fans have trouble negotiating their fandom for Beyoncé's work in the context of her evolved Black feminist representation within *Lemonade*. In this way, these fans' sense-making practices around *Lemonade* are contextualized within the larger history of Beyoncé's image and brand as a celebrity.

⁴⁷This is an English translation of the original Portuguese tweet, which read "Minha opinião após ouvir #Lemonade duas vezes. O álbum é ótimo, não é uma obra-prima no conjunto, mas superior a Beyoncé (2013)."

I argue these critical fan tweets can represent the ambiguity that can permeate audience decoding practices around popular Black feminist content. Within these tweets, audience members publically express the ways they try to hold space for, in some instances, their dislike of the content and their desire to support the Black women and femmes behind this content, or in other cases, their lack of fandom for the Black women and femmes behind this content and enjoyment of the content itself. This ambiguity may result from the ambiguity popular Black feminism, and in particular commercial Black feminism, creates through a dual emphasis on Black feminist representational politics and the commercial, precipitating a bifurcation between someone's reception of the political impulses of the work and the work itself. One could appreciate (or reject) the Black feminist impulses of the work in a way that is separate from the pleasure they derive from engaging with it based on their general expectations of popular media.

Anti-Fans

Just as fans engaged in live-tweeting to express points of joy and pleasure around engaging with this media, anti-fans used live-tweeting as a public forum to express their displeasure with these shows and visual albums. Most often, this displeasure stemmed from a sense that the media in question did not live up to their imagined expectations. For instance, after watching the pilot episode of *ABLSS*, one person tweeted:

Umm I'm rooting for everybody Black, but this was a snoozefest. #ABlackLadySketchShow (@Cookiebaby23)

Thus, this person's dislike of *ABLSS* stems from a comedic expectation this viewer had that the show did not meet. However, despite this person's dislike of *ABLSS*, they still contextualize this dislike within the context of Issa Rae's now well-known quote from the 2017 Emmys red carpet, "I'm rooting for everybody Black," indicating a desire to *want* to like the show. Again, this particular manifestation of anti-fandom may be rooted in the user's own presented identity as a Black woman—while her identification with the characters drives a desire for fandom, her generic dissatisfaction with what she perceives as a lack of humor in a sketch comedy show ultimately led her to anti-fandom.

Further, one viewer of *Dirty Computer* simply wrote:

I guess I'm just not a real #DirtyComputer like I thought I would be. (@musicman128)

Here, the posters use the phrase "thought I would be," signals that this viewer had *expected* to be a fan but disappointingly was not. This incongruence of fan expectations with their experience viewing this media motivates their active anti-fan engagement.

In the context of *Lemonade*, some anti-fan positions seem to develop because they viewed the film as transgressing the established norms of Beyonce as a celebrity and Beyonce fandom. For instance, one viewer tweeted:

Also #Lemonade was more about @Beyoncé than it was fans like you can just tell.. I miss her singing on a good single..on this she has none (@WhtiBeON)

As Jenkins (1992) notes, Fan displeasure and critique often develops when producers go against a show's established norms and conventions. Beyonce's choice to bring her image and work into a different, arguably more Black feminist and artistic direction with the release of *Lemonade* left these fans with a deep displeasure, which resulted in a negative affective reaction to the visual albums.

Just as some viewers' fandom developed around their identification with the characters represented in this media, other viewers' anti-fandom grew out of dissatisfaction with these same representations. For instance, one viewer of *Pose* tweeted:

Pose needs to set the ball world as a richer place — every competition can't come down to Abundance and Evangelista...(@ltg_jon)

In this case, the viewer's anti-fandom manifests from the perception that despite the arguably increased nuanced representation around Black femme, trans, and queer communities, *Pose* still only allows for limited representation through its dichotomous narrative framing between the Abundances and the Evangelistas. Similarly, using representation as the basis for their dislike of *ABLSS*, one anti-fan tweet read:

I just watched a sketch from #ABlackLadySketchShow and I just feel like the show is being catered to white audiences ima watch the whole episode tho before my final verdict (@7Sent_)

Like the tweet about *Pose*, this audience member's anti-fandom is directly connected to their perception that, despite the expansive representation of Black women on the show, the show's overall narrative was still catering to white audiences. In this way, just as identity can be a point of fandom, it can also

serve as a point of anti-fandom, not only highlighting the importance of identity in shaping positions of fandom and anti-fandom but also pointing to how the heterogeneity of positionalities and opinions within these identity communities can produce rich and complimentary critiques of how Black women are represented in popular media.

@US

Fans of popular Black feminist entertainment media use Twitter to engage in social and emotional sense-making around the narratives presented in these television shows and visual albums. Fans used Twitter to negotiate their understanding of the storylines presented within these television shows visual albums, especially as it related to potential points of ambiguity. Additionally, a small handful of viewers also actively used intersectionality or other frameworks of Black feminist theory as a lens through which to frame and convey their understanding of these television shows and visual albums. Thus, while some fans individually and collectively read Black feminist politics into these media texts, there is an ambiguity within the content that gets reproduced for other viewers.

