

The Black Woman that Media Built: Content Creation, Interpretation, and the Making of the
Black Female Self

by

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For the women who shared their testimonies, and to those who dare to listen

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Abstract

This study is a qualitative, womanist inquiry into the ways that black women engage media texts through their interpretive work and through content creation. The study explores the media landscape, the interconnected domain of commercial and non-commercial media texts, as both a place where black women perform the self and a place where the black female self takes shape. Interpreting mediated scripts of black womanhood is also a profound practice where black women co-construct what it means to be a black woman. Hence, this study is concerned with the interactive processes of meaning making—that is, understanding representations of black womanhood—and identity formation, or understanding and defining black womanhood at large.

The media texts considered in this study include television, film, radio, print and online platforms. Black women's interpretations of media and their social experiences, especially with other black women, constitute a matrix of influence that black women draw from as they define and negotiate performances of the black female self. This study attends to that matrix as a circuit of culture: media, sociocultural value systems such as religion, and interaction with an interpretive community of other black women. The study is based on interview data from 30 black women: 15 are professional content creators, 15 are audience members.

Taken together, the study offers expanded insights for defining complex media engagement practices among audiences. Specifically, the data speak to the ways in which black women have become experts at making do—manipulating a problematic media landscape to satisfy yearnings for role models, and for a space to testify to their own personal understandings of black womanhood. Through their testimonies study participants demonstrate the need to consider web-based content creation as a form of meaningful identity management that is enhanced, and not sullied, by the interactive capacities of an audience.

Introduction

Scripting Black Womanhood

An intriguing pattern in U.S. news media regarding professional black women emerged in the years from 2008-14—there were a lot of them. These women held titles like attorney, teacher, writer, and engineer; they were attractive and compelling on screen and in print. The reason they had become the center of multiple headlines, however, was not because of what they had achieved, but because of what they lacked. In 2006, the U.S. Census Bureau released data from its American Community Survey showing that 45 percent of black women in the country had never been married.¹ The trend was said to be most prevalent among black women who were also professionals with college degrees and careers, a combination that some suggested caused them to delay marriage and motherhood. It was Hannah Brueckner, a sociology professor and researcher at Yale University, who linked the census data to attainment of post-secondary education, and she declared in 2009 that professional black women’s achievements had “come...at the cost of marriage and family” (Yale University 2009). Thus black women found themselves, yet again, at the center of a crisis concerning the black family, and like so many times before, it was all their fault.

Public discourse explains the problem of black female achievement as two-fold: (1) it supersedes black male progress, and (2) it allows black women access to power and authority not traditionally associated with femininity. Such attitudes can be traced back to Daniel Patrick

¹ The census data only captures black women of a specific age group, 25-28. When considering the percentage of black women who have never been married up to the age of 55, the numbers decrease dramatically to 13 percent. See Stanley 2011.

Moynihan’s 1965 report on African American families which attributed social and economic impoverishment in black communities to female-headed households, increased female-over-male achievement, and “reversed roles of husband and wife” (Moynihan). Black women are allowed to be successful, but not so successful that they alter their tastes and preferences regarding romantic partnerships, that they reimagine a life outside of the confines of heterosexual marriage and motherhood, or that they indulge desires without regard for how they impact the rest of the black community. The rhythm of racial uplift has always required that black women move to the beat of a patriarchal drum. When black women seem to have lost the beat, media content emerges to amplify the rhythm—and to muffle any deviant tunes.

Table 1 News Coverage of Black Female Singledoom²

TITLE	OUTLET	DATE
Marriage Eludes High-Achieving Black Women	NBCNews.com	Aug. 2009
Single, Black, Female—And Plenty of Company	ABC Nightline	Dec. 2009
Why Can’t a Successful Black Woman Find a Man?	ABC Nightline	April 2010
Single Moms Raising Girls to Remain Single?	Cnn.com	May 2010
High-Achieving Black Women and Marriage: Not Choosing or Not Chosen?	Psychology Today	June 2010
Black Women See Fewer Black Men at the Altar	NYTimes.com	June 2010
An Update From the Frontlines of Romance	LATimes.com	June 2010
Sex and the Single Black Woman: How the Mass Incarceration of Black men Hurts Black Women	The Economist	April 2010
Does the Black Church Keep Black Women Single?	Cnn.com	Aug. 2010
Unmarried Black Women: Down or Out?	The Economist	Oct. 2011
Black, Female and Single	NYTimes.com	Dec. 2011

² Table 1.1 represents a random sampling of titles from news coverage of unmarried black women from 2009 to 2014.

No Scrubs? The Dilemma of Modern African American Women	NYPost.com	Nov. 2014
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Comedians, little known actors, and filmmakers emerged as some of the self-appointed experts who would offer black women guidance out of the so-called darkness of single-*doom*, and into the light of traditional black family units. Media personality Steve Harvey, who began his media career as a stand-up comedian, was one of the figures correcting black women; first in the Strawberry Letter segment of his nationally-syndicated radio show, and later in a book and film franchise and a nationally-syndicated talk show. Harvey used his brash sense of humor and the experience gained through three marriages to counsel black women. *ABC News* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* are a couple of the outlets that offered Harvey additional platforms to broadcast his instructions. The common threads of Harvey’s messages were always explicit: a) black women’s professional success has caused them to establish unattainable and inappropriate demands for potential black male partners, and b) the crisis of black female single-*doom* can only be eradicated by self-improvement among black women. The unique ingredients that made Harvey’s prescriptions easier to swallow were humor and casual references to God.³ His was a proven strategy—one similar to that used by Tyler Perry.

The billion-dollar Tyler Perry media empire was built, brick by brick, from profits earned in selling problematic fictional black female characters to real black female audiences. In the average Tyler Perry film, black women are cast as sin-sick damsels who are miserable and in the midst of a crisis. In most cases the women are suffering from pain at the hands of a man—sexual assault, physical and verbal abuse, infidelity. Yet, the balm in Gilead⁴ for these women is always

³ See Steve Harvey Credits God for Career During Emotional Final Comedy Show (Thomasos 2012), and *Steve Harvey and the Enterprise of Black Female Discipline* (Williams 2012).

⁴ The Christian hymn, “Balm in Gilead” describes the redemptive power of salvation through Jesus Christ. Through his sacrifice, all sinners, are healed and made whole.

a man whose romantic partnership elevates them out of their miserable circumstances, and heals their hearts and souls. Much like Jesus Christ, these valiant black men—who are almost always blue collar men that work with their hands—make grand gestures of love despite resistance from the female protagonists. If the women choose the right romantic partner, they find redemption. If not, such as the Judith character from Tyler Perry's 2013 release *Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor*, they wind up damned to single-doom for life.

Under different historical circumstances, it would seem ironic that these two black men, Steve Harvey and Tyler Perry, would find an audience among black women—or that they would even seek out black female audiences given the horrors facing black men in America. Yet, in this country, black women are expected to submit themselves to the control of black men for the sake of the race (Hill Collins 2000). In addition, black women are perpetually cast as a scheming Eve, destined to bear the weight of society's ills (West 2000). In the contemporary media landscape, control over black women is wielded through self-help content like Steve Harvey's *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* franchise, and romantic dramas like Tyler Perry's *Daddy's Little Girls*. When black women fail to submit, dominant media portrayals suggest that the black community and even all of society may suffer.

Black bitches, gold diggers, and jezebels are some of the most prominent foils of black womanhood that demonstrate to black women, and the world, the supposed outcomes of unbridled black female desire. Reality television shows like *Love & Hip-Hop* and *Basketball Wives* (VH1) send the message that when black women become too focused on wealth they often stoop to unethical means to attain it, and end up becoming cold and heartless. Even if they manage to attain professional success, *Scandal* (ABC), *Being Mary Jane* (BET), and *The*

Ultimate Merger (TV One) have taught us that black women will likely become emotionally inept and even more prone to sexual promiscuity.

Indeed, the media landscape has long been a site of struggle between black women and the groups and institutions that have sought to control them, leaving little room for black women to imagine or realize the black female self on their own terms. In the midst of said struggle, black women have developed a variety of protective and proactive strategies to contest the mediated representations that situate them as pawns in a larger machine serving whiteness and/or masculinity. The myriad ways in which black women have sought to stake claim to their own public narratives is a testament to their creativity and resilience. This study is an inquiry into said ways of making do—of how black women make meaning of, and negotiate, definitions of the black female self.

At stake in this study is an overarching definition of who black women are, and what they are capable of. Joke Hermes explains that “cultural resources,” in this case the scripts available in the vast media landscape, are the building blocks used in identity formation (71). Hence, meaning making and the making of the self are interwoven processes. The self is understood as a “reflexive project” that is collaborative, ongoing, and fluid (Giddens 75). As black women make sense of mediated scripts of black womanhood, both individually and in collaboration with others, they are also establishing the terms of how they will define and perform black womanhood in their own lives.

Research Questions and Central Focus

Collectively, the four questions that guide this study explore the ways in which black women engage and understand the spectrum of mediated content that offers them lifestyle

guidance, and the impact of the content creators that seek to facilitate said processes of meaning making and identity formation. In this study, I consider meaning making across multiple platforms that incite a variety of engagement techniques (e.g., reading, viewing, and listening). Rather than focus on the differences in interpretive strategies from one medium to another, this study engages the ways that audiences think across these platforms and derive resources for co-constructing the black female self with each other. I have used the data collected in this study to answer the following four research questions:

1. What meanings do black women bring to and take away from culturally specific media texts as presented in their media landscape?
2. What everyday literacies (i.e., social competencies) do black women cultivate through their dialogic media interpretation practices?
3. How do commercial media institutions approach representations of black womanhood, and how do these content creators relate to black female audiences?
4. How do black women understand (e.g., name, define, and distinguish) presentations of black womanhood, and how do they perform black womanhood through their media engagement practices?