Similar to survey responses in the previous chapter about the role of representational pleasure, the way Black women, femme, and queer folks were represented in these television shows and visual albums, also served as a key point of identification and fandom for those who lived within these real-life communities. In particular, Black women and Black queer women saw the visual albums as offering nuanced representations of Black womanhood and femmness that spoke to their unique lived experiences. However, representations of trans women of color on *Pose* served as a larger source of identification for those within the larger LGBTQIA+ community. Thus, calling upon Wanzo's identity hermeneutic, we can see how the nuanced representation of marginalized positionalities offered by a Black feminist framework opens up the possibility of fandom across a spectrum of possible points of socially positioned identification. Further, while these fans often unequivocally voiced their support, other critical fans engaged in nuance conversations that often highlighted the ambiguity in the messaging of these films, particularly the visual albums as manifestations of commercial Black feminism. In this way, I suggest the ambiguity within this media content that aims to sell Black feminism is often reflected in audience decoding practices as they attempt to sort out this media's underlying impulses and messaging.

Additionally, while the audience survey mainly consisted of audience members who wanted to take the time to think about these television shows and visual albums, potentially indicating a certain level of enjoyment, the co-viewing tweets in this chapter allow us to see negative affective reactions to this media. Often displeasure came from a *desire* to identify with these shows and visual albums that was ultimately disappointed. In this way, identity similarly served as a basis for anti-fandom, or rather, anti-fandom manifested as a critique of the shortcomings some audience members saw this representation offers.

Taken together, the audience responses in the previous chapter, alongside the co-viewing tweets examined in this chapter, offer a nuanced understanding of what happens when Black feminist politics and aesthetics are moved into the space of popular commercial culture. While the agency and positionality of audiences and fans allow them to read these media messages beyond the ambiguity and commercial impulses of these shows to extoll an underlying Black feminist impulse, much of these readings depend on the audience's own positionality. Thus, for some fans and audiences who have less identification and connection to these representations, the nuances of these representations as informed by Black feminist theory may be lost on them, in favor of more general reading of this media or even, in some cases, non-engagement.

Conclusion:

Popular Black Feminism as a Tool of Liberation

a.k.a how we get off Tariq Nasheed's internet

In October 2021, comedian Dave Chappelle released his third Netflix comedy special, *The Closer*. *The Closer* was released two years after Chappelle's previous Netflix special, *Sticks and Stones*, which was widely criticized for transphobic jokes and making light of sexual assault (Hostking, 2019; Obaro, 2019; Romano, 2020; Sippell, 2019). Even other comedians, especially those from the queer community, felt Chappelle's comments were beyond the point of reproach. As Black queer comedian Elsa Waithe tweeted, "For the same reason whites can't say n-word. You don't belong to the group. This is mad simple, not clever and low hanging fruit. Not a good look Dave," attaching to the tweet a clip from the special in which Chappelle said, "Why is it I can say N*GGER with such impunity, but I can't say the word F*GGOT?!" (Waithe, 2019).

The Closer then was, as Chappelle put it in the special, a chance to answer "all these questions you might have had about jokes I've said in the past few years," and in particular, "address the LBGTQ community, directly," (Chappelle, 2021). Unfortunately for Chappelle, these "clarifications," for many, only reinforced the belief that his comedy conveyed homophobic and transphobic views. In the aftermath of the special's release, critics in the popular press once again derided Chappelle for his homophobic and transphobic jokes (Mark, 2021; Stern, 2021). Further, in protest of the specials' continued distribution on the Netflix platforms, dozens of Netflix employees staged a walk-out—using the threat of stopping their labor under capitalism to effect change (Koblin & Sperling, 2021). In response to these protests and the public outcry, in a leaked memo sent to Netflix employees, Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos justified his decision to support the film, writing, "while some employees disagree, we have a strong belief that content on screen doesn't directly translate to real-world harm," and said that "[Netflix is] working hard to ensure marginalized communities aren't defined by a single story. So we have Sex Education, Orange is the New Black, Control Z, Hannah Gadsby, and Dave Chappelle all on Netflix. Key to this is increasing

diversity on the content team itself” (Donnelly, 2021). Netflix employees and LGBTQIA+ media organizations used research to categorically refute Sarandos’ claim that popular media misrepresentations of trans communities don’t lead to real-world harm. Additionally, comedian Hannah Gadsby told Sarandos, “f*ck you and your amoral algorithm” for using her to defend transphobia (Gadsby, 2021). Soros later apologized and retracted his statement. Nonetheless—Sarandos did not take down the special and continued to stand by Chappelle, presumably, because the revenue generated from leaving the special on the platform benefitted him as CEO of the company (Legaspi, 2021).

As a form of popular media, *The Closer* presents a generative space to think about the ways intersectional analysis, consciously or not, is misconstrued to defend systemic hegemony and heteropatriarchy. Throughout the special, Chappelle often tries and fails to deploy a systemic critique of racism to defend his homophobic and transphobic comments. In doing so, Chappelle exposes the potential power of inverted, raced misogynistic logic and what is at stake in how popular Black feminism is constituted and proliferates.

The Closer: A story of failed intersectional analysis

At the beginning of the special, we see a Black man sitting on the floor, flipping through recordings of Chappelle’s stand-up specials. This includes specific shots of *Sticks and Stones* and *The Unforgiven*, in which Chappelle exposed how the industry takes advantage of people and implores his audience to boycott his Central Comedy show, *The Chappelle Show*, until the network gives him the intellectual property rights. These past specials, one critiquing power structures and the other using a platform to make jokes about the LGBTQIA+ community, set the stage for *The Closer*, which the man then pulls from the sleeves and sets on the record player. As the record begins to spin, we hear Tribute*, an ode to recognizing the humanity of others “This is for my favorite band of human beings/ The faithful, the graceful, the tragic, the classic,” by Black Star, consisting of rappers Mos Def and Talib Kweli,⁴⁸ play in the background. We then transition to seeing Chappelle on stage in front of a cheering crowd.

Chappelle spends the first few minutes of the special warming-up. Chappelle discusses why he chose to hold the special in Detroit (because he talked so much shit about Detroit in the last special), the

⁴⁸Rapper Talib Kweli has recently been accused of harassing Black women online (Reese, 2020)

COVID-19 global pandemic, including one arguably racist joke towards Asian people, and a children's book he is writing to teach children about race called "Clifford the big Black n*gger," which tells the story of a large Black man whose white speaking voice allows him to get restaurant reservations over the phone. Still, his presence as a large Black man gets him arrested when he shows up in person.

At this point, Chappelle turns his attention to the "LBGTQ" community. After stating his desire to address this community in the aftermath of his last special, Chappelle assures the audience and viewers, "I want every member of that community to know that I come here tonight in peace, and I hope to negotiate the release of DaBaby." Here, Chappelle refers to rapper DaBaby, who had recently been lambasted for making insensitive comments towards the LGBTQIA+ community during his set at the Rolling Loud music festival⁴⁹ (Price, 2021; Ridner, 2021). Chappelle goes on to say that DaBaby, who had previously shot and killed a Black man in a North Carolina Walmart and come under little to no scrutiny for it, is a good example of how "in our country, you can shoot and kill a n*gger, but you better not hurt a gay person's feelings." In this way, for the next hour, Chappelle's analysis of race and sexuality within the U.S. sets up a dichotomy between being Black and being gay. The rhetoric Chappelle uses is one of "us" and "them," in which "us" or "we" is Black people, the group to which Chappelle belongs, and "them" is the perpetual gay other. Chappelle even asks the crowd outright, "can a gay person be racist," to which there is a resounding "yes," from the audience. It is not for another 10 minutes that Chappelle acknowledges the possibility that a person can be both Black *and* gay.

Throughout the special, it becomes increasingly evident that Chappelle's understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community is tied up in its contemporary neoliberal manifestation, typified by commercial sponsorships and the hypervisibility of white gay men (Chasin, 2000; Nast 2002). For instance, Chappelle suggests "we," Black people are jealous of "them" gay people because of how well their fight for civil rights is going compared to Black people "who have been trapped in this predicament for hundreds of years." This statement seemingly ignores the fact that same-sex marriage was not legalized until 2015 and that still today, LGBTQIA+ people face constant threats to their civil rights and lives

⁴⁹Offensive comments made by DaBaby included "If you didn't show up today with HIV, AIDS, or any of them deadly sexually transmitted diseases, that'll make you die in two to three weeks, then put your cellphone lighter up," and "Fellas, if you ain't suck a n*gga dick in the parking lot, put your cell phone lights in the air. Keep it fucking real"

(Thoreson, 2020; HRC, n.d.). What becomes clear is that Chappelle's assessment of the LGBTQIA+ rights movement is wholly grounded in one particular segment of this community: white, gay men. In comparing the Civil Rights movement to the LGBTQIA+ rights movement, Chappelle says, "I can't help but feel like, if slaves had baby oil and booty shorts, we might have been free 100 years sooner, you know what I mean? If Martin Luther King was like, I want everybody to get up on them floats. And get your bodies good and shiny." Chappelle's understanding of the LGBTQIA+ rights movement is relegated to the commercially-sponsored pride parades attended by sexy men in revealing clothing. Nowhere in his surface-level joke does he stop to consider what other segments of the LGBTQIA+ community face daily, specifically those who are Black and of color, working-class, non-binary, and trans people.

Later on in his show, Chappelle even acknowledges the very different revolutionary roots of the LGBTQIA+ rights movement. Chappelle says while he is not a fan of these "newer gays," he does miss "them old school gays, n*gga. Them Stonewalls n*ggas." they didn't take shit from anybody they fought for their freedom, I respect that shit, I'm not even gay, and I want to be like a Stonewall n*gga." However, instead of using this as a moment to talk about the historical role of Black and of color working-class trans women in leading the movement at Stonewall, Chappelle says he respects "Stonewall gays" because they were "glory hole gays," brave enough to put their penis in a hole and hope for the best. The glory hole, Chappelle says, is why he respects them. In this way, even in his critique of modern queer activism, Chappelle stops short of any systemic critique of capitalism, class, race, or gender and, in doing so, arguably, creates a popular understanding of Stonewall that erases the role of Black and of color trans women.

Then, throughout the rest of the special, Chappelle explains that his issue is not with the LGBTQIA community, but specifically with how white people within the LGBTQIA people deploy their whiteness to harm Black people. For instance, in one example, Chappelle tells the story of a time he confronted what he describes as a "a big, white, corn-fed, Texas, homosexual" for trying attempting to have his friend provoke Chappelle in a bar and then film it, presumably to post on the internet. In his recount of the incident, Chappelle says he walked up to the man holding the phone and called him a "bitch ass n*gger" before realizing the man was gay, causing the man to become offended. Chappelle, thinking the man is

about to fight him, mocks his flamboyant dress and affect, remarking on the man's full hand of painted fingernails and mocking how his shirt was tied in a knot, showing his midriff. As Chappelle recalls, "right when you think we would fight, guess what he did? He picked up his phone, and he called the police," he continues, "this thing I'm describing is a major issue that I have with that community. Gay people are minorities until they need to be white again." However, at this point, Chappelle acknowledges potential racial differences within the monolithic "gay community," as he notes, "a Black gay person would have never done that to me."