The research questions have been constructed with the understanding that media work in conjunction with pre-existing internal and external factors, such as family values, personal experiences, and community expectations as building blocks of black womanhood. In other words, black women's interpretations of media and their social experiences, especially with other black women, constitute a circuit of influence that black women draw from as they construct and perform the black female self. This study attends to multiple nodes of that circuit. For example, study participants explain how like-minded women in their interpretive communities, their formal training in feminist theory, and their faith-based understandings of virtue impact which media texts they choose to engage and how they read those texts. Furthermore the research

questions also take seriously black women's ways of knowing, or literacies, which they bring to bear on media texts.

Ultimately, these foundational research questions inform an inquiry that explores how black women make do—how they manipulate a problematic media landscape to satisfy yearnings for role models, and for a space to testify to their own personal understandings of black womanhood. Importantly, external forces and actors moderate the relationship between black women and the media landscape. That is to say that family, community, the members of one's social network, and media institutions intervene in black women's process of defining and performing black womanhood, making it complex and collaborative in nature. Still, the process of constructing the black female self is not wholly preempted by commercial media. Indeed, this study shows that the relationship between commercial media institutions and black female audiences is a complicated one where neither party fully disempowers the other. Rather, the dance between black women and those external actors and institutions who seek to set the standards for an ideal black womanhood is fraught with complications. Each party takes its turn leading and yielding to the authority of the other. The central focus of this study is to explore and explain that dance in greater depth and detail, ultimately offering insight into black womanhood, interpretation, and the role of media in contemporary identity formation.

Situating Black Women within the Media Landscape

At the core, images of black women in the contemporary media landscape are rooted in beliefs about black females that emerged centuries ago (Hammonds 1997; Hall 1997; Hill Collins 2004). Hence, it is impossible to divorce black women from the history of repressive images that continue to haunt them in the contemporary media landscape. Tropes such as

Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and their contemporaries like Black Bitch and Diva, breed white patriarchal ideologies that distort how black women are viewed and understood within popular culture and society at large (Hill Collins 2000; Springer 2007; Harris-Perry 2011). In the midst of a media landscape oversaturated with pejorative black female stereotypes, however, black women have developed nuanced interpretive strategies and redemptive practices of using the cultural resources such as blogs, online social network profiles, images, and traditional platforms like broadcast and print media to define the black female self on their own terms. Such strategies allow black women to engage mediated content, and enjoy it, while consciously reframing the texts to fit their own worldview (hooks 1992; Bobo 1995).

Nevertheless, there exists an idea that “black women [are] cultural dupes in the path of a media barrage who cannot figure out when a media product portrays them and their race in a negative light” (Bobo 240). Such is the argument of many cultural critics who have attacked those black women who enjoy shows like *Scandal* and *Being Mary Jane*.⁵ Indeed, black women are constantly charged with the crimes of ignorance and naiveté: for being too blind in their faith in black churches, and for lacking the basic competencies needed to manage romantic relationships (Membis 2010; Harvey and Millner 2011).⁶ In sum, black women are constructed as lacking cultural competencies that include, but also extend beyond, media interpretation. This study stands to correct that notion by presenting black women’s own complex textual interpretations as evidence of their sophisticated meaning making processes, and the various literacies, or social competencies, that undergird them. Using the concept of situated literacies—

⁵ Author Mack Major infamously posted a February 2014 Facebook post critiquing black women for neglecting black men every week in order to “live out their interracial fantasies” through the female protagonist, Olivia Pope, on *Scandal*. The author referred to Thursday night, the day when the show airs, as a time “when millions of neglected black men will be left without a black woman to talk to.”

⁶ Relationship advice columnist Deborrah Cooper, is a black woman whose 2010 column stating that “rigid beliefs constructed by the black church are blinding black women in their search for love” incited debates about black women, religion, and single-*doom*. See Membis 2010.

competencies that are “patterned by social institutions and power relationships...embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices...historically situated”—I identify the overlapping mechanisms that study participants use to make sense of the black female self (Barton and Hamilton 8).

Building upon the work of bell hooks and Jacqueline Bobo, I also define black women as media citizens, active agents in the media landscape that are not merely victims being enacted upon. Media engagement, as Bobo and hooks describe it, is sometimes akin to a dance where black women lead *and* follow. Bell hooks is well known for her development of the “oppositional gaze” as a disruption to Laura Mulvey’s⁷ work on the phallogentric gaze aimed at white women in cinema (122). In considering where black women stand in relation to Mulvey’s theory, hooks explains that when black women interpret films, they “create a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of ‘woman as object, man as bearer of the look’ [is] continually deconstructed” (122). Rather than situate black women as objects of oppression along with their white counterparts, hooks disrupts Mulvey’s binaristic theory altogether by adding an alternative avenue of spectatorship claimed by black women.

Although hooks situates black women as active audience members who subvert the encoded meanings of media texts, she still offers a manifestation of black female meaning making where “passive” absorption and “vehement” resistance are the only options for engagement, and thus leaves no room for the more complicated readings of media texts located in this study (65). The black female study participants whose testimonies are included here demonstrate a more nuanced continuum of meaning making practices that allow them to absorb a text in parts, while resisting or even reshaping other parts. Theirs is a nimble interpretive practice

⁷ Multiple scholars have challenged and/or expanded Mulvey’s earliest theorization of white female characters as objects of desire in American cinema. See Durham (2001) p. 201-17, and Loshitzky (2003) p. 248-59 for other notable reflections.

that twists, bends, and stretches in multiple ways all at once. Thus, the data call for an expansion of hooks's theory of oppositional readings to include the complex, socially situated processes through which interpretive communities collaborate in making sense of media texts, and, in making sense of black womanhood. The concept of socially situated literacies, a product of new literacy studies, is useful here as a framework for understanding how study participants apply various literacies to their interpretation of mediated content—and reconcile the meanings of those media texts with their own definitions of black womanhood. Specifically, new literacy studies researchers advance that “there are different literacies associated with different domains of life” (Barton and Hamilton 11). With this guiding principle in mind, I propose that black women apply multiple literacies, or competencies, to the processes of meaning making and identity formation. Study participants deploy literacies that are informed by black culture, black female consciousness, and black religious ideologies to facilitate the process of meaning making, and because these literacies are socially constructed through experience and interaction, they yield much messier readings than can be categorized in the classic accommodation/resistance dichotomy that hooks uses.

In addition, the current study also extends Jacqueline Bobo's findings on black women as cultural readers. Specifically, this project makes use of Bobo's conclusion that “the cultural is intricately interwoven with other aspects in the lives of cultural readers” (22). In her 1990s study of black women in the roles of media critics, producers, and audience members, Bobo details black women's resistance to “cultural domination” (22). She also identifies black women's meaning making as occurring within interpretive communities “strategically placed in relation to cultural works that either are created by black women or feature them in significant ways” (22). Furthermore, Bobo cites the work of notable media figures like Julie Dash, Terry McMillan, and

Alice Walker, as well as the analytic work of anonymous black female media activists, to demonstrate black women's ongoing media interventions. Where Bobo focuses on the creative work of black female content creators challenging the status quo, this study includes the actual voices of content creators who have been involved in propagating problematic images. By offering data from black women who have worked at companies that have contributed to the toxicity of the media landscape, this study offers a more complete picture of the relationship between audiences and producers. In the story that Bobo tells, there is a more clear distinction between the villains—white and male power players in commercial media—and the virtuous black female audiences and indie content creators fighting against them. In this story, the lines between those parties become blurred.

Finally, this study also reconsiders the value of user-generated content as a mechanism of identity formation in the digital era (Belk 2013). Black women have always been involved in creating representations of black womanhood, and they continue to practice public self-representation through media content that they own, direct, write, and produce. However, digital media technologies have greatly facilitated involvement and even storytelling from a wider variety of voices who are (re)scripting black womanhood. For example, free online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and WordPress have dramatically lowered the barrier to entry for publishing widely-available content. Nearly all of this study's participants engage at least one of these platforms and use them to construct, and reconstruct, public proclamations of self as an ongoing project. They are defining acceptable womanhood, and pushing limits in ways that tend to deviate from external or community-based standards of racial uplift and respectability.

A Spiritual, Womanist Framework

The social context where I situate black women readers privileges the spiritual as an undeniable part of life experience and the analysis of that experience. The undercurrent of spirituality in this study was born out of my previous research with black women conducted in 2010. In nearly 100 percent of the interviews that I conducted for an earlier project on media and black womanhood, black women expressed that spirituality was part of the circuit of influence they drew from in an effort to make sense of their media landscape and to define black womanhood. Furthermore, the participants wondered aloud why I had not broached the topic in my interview questions. Specifically, when asked what they were surprised that I left out, or what they thought I should include in future interviews, many participants explicitly replied, “religion.” Subsequently, after asking participants about the role of faith and spirituality in their lives, several responded with comments such as “I believe in God, so I already know the path that he has ordained for me is going to be a favored and blessed path,” and “When you were asking about how I would feel in 20 years if I’m not married, in my mind the first thing I thought was, well, God didn’t want that for me.”⁸

The importance of spirituality in the everyday lives and interpretive processes of black women is evident in womanist scholarship.⁹ The term womanism, as articulated by Alice Walker (1983), derives from the black colloquialism “womanish,” a term describing a black girl/young woman who has begun to test the boundaries of her power through her demeanor and behavior. To act womanish was to express that one was comfortable with one’s own agency. Womanist

⁸ See Appendix A for further definitions of womanism, religion, spirituality, and other key terminology.

⁹ Katie Cannon (1988) explains that black women come to rely on moral counsel, passed down from one generation of women to the next, in order to survive the oppression that they suffer. This moral counsel affirms black women’s humanity and condition as the beloved of God. Furthermore, Taylor (1998) and Williams and Wiggins (2010) have advanced that spirituality is central to black women’s physical and psychological wellness, and must therefore be taken seriously by health practitioners.

ethics demands that black women exercise that agency to facilitate self-care, and also to extend care for community/humanity through activism and advocacy (Walker 1983).