In his telling of the story, Chappelle takes a systemic analysis of the unequal power between white and Black people within the U.S. to unpack his critique of the LGBTQIA+ community. In thinking about the positionality of white gay men, Chappelle calls our attention to how, despite being gay, this man's white privilege still allows him to yield a certain amount of power in society to further oppress Chappelle as a Black man. Chappelle mobilizes an intersectional critique to highlight how white gay men's proximity to white supremacy, specifically the state-backed power of the police and criminal justice system, allows them to be complicit in the further oppression of Black people. For Chappelle, the lesson from this story is not about his interaction with one white gay man—it is about assessing people's relationship to power and privilege through this interaction. At the same time, by making fun of the man in question, Chappelle ultimately undercuts the strength of his argument. By defining and mocking this man's gayness by attaching it to his effeminate choice of dress, in the form of his nails and shirt, Chappelle makes gay men and their deviance from heteronormativity the butt of the joke. In this case, Chappelle leveraged his own privilege as a cisgender, straight male to reinforce pervasive and negative stereotypes about gay men. However, the irony of this seems to be lost on Chappelle.

Later in the special, Chappelle again invokes an arguably Black feminist critique of white feminism and the #MeToo Movement. To frame his critique, Chappelle announces to his audience that, to his surprise, according to the Webster's dictionary definition, he is a feminist: a human being that believes in equal rights for women; and not, as he originally thought, a "frumpy d*ke." Chappelle then uses his newfound label as a feminist to discuss how he wanted to go to the 2016 Women's March but couldn't find anyone to go with him. In particular, he recalls texting his friend Anj, described as a Black woman

comedy writer, if she was going to the march. Anj texted back, "I hope those white bitches get tear gassed." Chappelle then notes:

There's a problem in that feminist movement, isn't there? From its inception in America, there's always been a racial component. When Susan B. Anthony was having that meeting, and Sojourner Truth's black ass showed up... all those white women asked Sojourner Truth not to speak. They didn't want to conflate the issues of women's rights and slavery. But you know how Black bitches are; Sojourner Truth went up there anyway. She did a famous speech. She said, "Ain't I a woman. "

Here, Chappelle calls on a critical moment in Black feminist intellectual production to get the audience to question the relationship between mainstream feminism and whiteness. As Chappelle highlights, the mainstream women's rights movement in America has historically focused on white, middle-class women (Davis, 1989). Deploying this critique in his assessment of the #MeToo movement, Chappelle highlights how their strategy of visibility, such as showing up to the Golden Globes in all Black and wearing crochet pussy hats, did, in his estimation, little to help non-rich, non-white working-class women. Once again, invoking a comparison to the Civil Rights Movement, Chappelle retorts, "You think Martin Luther King's gonna be like, "I want everybody to keep riding the bus, but wear matching outfits. You gotta get off the bus and walk." Instead, Chappelle suggests, all of the celebrity women who were a part of the movement should each fire their agents, go to the mailroom of one of these big agencies, find a woman "bustin' her hump in there," and say "if you want to talk to us, then you have to talk to her." That way, "nobody would get fed to Harvey Weinstein." The joke then ends with Chappelle saying, based on his suggestion, that for the feminist movement to be successful, they should choose him as their new male leader because he is "the one who got off the bus and left \$50 million on the bus and walked."⁵⁰ In return, all they have to do is suck his d*ck—landing them back at square one.

Despite starting with a quite interesting, nuanced critique of the lack of attention to the structural differences created by race and class in the mainstream white feminist movements, Chappelle ultimately winds the audience and viewers down a path that lands in misogyny. Chappelle does not highlight that the phrase "Me Too," was initially created by a Black woman, Tamara Burke, or how sexual harassment and violence differentially impact women based on race and class (Armstrong, Gleckman-Kurt, & Johnson,

⁵⁰Here, Chappelle appears to be referring to his decision to not renew his Comedy Central show, *The Chappelle Show*, for a third season, resulting in a loss of \$50 million contract.

2018; Brockes, 2018). Instead, Chappelle uses his large platform to erase and elide these nuances that would potentially offer a generative critique of white feminism, opting instead to center himself in the narrative as a Black man, seemingly unaware of his male privilege. He does not stop to consider that it may, in fact, be his own sense of privilege as both a man and someone who, admittedly, had had "\$10 million in the bank" that allowed him to feel comfortable with walking away from a \$50 million deal (Yahr, 2014). Further, it is unclear if a "woman bustin' her ass," in the mailroom of *Comedy Central* or anyone person with less material power than him at the organization benefited from his decision. Ultimately, as Chappelle noted in *The Unforgiven*, even after leaving, the network still profited from his show because they retained rights over the intellectual property. In this way, while Chappelle fancies himself a revolutionary within his narrative, his resolution to larger concerns of racism was to remove himself from the situation in a way that absolved him from individual guilt but did little to dismantle larger systemic harms in the entertainment industry.