Womanism as a school of thought values black women's intersectional identities (e.g., race-gender-class-sexuality), yet honors their shared struggles for wholeness through intimacy with God (Hamlet 2000). Researchers have used womanism as a lens through which to take account of the multifaceted experiences of oppression that impact black women in ways that do not register in black nationalist and white feminist frameworks (Williams and Wiggins 2010). Taken up by black female theologians, womanism has also been the theoretical framework through which black women claim their status as children of God created in the image and likeness of God (Baker-Fletcher 1994). Furthermore, womanism is central to this study because it validates black women's interpretive capacities shared through intergenerational woman-to-woman networks (Cannon 1988).

I have relied on a womanist analysis of black women's storytelling practices across mediated spaces to guide this study. According to Karen Baker-Fletcher, womanists recognize that "storytelling is essential to [black] women's spiritual quest" (186). Such stories become "constructive theology" that imagines black womanhood "beyond traditional notions of childbearing and childrearing" (186, 204). In this study, black women created their own narratives alongside stories already offered in the media landscape to reconfigure black womanhood. I have read their interpretations, and the strategies that they use, as everyday hermeneutics that shape the ways black women create and perform the self. Thus, womanism functions as the theoretical framework and methodology in this study. I discuss these dynamics in greater detail in chapter one.

Research Methods

The research questions that guide this study require a qualitative approach to inquiry, which focuses on tapping understanding and interpretations. Thus, this study deploys a constructivist research design that is in alignment with womanist tenets including the intersectionality of black female experience, and the importance of community and spirituality to black women's liberation. Constructivism is a paradigm based on inductive reasoning that treats reality as socially constructed and requires qualitative methods where informants and researchers must interact to co-construct knowledge. Since qualitative researchers do not attempt to make generalizable claims, or to make predictions about the future, the findings from this study are based on the constructed truths of the participants in the specific context where this study takes place. While these data may be transferable to black female collectives in similar contexts, this study makes no inferences about the interpretive practices of **all** black women (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). The co-researcher relationship that the principle investigator and study participants share is understood as part of the context that helps to shape the study data. Through our interaction in interviews, follow-ups, and member checks the study participants and I co-construct meaning. I take the participants seriously as analysts and have used their input to interpret the findings from this study.

I gathered data through individual in-depth interviews with a total of 30 black women, including 15 audience members and 15 professional content creators, to better understand what they bring to and take away from their media landscape, and how they define and perform black womanhood in and through the media landscape. All study participants are adult women over the age of 18, and all self-identify as black and/or African-American. Altogether, I collected approximately 65 hours of interview data.

Throughout the process of conducting and later writing the study, I maintained a field log based on my standpoint as a researcher-informant. The study was designed so that both the researcher and participants could exit the study with more insights, and be moved and empowered for further action. I offer further details on the theories that guided my data collection and analysis techniques, as well as richer descriptions of participants and recruitment, in chapter one.

Researcher Statement

The impetus for this interdisciplinary work on black womanhood, media, meaning making and identity formation was my own indignation with the dominant scripts of ideal black womanhood disseminated through popular culture during my transition into adulthood. Media celebrated black women who married black men—any black man—who embraced some spiritual practice, and who attained professional success. Importantly, these icons were also wise enough not to allow their professional work to impair their child rearing and community service responsibilities—which were other requirements on the checklist of ideal black womanhood. More specifically, these women were domestic goddesses who effortlessly managed their households, while maintaining their fashion sense and attractive figures. It seemed natural, then, with the ascent of America’s first black family into the White House, that black women were guided to embrace First Lady Michelle Obama as a role model (Williams 2009; Harris Perry 2011). For some fans, First Lady Obama was a living, breathing embodiment of black America’s favorite fictional wife-mother-attorney Clair Huxtable, and therefore, black women’s single closest contemporary exemplar of traditional (white) femininity (Givhan 2009).¹⁰ Importantly,

¹⁰ The parallels between the two black lady icons inspired idioms such as “Michelle Huxtable.” See <http://www.michelle-huxtable.com/>.

Michelle Obama was also used as a model of the ideal black female romantic partner because she chose to date and eventually marry a black man whose professional attainment once lagged behind her own.¹¹ Thus, she was unlike the Black Bitch caricatures with impressive resumes, unwilling to become romantically involved with men who lacked comparable credentials.

The black women whose lives failed to resemble the basic structure of icons like First Lady Michelle Obama and the fictional Clair Huxtable were denigrated—and popular culture could not get enough of them. By the time I had transitioned from an undergraduate to a first year doctoral student in 2010, it seemed that black women had become the face of gender deviance—a case study of female advancement and independence gone wrong. The narrative was imbedded in various genres of media texts from films, to lifestyle magazines, to popular self-help relationship books, many of which were written by divorced or never-married black men. Still, I was most disturbed by the way news media outlets covered the *single-doom* narrative and the so-called demise of the black family.

Forsaking personal desires for professional achievement, independence, or egalitarian life partnerships, black women were urged to pursue marriage for the main objective of racial uplift. By over-burdening black women, this arc evaded the impact of structural inequality, and it elevated independence and autonomy as inappropriate demands for black women. Furthermore, since television news programming was an official carrier of the black *single-doom* narrative, the storyline was established as common sense in the American imagination, and therefore mostly sheltered from public questioning. More disturbing than the fact that this narrative was

¹¹ Relationships author Hill Harper (an actor who has never been married) used Michelle Obama as an example during a special televised town hall meeting sponsored by *ABC Nightline*. He explained to the audience full of mostly black women that President Barack Obama was a student interning at a firm where First Lady Michelle Obama was already employed as an attorney when the two met. With a smile, he reminded the audience that Obama had a hole in the bottom of his car when he and Michelle Obama married. Harper's intention in referencing this example was to suggest that many successful black women remain unmarried because, unlike Michelle Obama, they were not willing to date a man for his "potential."

circulating, however, was the fact that so many of my young black female loved ones, colleagues, and acquaintances seemed to have succumbed to its seduction. Many were single, and though in their late teens and early twenties, deeply concerned that they would not become wives and mothers. Thus, many of the women whom I spoke with, first in personal conversations and later in formal research interviews, considered themselves to be at risk of defaulting on a noble racial obligation, and more importantly, falling short of fulfilling their God-given purpose on earth.

My purpose for pursuing this study was to further understand what I imagined was a complex conceptual map of black womanhood that black female media citizens had in mind as they engaged the media landscape. More, I wanted to explore the relationship between mediated scripts of black womanhood, and the understandings and performances of black womanhood that study participants embraced and aspired to themselves. Admittedly, I longed for data that would gesture away from the conclusion that black women were fully embracing mediated scripts from black womanhood and using these scripts to guide their decision making in large and small dilemmas.

When I first began this work in 2010-11, a study participant informed me that she had opted out of attending law school (after she had already been accepted), because she believed that attaining a law degree would diminish her chances of marrying a black man. She was completely in tune with the *single-doom* narrative circulating through popular culture; and it worried her. Her fear was amplified by professors and mentors who routinely inquired about her marriage plan. It was that kind of testimony that most troubled me and drove me to search for more stories, more answers, and more optimistic data.

During the course of this project, I led multiple community service projects through my church and sorority, married a black man, climbed closer to the completion of a doctorate degree, and began to plan for children. In other words, I began to emulate the model of ideal black womanhood I so sincerely wanted to interrogate. During this transition into black womanhood and the journey toward completing the project, I also came to realize that the more interesting story, the one under-researched, was how the study participants came to understand and perform black womanhood, and not the imposed scripts that the media offered. Thus, this project is concerned with the interactive processes of meaning making (understanding representations of black womanhood) and identity formation (understanding and defining black womanhood at large). Rather than focus exclusively on repressive images and lingering tropes, I have devoted the majority of this manuscript to the complicated identity work that ensues when study participants engage these cultural resources. The chapters that follow offer a collection of testimonies that are encouraging, disappointing, inspiring, and frustrating all at once, depending on one's point of view. Participant testimonies that speak to their own content creation and their audacity to insert their own understandings of black womanhood into the media landscape are easily encouraging and inspiring for me. Those data that speak to the restraints that others place on black female desire and imagination, restraints that some participants accept, caused me great disappointment and frustration. Collectively, the data demonstrate that there is still so much to be explored regarding black women and media, and, that further work will only be impaired if researchers are unwilling to look beyond the resistance/accommodationist dichotomy and embrace the complexity of the processes that make us, black women, who we are.

Chapter Outline

In this study, womanism functions as a theoretical framework and as a methodology that works in conjunction with constructivism. Drawing on exemplars and canonical texts from both paradigms, chapter one, “Bearing Witness: Studying Black Women as Media Citizens,” explains the commensurability of womanism and constructivism. I begin with a more detailed definition of womanism and how it has functioned in research involving black female subjects and interpretation. I then explain the areas where womanism and constructivism overlap. This chapter ends by detailing participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.

In chapter two, “Nimble Readings: The Situated Literacies of Black Female Media Citizens,” I identify the strategies that study participants use to make sense of their media landscape. The data in this chapter demonstrate that black women interpret media texts, in much the same way that they learn to define and understand black womanhood, through dialogic interpretive moments where community members co-construct meaning. In addition, fictional black female television characters—Olivia Pope (*Scandal*), Clair Huxtable (*The Cosby Show*), and Mary Jane Paul (*Being Mary Jane*)—emerge in this chapter as exemplars of the continuum of black womanhood that informs study participants’ meaning making processes. Interwoven throughout this chapter are explorations of the various literacies, or social competencies, that operate as analytics, facilitating participants’ negotiation of media texts for constructing a black female self that aligns with their personal aspirations and value systems.