Finally, at this point in the special, Chappelle turns to the "crux" of the issue: gender identity. Within this conversation, Chappelle frames himself as the victim of a targeted attack and misplaced anger of the transgender community, noting, "These transgenders... these n*ggas want me dead. Every time I come out on stage, I be scared. I be lookin' around the crowd searching for knuckles and Adams apples to see where the threats may be coming from." Thus, we as the audience are now to believe that Chappelle, a celebrity with a large platform, is being oppressed by the collective transgender community. According to Chappelle, his thoughts on the trans community were "misrepresented" in a "gay newspaper" 16 years ago, and ever since, people within the LGBTQIA+ have all turned to this same article to unfoundedly criticize his work. While constantly repeating he is "not indifferent to people's suffering," because we all suffer on a human level, Chappelle continues to invoke the "we" versus "them" dichotomy to minimize the struggles of transgender Americans. Chappelle tells the story of an altercation he had with a transgender woman in a bar. During the conversation, the woman kept referring to the trans community as "her people." Taking issue with this point, Chappelle retorted, "what do you mean your people? Were y'all kidnapped in Transylvania and brought here as slaves?"...I looked at them gay Black dudes like... is there anything? You n*ggas need to tell this bitch?" Again, Chappelle calls on what he sees as a direct comparison of

power differentials between the Black community and the transgender community to suggest that being part of the transgender community is a choice, whereas being part of the Black community is not.

Again, for Chappelle, this issue comes back to whiteness and what he believes is the trans community's proximity to white supremacy or the question of "why is it easier for Bruce Jenner to change his gender than for Cassius Clay to change his name?" Chappelle denies claims that he "punches down" on LGBTQIA+ people and instead suggests the trans community as a tool of white supremacy used to "punch down" on the Black man. As Chappelle argues, "I have been arguing with the whites my entire career; and just when I thought I had you guys on the ropes, you changed all the rules. "Oh yeah?" deepening the tenor of his voice Chappelle responds to himself, "Yeah, motherf*cker. Well, I'm a girl now, n*gger, and you must treat me as such." It is at this point Chappelle reveals he supports the position of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs).⁵¹ Chappelle then ends his special by talking about connecting with people on a *human level* by telling the story of his friend Daphne, a transgender comedian, who killed herself days after defending Chappelle online in the wake of *Sticks and Stones*. "Empathy is not gay. Empathy is not Black. Empathy is bisexual, It must go both ways," Chappelle states. Chappelle then reinforces his point about the link between the transgender community and white supremacy, "LBGTQ, L-M-N-O-P-Q-Y-Z it is over. I'm not telling another joke about you until we are both sure that we are laughing together. ... All I ask from your community, with all humility, will you please stop punching down on my people."

Here, Chappelle deploys a systemic racial critique of whiteness to mask the harmful, transphobic belief that gender is a choice, transgender people choose to be trans, and that being a woman is inherently tied to being biologically female. The argument that non-heteronormativity is a tool of white supremacy sent to cast aspersions on the Black man is not new. In Dwight McBride's (1998) reading of psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing's Freudian assessment of Black homosexuality as a condition of Black men in the U.S., and

⁵¹Chappelle categorically announces his support for the position taken up by Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs), that gender is a biological fact, arguing "[cis gender women] look at transgender women the way we Blacks may look at black face. it offends them." Chappelle claims his right to speak on this issue "as a feminist," to defend this position "from a [cis gender] woman's perspective," which in this case amounts to speaking for and over cis gender women, and assumes, that any access to privilege by transgender women such as Jenner would offend [cis gender] women. He knows this because, it is how he would feel if Eminem won "N*gger of the year," at the BET awards. Within his speech, Chappelle constantly conflates sex and gender, and links womanhood to anatomically having a vagina and being able to have a period.

not the original Black African, he notes how Welsing's analysis, like Chappelle's, frames homosexuality and non-heteronormativity as a tool of white supremacy, making it so Blackness must stand in opposition to non-heteronormativity. This, McBride suggests, is what happens when we privilege race over any other system of oppression in understanding people's lived experiences and relationships to power. As McBride argues, "understanding of Black oppression that makes it possible, and worse permissible, to endorse at any level sexism, elitism or heterosexism is a vision of black culture that is finally not politically consummate with liberation" (p. 5).⁵² By choosing to situate his critique from an anti-racist standpoint, as opposed to an overtly homophobic one, I suggest Chappelle can give the rhetorical appearance that he is employing a larger systemic critique of whiteness. However, in actuality, Chappelle chooses to ignore his privilege as a wealthy, heterosexual man with a television special and uses his platform to make fun of transgender people and perpetuate the harmful stereotypes about people within the LGBTQIA+ community.

I argue *The Closer* is a story of failed popular intersectional analysis. Throughout the special, Chappelle aims to level a systemic raced, classed, and gendered critique of the women's and LGBTQIA+ movements and the transgender community. However, instead of taking these critiques to their full potential of revealing how different people's positionality as they relate to sites of power must inform our understanding of society, Chappelle often opts to center himself in the narrative as the most oppressed person: the Black man. In ignoring his own relationship to privilege, Chappelle inevitably ends up reproducing sexist, misogynistic, and transphobic rhetorics that simultaneously erase the histories and work of Black women, femme, and queer folks. Instead of looking to the disruptive fugitivity of Blackness and transness under white supremacy and cis sexism, Chappelle instead opts to present in opposition to this possibility by conjoining his Blackness with transphobia and homophobia (Bey, 2017).

As a form of popular media, the harmful rhetoric and ways of thinking Chappelle produces throughout the special have a wide impact. While arguably, the fact that *The Closer* is distributed on a streaming platform means people can choose not to watch it, I argue the film's impact on popular culture, evidenced through its wide circulation via the popular press and social media, define it as a mass circulated piece

⁵²Some previous scholars have also linked this form of anti-racism to the Black church (Ward, 2005).

of media. Even if you did not watch *The Closer*, its message became ubiquitous. Additionally, while the proprietary nature of Netflix streaming data makes the profitability of *The Closer* hard to prove outright, the fact that the film remained on the Netflix platform despite public outcry speaks volumes about its market value for the streaming company. The profitability of Chappelle, and his content, is also evidenced by the fact that since the release of *The Closer*, Netflix announced Chappelle would be headlining their LA-based comedy festival, "Netflix is a Joke," and that the company would be partnering with the comedian to direct and produce four more comedy specials (Hibberd, 2022).⁵³ I argue it is this rhetoric presented in *The Closer* that popular Black feminism can work to help us unravel.

How we use Popular Black Feminism [to stay on Beyoncé's Internet]

The Closer is only one example of a growing number of popular media that employ a systemic analysis of race, gender, and class to promote sexism and homophobia. As popular Black feminism grows, so does the number of Black male-centered Youtube shows and podcasts that deploy misogyny and homophobia towards Black women, femme, and queer folks, as a part of what has been dubbed "the Black manosphere," part of the internet where Black men feed into and perpetuate misogynoir logics in the name of Black liberation (West, 2022; Young, 2022). As these media forms circulate throughout popular discourse, they reinforce and reproduce the logic of white supremacy, misogyny, and homophobia through systemic critiques framed as anti-racism. Thus, parallel to how Banet-Weiser (2018) parallels the growth of popular feminism with popular misogyny, I see a corollary between popular Black feminism and the popular media circulating within this Black manosphere. However, in this case, popular Black feminism and misogynistic anti-racist discourse, hotepery, and rhetorics of the Black macho have always existed in tandem—they have just now both moved into the space of popular media (Wallace, 1999).

I contend Popular Black feminism has the potential to give audiences of popular media the tools to unravel the logics Chappelle creates. For instance, we can juxtapose how Chappelle mobilizes anti-racist misogyny to *A Black Lady's Sketch Show's* use of satire to critique misogynoir through characters like Dr. Haddassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman Pre-PhD. For instance, in a skit from *ABLSS's* second season Dr. Haddassah, played by Robin Thede, hosts an internet talks show called "Black Table Talk," a play

⁵³These specials will be hosted by Chappelle but feature other veteran comedians Chappelle endorses.

on Jada Pinket Smith's Facebook show *Red Table Talk*. Dr. Haddassah frames the show for the viewer as "the only place on Tariq Nasheed's Internet where we can have an honest conversation;" a direct play on the phrase "not on Beyoncé's internet," often meant to call out egregious acts of misogynoir online and in popular culture, but with Beyoncé's name replaced with that of a well-known internet anti-racist misogynist. In the skit, Dr. Haddassah interviews actress Gabrielle Union, or, as she is labeled in the lower third, "subservient African queen." After Dr. Haddassah gives an extended introduction, the interview begins as such:

Dr. Haddassah: Anyway, welcome to the show. It says here now that you're an actress, an author, a television host, a fashion designer, and a spokeswoman.

Gabrielle: Thank you.

Dr. Haddassah: Why so many jobs, and how does your husband deal with this betrayal?

Gabrielle: Betrayal? Um—I think my husband appreciates a woman...

Dr. Haddassah: *oh*

Gabrielle: I'm sorry. Female

Dr. Haddassah: Thank you.

Gabrielle: That makes her own money, is incredibly flexible, and still is able to raise a family.

Dr. Haddassah: I'm glad you said that. Now everybody knows, there are many factors working towards the destruction of the Black family. Number one: wedge sneakers. Number two: working women.

From this short excerpt, we can see how the back and forth between Union and Thede calls into question anti-racist logic that necessitates heteronormativity, misogyny, and, especially as it relates to *The Closer*, an insistence on the connection between biological sex and gender. A logic that requires, as Dr. Haddassah puts it, "us versus them, and you know who them is." Suppose audiences can read these nuances and Black-feminist informed messages within popular Black media. In that case, they can deploy them as a way to counter and resist the logics media like *The Closer* poses.

Similarly, Black feminist journalism can also be mobilized to help audience understand and contextualize the nuances of popular Black misogyny, if you will. In an episode of *Zora's Daughters*, entitled "Villain Origins Story," James and Tynes use the word patriarchy and Michelle Wallace's *Black macho and the myth of superwoman* (1999) to discuss the Black manosphere. In the conversation, the pair use Wallace's notion of the "Black Macho," a type of hypermasculinity born from parts of the Civil Rights movement and Black power movement that used white (racist) analysis of the Black community by white men, such as Norman Mailer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, to craft a form of Black liberation that solely centers the prosperity of Black man as a precursor for the Black Manosphere. As the pair explains to their audiences, these writings drew on sexist tropes to frame the Black man as hypersexual and constrained in their masculinity by the Black woman. However, as leaders in the Black power movement take up these writings as a way to forge a version of Black masculinity, they inevitably reproduce the white supremacist logics which undergrid these arguments and oppress Black women and queer folks. This critique then becomes a jumping-off point for the pair to discuss anti-racist misogynistic logics mobilized by the Black manosphere in popular culture today.