Commercial media institutions play a significant role in the matrix of influence that informs how black women define and perform the black female self. Thus, chapter three, “Inscribing Black Women in ‘White Space’: Marketing, Prototypes, and Commercial Media,” explores the media landscape through the perspectives of professional content creators involved

in the enterprise of scripting black womanhood. Here, study participants discuss the cultural theories and ideologies that undergird the production strategies of commercial media institutions. Specifically, this chapter considers the extent to which media institutions confront black women's interpretive work and evidences the malleable quality of the relationship between black women and the corporations that seek to reach them.

Chapter four, "Public Gestures, Interior Blessings: Black Womanhood in the Digital Age," advances the claim that the interactive affordances of web-based technologies are critical for facilitating black women's co-construction of the black female self. The data presented here gesture away from theories about the dangers of over-sharing in online spaces, and other frameworks that stress the limits of interfaces that are ultimately controlled by large commercial media institutions with their own self-sustaining motivations. Rather, the data demonstrates that study participants benefit from the public nature of online identity construction. The interactive capacities of communication channels like YouTube, Blogger, and Facebook allow black women to affirm each other as they script black womanhood for themselves.

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Chapter 1

Bearing Witness: Studying Black Women as Media Citizens

This study is a qualitative, womanist inquiry into the ways in which black women navigate their media landscape as media citizens, through interpretation and content creation. The terminology of media citizen speaks to the active role that black women assume in participatory culture and acknowledges that even in asserting their agency, black women are constrained by the complex hierarchies that organize the roles of various actors in the media landscape. Through an examination of media texts and data derived through participant observation and interviews, this study offers an expanded insight into how black women understand and perform black womanhood in and through media. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. What meanings do black women bring to and take away from culturally specific media texts as presented in their media landscape?
2. What everyday literacies (i.e., social competencies) do black women cultivate through their dialogic media interpretation practices?
3. How do commercial media institutions approach representations of black womanhood, and how do these creators relate to black female audiences?
4. How do black women understand (e.g., name, define, and distinguish) presentations of black womanhood, and how do they perform black womanhood through their media engagement practices?

The study offers insights into defining and understanding complex media engagement practices among audiences. Specifically, the data speak to (1) the dialogic nature of black female interpretive communities, and (2) the complex literacies that black women wield in their

everyday meaning making and identity negotiation processes. The study participants all maintain membership in collectives where interpretive strategies are developed and shared. Within their intergenerational family and friendship groups, with fellow church parishioners, within social activities groups like book clubs, and with fellow professional colleagues, these black women co-construct modes of meaning making. The process of meaning making requires that they tap into the shared and vast reservoir of black female experiences and consciousness. In order to make sense of the enduring significance of a fictional character like Clair Huxtable, for example, study participants must also already perceive the impact of the hurdles of black female stereotypes that a figure like Clair expertly transcends. Similarly, reimagining the black female self through faith-based blogs requires that one study participant in particular, Jade, draw on her internalized knowledge of the intersection where black womanhood, respectability, and religion meet. Disentangling this frayed knot of ideology, tradition, and doctrine—in a way that resonates with her audience—requires that Jade first understand the function and point of origin of each knotted strand.

Study participants also demonstrate the need to consider web-based content creation as a form of self-care and meaningful identity management that is enhanced, and not sullied, by the interactive capacities of an audience. That is to say, the anxiety about narcissistic over-sharing online fails to accommodate the ways in which study participants benefit from the interpretive validity granted by the audiences who engage and comment on their content.

I gathered interview data from 30 self-identified black women, 15 of whom are professional content creators formerly or currently employed at commercial media companies. Altogether, this study includes more than 65 hours of interview data and more than 15 months of intermittent participant observation that detail how black women navigate the media landscape.

“Black woman” as conceptualized in this study is used to signify a diverse population of women of African/African American descent whose intersectional experiences of race and gender mark them as part of the ever-evolving project of black womanhood. Black women have a “shared historical reality” of structural oppression, degradation, disenfranchisement, and misrecognition through which they are axiomatically linked (Few et al. 2006). Such a connection does not require the collective consent of black women, nor does it require an intimate familiarity among them. Rather, the structural forces which categorize all individuals into groups that are undergirded by the authority of the state inevitably impact black women’s life experiences. Many black women, including all of those who participated in this study, embrace their identities as black women; nevertheless, they subscribe to various understandings of what this identity means.

Importantly, the implications of imposed categorization are felt differently by black women according to a number of other social identity factors including socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, generation, body type, complexion, and ethnic heritage, among others (Hill Collins 2000). Thus, while there are multiple shared traits and commonalities among black women, there are still many points where two black women may be quite different. For example, Tracy and Adrianna are two black female study participants who have lived on the east coast of the United States and have worked at magazines that target black readers. Still, Adrianna’s experiences as a black woman are complicated by her Latino ethnic heritage. She has often experienced exclusion from social groups that refuse to acknowledge her dual heritage. Such an experience is unknown to Tracy; yet, as a black woman who entered a mostly white male tech world in the 1990s, she has experienced intense workplace discrimination that Adrianna may not ever encounter. The social contexts that shape study participants’ lived

experiences are salient to how they have come to understand black womanhood and are therefore considered in this study.

My goal in this project is not to make a statement about *all* black women, but to learn from the specific findings presented by the group of women who participated. The data presented here speak to study participants' meaning making processes, their understandings of black womanhood, and the everyday literacies that inform their media engagement practices. The findings are useful for expanding the ways that researchers think about black women as an audience and conduct reception studies in general. Specifically, this study resists the reductive dichotomy of accommodation and resistance whereby black female media citizens are seen as either fully capitulating to or pushing back against the status quo. Instead, this project advances the claim that black women's negotiation of the media landscape is complex and can be read as simultaneously rebellious and compliant.

In this chapter, I explain the conceptual framework that informs my approach to this study. Specifically, I situate myself as what womanist methodologist Janette Taylor terms a "participatory witness" (58). First, I contextualize womanism and detail its use for a study about black womanhood and media engagement practices. Next, I demonstrate the commensurability of womanist tenets and constructivist methodology. The goal of this chapter is to outline the reasoning that supports the overall research design.

Why Womanism?

The term womanism was first coined by Alice Walker in the 1980s. She described womanism as a concept that would center black women's liberation and the unique pressures that they experienced at the intersection of race, gender, and class marginality. According to Walker, a womanist is

a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health (ix).

Walker's writing favored wholeness over perfection, and imagined a space where black women too might fulfill their personal desires. Importantly, this definition also emphasizes community and the value of a liberation movement that includes black men and women working in concert.

Womanism took its contemporary form and name at a time when many black female researchers were questioning what a black women's liberation movement would look like, and the theories and principles that should guide it. Bell hooks offers that in reaction to white women's coalition-building and activism in the 1970s, some black women "form[ed] separate 'black feminists' groups," which she argues undermined the very idea of a liberation movement (150). It is significant, then, that Walker defines womanism as being centered on black women's struggles yet also inclusive. Hence, the principles of "community building, self-determination, compassion, and empowerment through interpersonal connection" became heralded as the mechanisms by which black women could advance liberation for themselves and others using a womanist framework (Williams and Wiggins 178). The womanist framework has thus been accepted by many researchers as encompassing the totality of the black female self where other theories, specifically black nationalism and feminism fail, (Hill Collins 2006; Williams and Wiggins 2010). Womanism speaks to the diversity of black womanhood, attending to race, gender, class, and sexuality while also situating black female subjecthood within a larger matrix of key influences, e.g., family, community, and religion. Understanding black womanhood through these various facets enables researchers to tap into the complexities and interior workings of black women. Namely, scholars in the fields of public health, media/cultural studies,

and theology have demonstrated that womanism enables researchers to view black women's experiences through black women's eyes.

Janette Taylor is a public health scholar whose work has been useful for understanding the benefits of using womanist methodologies when engaging black female research subjects. Taylor (1998) describes womanism as descending from the principles of Afrocentrism with a distilled focus on the unique experiences of black women. Ideals such as harmony with nature, survival of the group, collective responsibility, and spiritualism, which are key to Afrocentrism, are passed down from generation to generation among blacks and shape the way that black women define and perform black womanhood. Thus, Taylor advances that researchers must also understand and practice these principles in their work with black female study participants if they want to accurately contextualize and analyze black women's voices.

In her examination of contemporary black-female targeted media, Janice Hamlet (2000) applies a womanist framework according to the principles and guidelines that Taylor describes. Hamlet identifies an editor's column in the black female magazine, *Essence*, as womanist rhetoric because it speaks to and affirms black women in a style of communication that is specific to black female experiences of intersectional oppression. The use of a womanist framework is key to Hamlet's analysis because it allows her to take seriously the voices of black women in everyday language. Hamlet acknowledges that within the Afrocentric tradition, women's voices are often muted. Similarly, black voices are muted in classic rhetorical theory. Womanism acts as a "bridge" that allows her to connect useful mechanics from each school of thought and ultimately de-marginalize black women's voices and thought (Hamlet 422).

While the benefits of womanism and womanist epistemologies are evident in research that concerns black female subjects, the differences between womanism and black feminism are

less apparent. Scholars like Taylor and Hamlet lean toward the term womanism but believe that black feminism and womanism are interchangeable as they represent the same fundamental ideas. The debate of naming continues as black women, especially black female scholars, question the strategic value of “umbrella” terms and whether or not the existence of womanism and black feminism reproduces division that threatens the aim of black female liberation (Charles 2006). Like Taylor and Hamlet, I acknowledge the overlaps between black feminism and womanism. Both of these terms speak to epistemologies and methodologies that place black women at the center, and correct those ideologies that insist on black women’s status as “Other.” Yet, I use the term womanism throughout this study to trigger a specific intellectual history that privileges the spiritual as central to an exploration of black women’s lives.

Womanists, generally speaking, have been less attracted to black feminism, an alternative school of thought, for a number of reasons, including: black feminism’s perceived historic legacy of excluding black men, and a lacking emphasis on spirituality. Among womanists are theologians Katie G. Cannon, Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, Emilie Townes, and Karen Baker-Fletcher who took hold of Walker’s definition of womanism and extrapolated philosophies about black women in relation to God. Black womanist theologians crafted a theology that grants them validation that black male theologians, who were engrossed in patriarchy, were initially unwilling to offer.¹² That is to say that black womanists focus their energies toward remedying shared experiences of oppression by reimagining religious doctrines based on a “love of God” that extends to “self and others,” and by reinserting black women’s voices into Christian philosophy (Townes 11). Specifically, black womanist theologians have repositioned Jesus as the divine kin of black women—de-legitimizing theories that use Jesus to

¹² Black women also deemed the work of feminist theologians like Mary Daly to be inadequate for addressing the significance of race in black women’s experiences of oppression and conception of Jesus Christ as a co-sufferer (Grant 1989).

conflate maleness with divinity (Grant 1989). In doing so, they have also emphasized the emotional and affective aspects of spirituality as tools for social justice and self-care.

The intellectual debates surrounding the naming of black women's struggles for autonomy have caused some scholars to question if black womanist theologians have threatened the integrity of Walker's original definition, while others embrace black feminism, or Africana womanism, or even motherism. Some scholars believe that these names encompass different philosophies, while others believe that naming is insignificant relative to other issues (Sanders et al. 1989). Specifically, Patricia Hill Collins argues that "the time has come to go beyond naming by applying main ideas contributed by both womanists and black feminists to the over-arching issue of analyzing the centrality of gender in shaping a range of relationships within African American communities" (66). So long as theoretical debates distract black women from the practical negotiations required to establish a sense of wholeness in the midst of adversity, I agree that there is little value to be found in the former. Given the fact that none of the study participants named any particular school of thought, other than Christianity, to explain their worldviews, I have been careful not to impose womanist theory where it does not fit. Nevertheless, much of the participant data reflected womanist principles, and I have thus elected this theoretical framework to help situate the study within scholarly discourse.

A womanist framework is critical for this study because it addresses the salience of God, religion, and spirituality regarding black women's understanding of the self. In addition to identifying the importance of religion and spirituality to black Americans in general, scholars have also found that black women are among the most fervent faith practitioners in the country.¹³ For example, psychologist Jacqueline Mattis advances that religion and spirituality are essential

¹³ In a 2011 national survey conducted by *The Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation, 74 percent of black women reported that "living a religious life" is very important to them. See Labbé-DeBose 2012.

to many black women's understanding of "the meaning and purpose of life," "[choosing] romantic partners," and "notions of civic responsibility" (102). An approach for exploring how black women understand black womanhood would be lacking without any accommodation of how religion and spirituality may figure into these perspectives.

Furthermore, black women routinely confront explicit and implicit references to God in their media landscape. While it has been established that black women in America imagine God in myriad ways—for example, as a figment of the imagination, as Allah, as the divine sum of all living things, as an inner voice offering guidance—it is also clear that references to God infused into the media landscape are overwhelmingly Christian.¹⁴ For example, media mogul Tyler Perry, following in the vein of trailblazers like Eloyce Gist and Spencer Williams, Jr., has made Christian subtexts a fundamental feature of his brand.¹⁵ In addition, various television shows, films, and magazines targeting black women have portrayed church attendance and prayer as cultural norms; they include: *Essence* magazine, *The Cosby Show*, *Girlfriends*, and *Waiting to Exhale*. Importantly, these media texts are not Christian-themed, and thus include references to religion and spirituality as part of the everyday cultural practices specific to African American life.

In this study, I have elected to use womanism for its emphasis on spirituality, community, and inter-generational dialogue. My embrace of womanism, however, is not a disavowal of black

¹⁴ While Christianity at large relies on a belief in the Holy Trinity—God the Father, God the Son (i.e., Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit—Black Americans exemplify the diversity within this tradition of faith through various denominations. Denominations span beyond the pre-dominant Church of God In Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), African Methodist Episcopal, and Baptist iterations that are often reduced to the descriptor, "evangelical." Other Black expressions of Christianity include The Pan African Orthodox Christian Church (Shrine of the Black Madonna), Church of Christ (Holiness) U.S.A., and the Church of Universal Triumph Dominion of God, among others.

¹⁵ See Means Coleman and Williams (2013) for a detailed analysis of Tyler Perry's use of religion to undergird black female romance narratives.

feminism(s). I have drawn from scholarship carrying multiple labels (e.g., Africana womanism, black feminism, etc...) to make sense of the data.

The Womanist Framework and Scripts for Black Womanhood

The concepts at the core of womanism—black female liberation, spirituality, community, and inter-generational dialogue—are also key themes that emerged in study participants’ discussions of black womanhood and media engagement. Such themes are important for understanding black women’s interpretive practices and the deeper meanings of their engagement with various media texts. Black women’s participation in the media landscape has historically been shaped by their myriad responses to hegemonic discourses that dehumanized and degraded them (Hamlet 2000). Early public narratives created by, and aimed at, black American women were overwhelmingly focused on black women’s role in racial progress. For example, the black women who produced magazines such as *Our Women and Children* (1888-1891), *Women’s Era* (1894-1897), and *Half-Century Magazine for the Colored Home and Homemaker* (1916-1925) assumed a moral obligation to offer instruction that might lead to universal racial advancement (Rooks 2004). A prevailing ideology which persisted throughout the first century of the U.S. as an independent nation suggested that social correction for the whole of black Americans rested largely on black women re-creating themselves in the image of purity, submissiveness, and selfless mothering that prevailed at the time (Hammonds 1997; Hill Collins 2000). Race leaders, (elite) men and women with power and influence, generally believed that designing scripts focused on black women’s self-improvement would result in uplift for the entire racial community (Mitchell 2004). Hence, newspapers, magazines, and public orations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries intended for black female consumption were written as lifestyle guides and rarely as leisure texts.

Although black women's magazines published between 1888 and 1925 upheld a general standard of black female respectability, ideas about who most needed lifestyle guidance often fell along class lines. According to Noliwe Rooks:

Each of the publications attempted to educate a migrant population about the requirements and expectations for societal acceptance in an unfamiliar urban area and used this rationale to explain its existence. What African American women wore, bought, read, cooked, ate, and did at home with their families were all fair game, and each magazine offered copious advice and analysis about what such choices did and could mean (5).

These magazines, written and edited by black female elites, functioned as revisionist spaces. Writers and editors were most concerned with the stereotypes that defined black women as sexually immoral. While the comprehensive guides written in such publications addressed all lifestyle matters, they were intended to coach black women toward emulating the highest models of white femininity and ultimately debunk the myth of the lascivious black woman. The type of morality that these publications espoused aligned with the dominant Christian understandings of right and wrong, good and evil (Higginbotham 1993). Thus, it was on religious grounds that American society measured black women, and also on religious grounds that black women defended their respectability.

Although black women understood that they were being measured according to a Victorian ideology that defined womanhood as a condition of weakness relative to manhood, black women were not altogether invested in these theories. In fact, many rejected the idea that focusing their energies on the home and child-rearing were lesser tasks. Many black women argued that it was black women's superior moral aptitude which equipped them to meet the grand objective of achieving racial uplift through improving the image of future generations. Furthermore, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) explains that despite appearances,

black religious women's preoccupation with a pure public image was not a blind capitulation to the status quo.

Black women also used magazines sponsored by religious institutions like the Black Baptist Convention to "reinterpret the church's social teaching so that human equality embraced gender as well" and to publicize their own gendered perspective on the prevailing doctrine of the day (Higginbotham 121). "They rejected a model of womanhood that was fragile and passive," writes Higginbotham, "just as they deplored a type preoccupied with fashion, gossip, or self-indulgence" (121). Rather than assume a delicate womanhood that rendered them powerless, and largely useful as in service to children and husbands, some black women opted instead to become tireless laborers who would prove their moral worth by saving their race from the shackles of racial oppression. "They argued that women held the key to social transformation, and thus America offered them a vast mission field in which to solicit as never before the active participation of self-disciplined, self-sacrificing workers" (Higginbotham 121). In addition, becoming deeply involved in religious work was a way to achieve autonomy. As Emilie Townes explains, "religion provided a way to order one's life and priorities. It also enabled women to rely on an authority beyond the world of men" (35). Black women would rather become followers of a Christian script for black womanhood than yield to the whims of (white or black) man.

A number of content creators, now considered womanist trailblazers, were involved in writing a more empowered black woman into existence. Several of them were preachers who linked black women's justice with biblical principles and found greater rationale for conjoining the social and spiritual worlds than for keeping them separate. For example, women like Rebecca Cox and Jarena Lee crafted spiritual autobiographies that combatted racial and gender

oppression. According to Nellie McKay (1989), “spiritual autobiographies were one vehicle through which nineteenth century black writers sought spiritual healing from oppressive social conditions and gained literacy and power in the language of the dominant culture” (151). These authors and preachers were testifying to the freedom granted them through their personal conversion experiences and relationships with God. Cox was born in 1795 and reported having a religious conversion experience in the 1830s. She eventually left her husband in pursuit of her spiritual goals. Born in 1783, Jarena Lee was also a wife and a mother but struggled to manage these relationships with her spiritual call to ministry. She is the first woman that Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, accepted as a preacher.

Cox and Lee understood their act of claiming the authority to speak on matters of religion and politics, as black women, as a performance of gendered freedom. Importantly, these interventions made by black women in popular culture also supported “the validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in the construction of theological statements” (Williams 121). By sharing their truths, these black women were challenging the authenticity of the dominant scripts for black womanhood disseminated through local and larger systems of patriarchy. Their actions indicate that even in the nascent stages of a media landscape, resistance had been present.

The brief historical summary provided here is critical for understanding the ways in which faith functioned to bolster black women’s disruption of the public record regarding black womanhood, even as religion was used as a self-justified yoke limiting black women to traditional gender roles. In creating their own media scripts, black women demonstrated ways of making do, of using the tools and mechanisms available to liberate themselves from the distorted images of black womanhood that dominated the media landscape.