In both instances, popular Black feminism takes up a Black feminist critique of systemic oppression and anti-racist misogyny and homophobia to foreground comedy and news, respectively. Thus, if audiences of media can decode the nuances of these messages, both implicit and explicit, they can also use them to deconstruct media that perpetuates popular Black misogyny. However, as my findings from Part III suggest, while popular Black feminist media, especially popular Black feminist entertainment media, may circulate broadly throughout society, it is often those from within Black women, femme, and queer communities, that most readily read the Black feminist critique embedded in these shows. These audiences, in particular, often overlook the potential neoliberal limitations the how these media are framed in favor of a more generous Black feminist reading. However, these readings may be less apparent for white, heteronormative audiences, who can still enjoy and find pleasure in this media without identifying a larger, systemic critique.

The commercial nature of popular media either, which in the case of Black feminist journalism, makes it harder to circulate, or in the case of Commercial Black feminism, which makes its Black feminist impulses harder to decode, inevitably impacts the Black feminist impulses of this media. Thus, I argue popular Black feminism may be limited in its ability to counteract popular circulations of anti-racist based misogyny and homophobia. However, despite this potential limitation, I also suggest popular Black feminism as a framework for understanding the world can also be paired with a constellation of other tools of contemporary Black feminism, such as Moya Bailey's digital alchemy (2021) and Catherine Knight Steele's Digital Black feminism (2021) as frameworks and pathways for resisting misogynoir and homophobia. However, unlike these tools, which intentionally were made to exist within counter-public communities, popular Black feminism moves between public and counterpublic communities and discourses, offering these tools to niche and *mass audiences*.

Neoliberalism & the Fugitive Power of Popular Black Feminism

More broadly, this project sought to understand what gets produced when Black feminism overlaps with neoliberalism in the context of popular media. Through interviews with Black feminist news creators and close readings of television shows and visual albums that employ a Black feminist lens to represent Black women, femmes, and queer folks, I found that across these media spaces, similar strategies are used to encode Black feminist ideas, concepts, and aesthetics. Notably, the producers of these media texts often aim to highlight the nuanced, dynamic, and heterogeneity of identities and positionalities embedded within Black women, femme, and queer communities. In this way, these producers actively push against a history of monolithic stereotypes that have dominated both news and entertainment media depictions of these communities. However, Black feminist ideas, concepts, and aesthetics often need to be made more marketable to the neoliberal consumer. While Black feminist journalists often sacrifice marketability for their Black feminist praxis, television shows and visual albums often have to embed these representations within more neoliberal framings, or risk divestment from larger network support and mass, white audiences. In this sense, popular Black feminism has the potential to inadvertently misconstrue Black feminism as an issue of individual representation and diversity, as opposed to mobilizing the experiences of these communities to found a larger systemic critique of systems of power.

In this way, I argue the structures of popular media, as a form of commercial media for the masses, in some sense, necessarily limit its use as a medium for spreading liberatory rhetoric. Yet and still, the fact that audiences from marginalized communities are often able to read past the neoliberal to engage with the larger systemic critique provides some evidence that popular media can become a tool to critique systemic inequity and mobilize popular conversations around racism, sexism, and homophobia. Further, the mass scale on which this media is disseminated more readily gives historically marginalized and oppressed marginalized communities access to these tools and concepts through which they can work to deconstruct the logic that propagate systemic, intersectioning forms of oppression.

At the same time, popular Black feminism may not be a mobilizing tool for all, as its neoliberal-impulses often allow those in positions and positionalities of power to overlook the revolutionary potential embedded in this media. Yet this "strategic ambiguity" of popular Black feminism may also be its source of power, as it allows structural critique and revolutionary epistemologies to proliferate in ways that can go undetected by those in positions of powers. While on the one hand, this may mean popular Black feminism, in the end, may not bring Black feminism as a tool of liberation to *all* people; the ambiguous nature of popular Black feminism as explored in this project also opens up the possibility of popular Black feminism as a subversive tool of liberation. As Black feminist scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (1997) and Simone Browne (2018) have noted, historically under systems of oppression Black people have found ways to obfuscate, supplant, and evade these sites of power all while under the gaze of the oppressor. Thus, if we think of the ambiguity of popular Black feminism as a form of fugitivity, it then becomes a tool through which Black women, femme, and queer folks are able to use mass and popular media forms to spread Black feminist laboratory messages on a level never-before seen; showing all marginalized peoples how we can, eventually, in the words of the Combahee River Collective "get free."