However brave and radical these attempts at resisting the status quo, black women's media interventions were insufficient for fulfilling the intended purpose of the freedom to craft the self on one's own terms. Rooks and Higginbotham acknowledge where black women's public narratives often fell short in terms of their regional, heteronormative, and class-based elitism. The authority to re-define black womanhood was not shared by all black women, but reserved for elites whose status was often the result of their relationship to powerful and respected men. Yet, the unspoken lack in these mediated scripts hinged on respectability is access to a black womanhood whose humanity did not have to be proven, fought for, or awarded on the basis of merit. Burdened with the task of emulating flawlessness, women like Rebecca Cox, Jarena Lee, and members of the women's auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention did not enjoy the benefits of grace—the irrefutable truth that you are favored and worthy of being, simply because you were created. What these women offered through their media interventions was not complete salvation from the repressive ideologies of American culture, but rather, temporary refuge on the condition of capitulating to the restrictions of respectability.

The motivation and resources that facilitated processes of meaning making and self-definition among black American women more than a century ago are reproduced among black women in contemporary times. While there are more widely-accepted alternative understandings of womanhood, and thus, multiple ways of making sense of the self in relation to popular (mis)representations, black women continue to struggle to define the self in the midst of a media landscape with recycled repressive images. Yet, just as the historical record shows, black women are still persistent in creating scripts for black womanhood on their own terms. The media landscape—especially web series, blogs/vlogs and other online media productions—has become more robust in its offerings of black female representations.

My goal in studying black womanhood and media through a womanist framework is to privilege the everyday interpretive agency that enables the participants—of various classes and religious affiliations—to “decipher the various sounds in the larger world...[and to] find meaning in the most despotic circumstances” (Cannon 126). I and participants (even if they don’t use this language) use womanism as a framework to more fully understand the complexity of meaning making among black women—the proactive strategies, the accommodationist stances, the systematic repression, the inequalities, and the notions of self-care and pleasure that linger among them. Hence, my aim is not to limit all participant data to an ideal of empowerment, but rather, to engage the participants’ meaning makings as the center of an interactive project of defining and performing the black female self.

Merging Womanism and Constructivism

As a conceptual framework, womanism, like constructivism, relies on the validity of black women’s interpretive capacity and their ability to communicate their meaning makings through interviews. The constructivist paradigm (where this study is located), is the research approach most concerned with individual meaning-making practices and the plurality of human experience. This paradigm embraces knowledge as subjective in nature and best obtained through dialectical methods (Lincoln and Guba 165). Constructivist researchers believe that “true knowledge is gained through prolonged immersion and extensive dialogue practiced in social settings” (Lindlof and Taylor 11). Distance between the researcher and participant is minimized in constructivist research design because it impedes the dialogue and interaction that is central to obtaining knowledge. Thus, the researcher and the participant, in all of their complexity, help shape or co-construct the data through member checks and a shared role of analyst. Since the participant has the right to grant or deny access to her experiences, she maintains more power

than is typical in positivist or post-positivist traditions. I use the remainder of this section of the chapter to show how womanism and constructivism function together to facilitate an understanding of the experience of participants' interaction with the media landscape.

Locating the Study

The constructivist paradigm that informs this study suits a womanist framework and offers a more specific guide for research grounded in audience reception. Constructivist principles overlap with the methodological tenets of womanism. Within the womanist methodological tradition, researchers embrace the diversity of black female experience. Just as constructivists recognize multiple truths, womanists too acknowledge each participant's voice as a valuable contribution. Both paradigms call for research that edifies the participants and researcher according to an ethics of justice. In order to satisfy the requirement of honoring participants' voices, researchers must abandon the role of (unbiased) outside observer and become participant witnesses. Taylor (1998) describes the shift from participant observation to participant witnessing as a fundamental modification. She writes:

The researcher as one who bears witness must be responsible and accountable for progressive critical reflection and interpretation of the stories. The end point of participatory witnessing is to translate the stories in a fashion that is beneficial to African American women and improves their social and material conditions (p. 59).

The reconfiguration of the research relationship relies on a humanist acknowledgement of who the researcher and participants are as people, beyond the space of the inquiry. Conceptualizing the roles of researcher and participant in communal terms repositions both actors as members of the same community that enter into a dialogue. Such an exchange may manifest in many different ways across the community, one style of which is a formalized research project. The womanist approach to research, therefore, minimizes the gap between researcher and participant produced by the unequal political act of conducting human subjects research. Thus, my

methodological choice to recognize study participants as co-analysts in the research process is also a political strategy that “redresses power imbalances such that those who were previously marginalized now achieve voice” (Lincoln and Guba 185). The participants’ interpretations have not been assessed on a continuum of right or wrong; rather, these data are understood to be the participants’ truths.

A Note on Insider/Outsider Status and Authentic Research

Traditionally, ethnographers have been divided into two groups based on their relationship to the field and their research subjects—insiders and outsiders. Insiders consist of those who are familiar with their research subjects via their own personal standpoint and therefore have access to the emic or “native’s perspective of reality” and experience (Fetterman 31). Conversely, outsiders are those who are not members of the population under study. For researchers studying identity, gender, and race, shared group membership between researcher and participant has often been viewed as an asset. Researchers with direct personal experience are often privileged with a critical viewpoint that allows them to recognize patterns and understand codes that a stranger might not ascertain. In addition, participants may be more willing to trust researchers who they recognize as *one of their own*. Conversely, insider status also produces blind spots that obstruct the researcher’s view of *what’s going on here*. If the researcher approaches the study as knower, even sub-consciously, and not as learner-listener-witness, the tendency to fill gaps that should be left open and divide concepts that the participants have woven together is heightened.

The research-participant relationship in this study is further complicated by the fact that individual meaning making is not impacted by a single aspect of a person’s identity. For example, a researcher-participant relationship where gender is shared but socioeconomic status is

not could ultimately make the data collection/analysis process just as challenging as if there were no shared identity status at all.

Even when a researcher and participant are alike in race, gender, age, and class, insider status presents its own research challenges. For example, Alford Young (2004) found that when interviewing upwardly mobile black men under 35, men with whom he shared many similarities, assumptions based on identity crippled the interviews. When Young asked participants to elaborate on their answers they would often become confused by his lack of understanding; there was an unspoken cultural understanding that as a black man Young possessed the knowledge to fill the gaps in their responses. At times, these participants refused to answer his follow-up questions. Young therefore concludes that an outsider (e.g., a white woman or man) may have been granted access to more detailed and complex responses, because participants would have assumed the researcher's ignorance.

I approached this study with an awareness of my own dual status as an insider/outsider. Much like the "outsider within" positioning that Patricia Hill Collins has written about, my multiple selves (e.g., as researcher, as black woman, as Christian, as PhD candidate, as married heterosexual) converged in a tangled harmony that distanced me from participants in certain circumstances and drew me nearer in other situations (Hill Collins S14). On the one hand, I find that insider status is a natural product of sound womanist research with human subjects. If researcher and participant are bound to an agreement of exchange and mutual fulfillment, then they must be considered part of the same community in some way. As an insider, I carried a dual burden of representation because the arguments made about study subjects also apply to me. My multilayered investment was something I was keenly mindful of, and it motivated me to be a more rigorous researcher.

Certainly, being a black woman of faith discussing media and womanhood with other black women has granted me advantages in accessing participants who might not be as open with outsiders. In addition, my experience as a media professional also yielded credibility in the eyes of media producers (Erlandson et al. 1993). Trustworthiness with participants—study participants’ trust of my capacity to conduct an authentic and credible study—is therefore one critical benefit of being able to access the emic perspective as a research-informant. According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), trustworthiness depends on researchers meeting a set of key criteria in their study, including: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. In meeting said criteria, researchers develop a map of the steps taken from identifying research questions to finally establishing the findings derived from data collection. My insider status as a Christian black woman and a former media professional facilitated my use of the techniques that yield credibility; specifically, prolonged engagement with participants and persistent observation. The women who participated in this study generously welcomed me into their homes, their work places, and their places of worship with the understanding that I would be able to honor those physical spaces and the things that were shared in those otherwise private domains.

Insider status, however, is always a potential impediment to a researcher’s capacity to analyze data with integrity and to arrive at credible and verifiable conclusions. I designed the study (i.e., interview questions, triangulated data collection, member checks, etc.) with this potential dilemma in mind.

I have drawn on multiple solutions from constructivist and womanist research methods to address my insider/outsider status and other methodological concerns of this study. Progressive subjectivity, for example, describes the researcher’s process of regularly recording *a priori* assumptions in a field log throughout the study. Documenting these assumptions facilitates an

ongoing analysis of the “researcher-self” hyphen, and its impact on the study. This practice was helpful in holding researcher expectations and assumptions at bay. The field log that I began in the fall of 2010, prior to data collection, facilitated an ongoing internal dialogue that helped me to consider and re-consider the purpose of the study, my interaction with participants, and the factors—within and beyond the realm of human control—that would impact the outcomes of the project. The field log also inspired discussions about assumptions during peer debriefings. A team of interdisciplinary committee members, of faculty advisors, and of graduate student researchers in outside disciplines served as peer debriefers. The practice of peer debrief was therefore equally helpful in maintaining an analytic grasp on researcher bias. In addition, I also reviewed the results of data analysis with study participants via member checks. The member checks allowed for study participants to verify data. This verification ensures that the researcher has maintained the integrity of the participant’s own meanings without imposing *a priori* assumptions.

These methodological strategies positioned the study for tactical authenticity and enhanced confirmability and transferability (Erlandson et al. 1993). Tactical authenticity deals specifically with study participants and the degree to which participation in the study empowers them to take action (Means Coleman 2000). Confirmability and transferability are both criteria connected to data collection and analysis. More specifically, confirmability is a quality based on the researcher’s capacity to verify the data and her interpretation of the data, while transferability is a quality that involves the extent to which the findings in one context can be transferred to other contexts. In order to ensure confirmability it is essential that the researcher makes the logic of her interpretations clear and explicit. Readers should be able to follow a direct line from the data, to the techniques used to analyze that data, to the conclusions derived from that analysis.

Since this study is a qualitative inquiry, the conclusions have been developed with transferability, not generalizability, in mind. It is not the qualitative researcher's place to make inferences about the most statistically probable truth, but rather, to draw context-specific conclusions about the findings and to explain how such findings might relate to similar contexts. Transferability is the outcome of thick description which allows readers to perceive how the findings of the study might apply to another context of interest (Erlandson et al. 1993).

Furthermore, this study was designed with an attention to fairness and authenticity. In constructivist and womanist research, it is critical that the researcher think carefully about the implications of the research and the study, for all participants. The constructivist researcher is not only accountable to a collective of academic peers but also to the participants and must therefore attend to the political dynamics that imbue the research process. Specifically, constructivist researchers strive to achieve tactical authenticity. In addition to building a study that moves participants to act, the researcher must also be prepared to offer help that facilitates that action. In this study, for example, I helped participants brainstorm actionable ideas and connected them to gatekeepers that can further support those ideas. In the end, my intent was for the participants to exit the study having benefited through gaining new insights.

Research Design

The womanist-oriented, constructivist methodology outlined in the previous section informs the research design of this study, including: recruitment, data collection, and data analysis techniques. In this section, I discuss the research design ultimately guiding the reader back to the initial research questions.

Participant Selection—Black Female Collectives

This study called for two kinds of participants: adult women who identify as black and/or African American, and professional content creators whose work targets black female audiences and who also identify as black and/or African American. The specific aim of the research questions called for targeted sampling techniques that would result in a group of black female study participants who interact with media as a part of their everyday routines. Importantly, the participants in this study are self-identified black/African American women who occupy various social positions given their variation in socioeconomic status, age, education level, sexual orientation, employment status, ethnic background, religious affiliation, residential history, relationship status, mothering status, gender presentation, physical ability, etc.

As with any group of black women, these participants define and prioritize their identities in multiple ways. The fact that they have voluntarily participated in this study is not an indicator that being a black woman is the most important vector shaping how they view themselves or how they would like to be viewed. The participants, as explained throughout chapters two and four, reported that being lesbian or Christian may register as more significant for them than being a black woman in certain contexts. In any case, no single identity vector shapes any black woman's everyday life, but rather, the interaction of multiple vectors impacts her in context-specific ways. For each participant, I have included a summary of the identifying factors that I read as most relevant to the study, without forsaking the confidentiality agreement made with each participant [See Appendix F]. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

While the participants also constitute a particular commercial audience, this study defines them beyond niche consumer marketing terms. As an interpretive community, this group interacts in a model similar to that enacted by the classic audience. According to James Anderson

(1996), “classic audiences were not aggregates of isolates but were interacting, interconnected social memberships...Further, there was an established social connection between the members of the production enterprise and the members of the audience” (75). In my effort to capture the interpretive processes of black women in a natural social state, I recruited participants already a part of pre-formed collectives including educational institutions, friendship networks, a book club, and a church. By targeting women already part of a social group, I was better able to capture their everyday interpretive networks. Interpretive communities, after all, are rarely formed under the auspices of a researcher. Black women may belong to multiple social groups that discuss media, engage in collective moments of interpretation, and yield influence over the ways in which individual members perform mediated scripts of black womanhood in their everyday lives.

The first participants to join the study were current and former students of a university in the Midwest. After I made announcements about the study at various on-campus events with high black female attendance, three women agreed to participate in the study. In the interest of recruiting women already a part of pre-formed collectives, I also recruited three more participants via snowball sampling. These women agreed to act as research subjects after their friends, the original study participants, had already begun to participate. I observed the group of friends interacting at social campus functions such as performances and film viewings, as well as other social settings like cafes and restaurants.

Another group of participants were members of a book club located in one of the wealthiest counties in the Midwest. One of the coordinators of the book club, Sammy Jo, was the only person to respond to a general e-mail I sent to all of the predominantly black female book clubs in a Midwestern state listed in a public book club directory. The women in the book club

came to know each other through their affiliations as co-workers, neighbors, and/or co-parishioners of a local African Methodist Episcopal Church. I met the women at a regularly scheduled book club meeting to discuss the study in greater detail; four of the ten women in attendance agreed to participate in the study. I attended multiple book club meetings to conduct participant-observation where I engaged the women in discussions on literature and current events, and I also noted their ways of performing and making sense of black womanhood in this setting.

In order to increase the likelihood of gaining access, I also recruited participants from a church where I had established a rapport with the institutional leadership. After the First Lady (i.e., the wife of the pastor and a co-leader of the institution) approved the recruitment of participants at the church, I made public announcements at the monthly women's gatherings and other church events. Five women agreed to join the study. During data collection, I also participated in multiple worship services to take notes on the everyday meaning making and performances of black womanhood that occurred. My participation included, but was not limited to, singing and praying with the congregation while attending worship services, sharing a meal, or participating in a shared media viewing experience.

Participant Selection—Professionals

In order to explore the media landscape from multiple points of view, I also recruited for this study 15 black female professional content creators whose content speaks to and about black women. The purpose of including professional content creators is two-fold. First, the individuals involved in the day-to-day operations of creating, producing, publishing, and distributing content speaking to and about black women are a part of a community of interpreters involved in the interactive process of meaning making, and consequently, the making of the black female self.

Furthermore, the womanist framework that guides this study is one built on community, with meaning passed down from one generation of women to the next. Hence, the inclusion of cultural producers is appropriate to fit the dialogic quality of meaning making involved in this study.

Second, the inclusion of media industry insider data responds to a general lack of attention to media professionals in contemporary research, particularly those working at black targeted media (McRobbie 1999). These content creators offer insight not otherwise obtained in a reception study focused strictly on audiences. Any theorization of the motivation behind mediated representations of black women can only be enhanced by capturing the perspectives of these members of the black female interpretive community.

I began the recruitment of professional content creators through my connection to gatekeepers who are currently, or were previously, employed by media organizations including *Essence* (online and print magazine), *Aspire* (cable television network), Cocoa Media Group (sponsor of multiple lifestyle web sites and web series), Black Entertainment Television (cable television network), Johnson Publishing Company (owner of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines) and Oxygen Media (cable television network). Upon interviewing willing participants from among my personal contacts, I recruited additional participants through snowball sampling. I also reached out to other content creators to whom I had no prior relationship. My collective recruitment efforts resulted in 15 participants (in addition to the 15 study participants without a professional media background).

In order to diversify the pool of media professionals, I drew participants from organizations of different sizes that are based in different geographic regions and that function using different business models. Some companies are black-owned, while others are non-black

owned media conglomerates. Some have been established for several decades in broadcast and print, while others were founded within the past five years in digital. Furthermore, the participants that I recruited are located differently in their respective organizational hierarchies. Professional titles among the participants include: editor/editor-in-chief, producer, vice president, manager of branded entertainment, CEO, and social media strategist among others. The variety in media organization and employee rankings allowed for perspectives from across black women's media landscape. For example, staff at smaller companies, and those at larger conglomerates, sometimes held different viewpoints about censorship. Likewise, entry level staff and executives offered different perspectives on the organization's relationship to advertisers and sponsors.

My expertise in magazine journalism and my experience working in the media field equipped me to engineer a study with a media producer's challenges, motivations, and concerns in mind. Such a design also signaled my credibility in the eyes of the participants. The professional relationships that I have maintained with media professionals in various fields also laid the foundation for establishing trustworthiness. Without credibility and trustworthiness, it is likely that I neither would be granted access to the professionals themselves nor to their places of employment. Taken together, my established rapport, credibility, and trustworthiness resulted in richer data.

Sample Size

In qualitative studies the size of the participant sample is determined by reaching redundancy in the data, rather than by using a formula to determine statistical significance. That is to say, qualitative researchers stop collecting data when they have reached what Lindlof and Taylor term "a critical threshold of interpretive competence" such that the newly collected

participant data no longer yields new findings but starts to repeat what has already been found (129). Some qualitative media researchers have found that interviews with approximately five participants satisfy this standard, while others rely on larger groups of 30 or more participants (Harris and Hill 1998; Means Coleman 1998). Having reached redundancy, I stopped recruiting participants after 15 black female audience members and 15 professional content creators participated in the study.

Data Collection Methods--Overview

In an effort to capture the complexity of the study participants' meaning making, I conducted individual in-depth interviews and follow-ups with each participant, and I engaged in participant observation with each audience collective (i.e., the college friends, the book club, and the church group) on two to three separate occasions. I also conducted one individual interview with each professional content creator, and followed that with a member check/interview, or a follow-up in which participants have the opportunity to verify and edit their responses. Collectively, I gathered more than 65 hours of interview data over 15 consecutive months. Researchers who use participant witnessing, or participant observation, as a method elect to join the research subjects in their everyday interactions and social events. This particular data collection technique helps the researcher to understand reality from the research subject's point of view, and to distill the "explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and culture" (DeWalt and DeWalt, p. 1). In this study, participant witnessing was used in an effort to triangulate the data collection, such that "data obtained directly from the statements of individuals [were] checked against observed behavior" (Erlandson et al. 31). While I did take notes during these

witnessing sessions, I did not tape record them. All other interviews were tape recorded, and then transcribed by the researcher for further analysis.

Data Collection—Individual In-Depth Interviews

Individual in-depth interviews are one-on-one sessions between a researcher and participant/informant purposed to produce data about the research phenomenon. Interviews vary in length and may be highly-structured, semi-structured, or unstructured/informal (Merriam 1998). The structure of the interview denotes the researcher's approach. For example, a semi-structured interview lies at the middle of the continuum where a researcher may prepare an interview guide with several questions organized by topic but approach the session with flexibility to allow for the organic flow of conversation. An informal interview may be impromptu where a researcher has no pre-written guide or script (Patton 1990).