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- The Game S1-3 - Aug 15
- Sister Sister - Sept 1
- Girlfriends - Sept 11
- The Parkers - Oct 1
- Half & Half - Oct 15
- One on One - Oct 15
- To celebrate, here's a message from your faves: Retrieved from:<https://twitter.com/strongblacklead/status/1288489544770129920>
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Appendix

Table 1. Black Feminist Journalism Study Participants

Interviewee Name	Outlet Name	Medium	Role
Raqiyah Mays	Real Black News with Raqiyah Mays	Podcast	Creator & Host
Morgan Johnson	The TriiBe	Website	Co-Founder & Creative Director
Ashley Tribble	P Power Radio	Podcast	Creator & Host
Anna DeShawn	Anna DeShawn & The Q Crew	Radio Show/Podcast	Creator & Co-Host
Ally Hickson	Unbothered, Refinery 29	Instagram/Website	Creator & Former Editor
Kayla Lopes	Back Talk	Podcast	Creator & Co-Host
Julia Clemons	Back Talk	Podcast	Creator & Co-Host
Diamond Stylez (Collier)	Marsha's Plate	Podcast	Creator & Co-Host
Jill	Red Table Talk	Digital Talkshow	Associate Producer
Tressie Mcmillan Cottom	Hear to Slay	Podcast	Co-creator & Co-Host
Nickecia Alder	Black Girl Fly Magazine (BGF Mag)	Website/Blog	Creator & Editor
Asa Todd	Black Girl Missing Podcast	Podcast	Co-creator & Co-Host
Tanya Christian	Essence Magazine	Magazine	News & Politics Editor
Sunnivie Bydum	Yes! Magazine	Print/Web	Editorial Director
Shairina Brown	Intersectional Media	Podcast	Creator & Co-Host
Sam Crabbe	Intersectional Media	Podcast	Co-Host
Mia Thornton	Go Off, Sis	Podcast	Creator & Host
Chelsea Sanders	Go Off, Sis/ Refinery 29's Unbothered	Podcast/ Instagram/ Website	Host & VP, Brand Strategy and Development
Clarissa Brooks	n/a	Web	Freelancer
Ashton Lattimore	Prism	Website	Editor-in-Chief
Andrea Butler	Sesi Mag	Print/Web	Creator & Editor-in-Chief
Carmen Phillips	Autostraddle	Website	Interim Editor-in-Chief
Zuva Seven	An Injustice!	Medium Website	Editor-in-Chief
Danielle Moodie	Woke AF	Podcast	Creator & Host
Melissa Brown	Black Feminisms	Website	Creator
Andrea González-Ramírez	GEN	Medium Website	Staff writer
Alyssa James	Zora's Daughter	Podcast	Co-Creator & Co-Host
Brendanne Tynes	Zora's Daughter	Podcast	Co-Creator & Co-Host

Table 2. Audience Survey Respondents Demographic Information

Respon- dent	Race	Gender	Sexuality	Class
R1	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R2	White	Cisgender Man	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R3	White,Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R4	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R5	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Working Class
R6	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Upper-Middle Class
R7	White	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Upper Class
R8	White	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R9	Indigenous/Native American	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Upper-Middle Class
R10	Indigenous/Native American	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Upper-Middle Class
R11	White	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R12	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Working Class
R13	Black	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Middle Class
R14	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R15	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Working Class
R16	Asian	Nonbinary Femme	Heterosexual	Upper-Middle Class
R17	White	Nonbinary Femme	Bisexual	Middle Class
R18	White	Genderqueer	Homosexual	Middle Class
R19	Indigenous/Native American	Cisgender Woman	Pansexual	Working Class
R20	White	Nonbinary Masc	Not listed	Working Class
R21	Black	Nonbinary Femme	Pansexual	Upper-Middle Class
R22	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R23	Black	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R24	Black	Nonbinary Femme	Non-defined	Middle Class
R25	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R26	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Upper-Middle Class
R27	Black	Transgender Woman	Bisexual	Middle Class
R28	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R29	Black	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual	Middle Class
R30	Black	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Upper-Middle Class
R31	Black	Genderqueer	Non-defined	Lower-Middle Class
R32	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Working Class
R33	Black	Nonbinary Femme	Bisexual	Upper-Middle Class
R34	White Latinx	Nonbinary Masc	Pansexual	Upper-Middle Class
R35	White	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Upper-Middle Class
R36	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander,White Latinx	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R37	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R38	Black	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Working Class
R39	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R40	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R41	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R42	White,Indigenous/Native American	Cisgender Man	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R43	Black,Indigenous/Native American	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class

R44	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R45	Black	Transgender Woman	Bisexual	Middle Class
R46	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Lower-Middle Class
R47	Black	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Working Class
R48	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R49	Black	Genderqueer	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R50	Black	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Middle Class
R51	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R52	Black,Non-White Latinx	Cisgender Woman	Homosexual	Middle Class
R53	Black	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	Middle Class
R54	Black	Genderqueer	Not listed	Middle Class


```
46 rule = gen_rule_payload(SEARCH_QUERY,
47                         results_per_call=RESULTS_PER_CALL,
48                         from_date=FROM_DATE,
49                         to_date=TO_DATE
50                         )
51
52 rs = ResultStream(rule_payload=rule,
53                  max_results=MAX_RESULTS,
54                  **premium_search_args)
55
56 with open(FILENAME, 'a', encoding='utf-8') as f:
57     n = 0
58     for tweet in rs.stream():
59         n += 1
60         if n % PRINT_AFTER_X == 0:
61             print('{0}: {1}'.format(str(n), tweet['created_at']))
62             json.dump(tweet, f)
63             f.write('\n')
64 print('done')
```