Semi-structured individual in-depth interviews were the main data collection method for this study. I designed individual in-depth interviews with Patton's interview guide model in mind. That is, I initiated each interview with less-involved questions about the participant's media environment and gradually increased the depth of each question (Patton 1990). Also, each interview ended with an empowering question that asked the participant to practice agency through expressing improvements that could be made to existing media and imagining the type of media they could create independently.

Each interview took place at a private or public location of the participants' choosing. Examples include, but are not limited to, a public eatery, the participant's home, the participant's work place, a closed room at a church, and a campus research facility. Whenever a public location was selected, I secured a closed or semi-private location, such as a business office or a remote booth in a restaurant, to ensure privacy for the participant and to honor the confidentiality

agreement outlined in the informed consent form. All interviews were tape-recorded per the participant's consent and flowed according to the procedures outlined in the informed consent form [See Appendix C].

Interview Guides

Two interview guides—one for individual interviews with professional content creators and the other for individual interviews with audience members—were designed for this study. Both guides were constructed using the language perceived to be familiar to participants based on previous research with black women. These guides consisted of intersectional questions that resisted asking participants to categorize themselves as either black or female (Bowleg 2008). Rather, I embraced the intersectional nature of the participant sample and resisted questions that pre-supposed a compartmentalized response. For example, instead of asking, “When you think about how you’d like to present yourself to others as a woman, what characteristics/traits are parts of that presentation? What about how you’d like to present yourself as a black person?” I asked, “When you think about how you’d like to present yourself to others as a black woman, what characteristics/traits are part of that presentation?” [See Appendix D for both interview guides]. Additionally, I asked professional content creators about their particular role in the enterprise of scripting black womanhood, and about their understandings of black female audiences. Thus, professional content creators were asked to think about media engagement at the *meta* level, that is, to analyze how they themselves and other women analyze media.

The interview guides were designed as tools for ethnographic interviewing. A range of different disciplinary styles may fall within the bounds of this categorization. However, it is generally understood that this style of interviewing requires an awareness of the social and physical context where the interview is situated. Barbara Sherman Heyl (2007) proposes that

regardless of disciplinary distinctions, researchers who conduct ethnographic interviews must:

- (1) Listen well and respectfully, developing an ethical engagement with the participants at all stages of the project;
- (2) acquire a self-awareness of our role in the co-construction of meaning during the interview process;
- (3) be cognizant of the ways in which both the ongoing relationship and the broader social context affect the participants, the interview process, and the project outcomes; and
- (4) recognize that dialogue is discovery and only partial knowledge will ever be attained (370).

I designed the interview procedures to adhere to these guidelines.

Data Analysis

I analyzed all participant data using an open coding system as described in Strauss and Corbin in *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (1990). Moving from the inductive to the deductive, I started with a specific note, observation, or sentence and eventually derived theories through categorization, evaluation, and comparisons and contrasts. The first step in the coding process was to label each note, sentence, or observation. The naming process identifies the function of a particular phenomenon, allowing me to break down a transcript or field notes into distinguishable parts. For example, “strong black woman” in one transcript might be labeled as a stereotype. This label indicates the appropriate function that these words take on within the context of the interview. After establishing this first level of coding, I proceeded with the initial grouping stage where I sorted the labeled data into different categories. Strauss and Corbin describe the categorization process as one of discovery, such that categories emerge from considering each piece of data with the others to consider what is (dis)similar about them. Matching data were placed into the same category. For example, “strong black woman” and “welfare queen” are both stereotypes placed into the category “Black

Women on Screen.” I then assigned an additional property or dimension to each category. For example, I assigned the property “married” or “single,” to the category “Black Women on Screen” and then assigned a dimension of “ideal” or “non-ideal.” Importantly, this process was repeated with each datum until all data had been labeled, categorized, and assigned distinguishing properties and/or dimensions.

I first reviewed each transcript and set of notes separately. Afterwards, I compared and contrasted coding results across interviews. Although different interview guides were used in interviews with professional black female content creators and black female audience members respectively, the data that emerged from these interviews carried the same themes. Putting these two sets of data in conversation was, therefore, a straightforward analytic task. There were times, however, when participants contradicted themselves. Whenever this occurred, I analyzed that data as a reflection of the non-linear ways in which meaning is made and the self is constructed. My task was not to decide which version of the truth was most accurate; rather, it was to communicate that the truth is plural, vacillating, and deeply imbedded in context.

Conclusion

I have drawn on constructivist and womanist theories regarding black female research subjects and qualitative research, respectively, to assign the appropriate methods for participant selection and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Both the constructivist and womanist paradigms are based on an inductive reasoning approach where researchers rely on participant voices and experiences to construct theory. The reliance on participant voices requires that researchers take participants seriously as experts, and even co-analysts, of their own lived experiences. Furthermore, since this project is concerned with black women specifically,

womanist theory, which addresses researcher considerations for the particular power imbalances and concerns that arise when working with black female research subjects, is fitting.

In the chapters that follow, the data will serve as evidence of the complexity of the study and the need for a methodological framework that appropriately attended to each layer of that complexity. Chapter two, for example, delves into the interior and exterior mechanisms that inform black women's engagement with media texts as audience members. The data in this chapter were particularly unruly, failing to be easily managed or explained by existing audience reception theories. Womanism, therefore, functions as a necessary guide revealing how study participants come to interpretations of texts like *Scandal* and *Being Mary Jane* that are incommensurable. Yet, with a constructivist, womanist lens it becomes possible to take participants seriously as theorists who are advancing their own systems of thought. And although these black women sometimes co-construct ways of understanding real and imagined figures of black womanhood that are incompatible, they are also making do with what the media landscape has to offer.

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Chapter 2

Nimble Readings: The Situated Literacies of Black Female Media Citizens

When I first began to explore mediated narratives about black women and relationships in 2010, there was no Olivia Pope. Instead, there were a host of headlines and plotlines that told a mostly agonizing narrative about professional black women’s failure to fulfill their duty of racial uplift—that is to bolster traditional middle class black families through marriage and

motherhood. Screenwriter Kriss Turner cinematized the narrative in the film *Something New* (2006); CNN kept the topic front and center in a two-part *Black in America* special (2008); national and local news outlets from *The Economist* to *The Culvert Chronicles*



Figure 2.1: Single Professional Women

In an article published April 8, 2010 *The Economist* blamed escalating black male incarceration rates and increased academic advancement among black women for a shrinking pool of eligible black men and the eventual “collapse of the traditional family.”

Source: *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/node/15867956>.

covered the so-called “plight of the educated African American women”; and megastar Beyoncé made an anthem for “all the single ladies” complete with a hand gesture to showcase an empty ring finger. Once Olivia Pope, a fictional 30-something unmarried black woman with an Ivy-

league law degree, made her small screen debut on ABC's dramatic thriller, *Scandal*, she changed the story about black female single-*doom*. I realized that my research would never be the same.

Scandal follows the professional feats and nail-biting calamities of the most powerful faces and behind-the-scenes players in D.C. politics and business.¹⁶ The show mostly rests on the political acrobatics of Olivia Pope and her small, but loyal, army of “gladiators” who together make up the consulting firm Olivia Pope and Associates. Each episode depicts Olivia as a screaming contradiction. Where she may be coaching an accused murderer through a press conference or encouraging one of her employees in one scene, she may be sneaking into some hidden corner of the White House for moments of sexual pleasure with the President of the United States in the next. Furthermore, Olivia Pope embodies the tensions among conflicting visions of black womanhood: the way a dominant white patriarchal society sees black women, the way some black women see (or want to see) themselves, and the way black communities look upon black women with great expectation. She is one-part stereotype, one-part glass-ceiling breaker, and one-part model black woman whose professional and academic accomplishments strengthen the reputation of the entire race. Certainly, her character is cause for celebration in the midst of a bleak media landscape where black women typically only attain the lead role in reality television or on all-black networks. In addition, Olivia's wit, management style and her equally awe-inspiring wardrobe are signifiers that this is not the kind of black female subject one is used to encountering in Tyler Perry films or traditional romantic comedies. Hers, simply put, is the

¹⁶ *Scandal* is loosely based on the life of former George H.W. Bush aide Judy Smith, a black woman. The show is also the third dramatic series that writer-director-producer Shonda Rhimes, a black woman, has created in collaboration with ABC Studios. And at a time when virtually no other black women could be found leading fictional primetime dramas, Rhimes cast Kerry Washington, also a black woman, to play the role of Olivia Pope. Within three seasons, these black women revitalized black female fandom and complicated conversations about what it meant to be a strong black woman—to handle one's professional demands with conflicting family and romantic commitments. By the 2013-14 season, *Scandal* became the sixteenth most watched show of the year, and the most watched Thursday-night series among adults ages 18 to 49. See Bibel 2014.

kind of quality role usually reserved for white actors in Hollywood. Still, I was surprised by the way Olivia was received by so many black women who quickly became fans of *Scandal*.

This chapter explores the ways in which black women are grappling with deeper understandings of the black female self in their interpretation of media texts like *Scandal*. While discussions of Olivia Pope were prominent in interviews, many other mediated subjects and texts were also salient for study participants, including Clair Huxtable (*The Cosby Show*) and Mary Jane Paul (*Being Mary Jane*). Despite the fact that *The Cosby Show* exists mostly as a pop culture artifact in the contemporary media landscape, Clair Huxtable still reigns supreme over representations of black womanhood. The continued appeal of Huxtable lies mostly in her embodiment of an idyllic black womanhood in the midst of scarce black female representations in scripted television (Boylorn 2008). Clair is a feminist who never has to say the word feminist; a career woman who, despite rarely being featured at work, never has to prove her professional success; and a domestic goddess of sorts who never has to break a sweat or take much time for herself as she raises five children and manages a sixth dependent of sorts in her husband. She stands in stark contrast to Olivia Pope and Mary Jane Paul who offer contemporary black female media citizens unconventional models of female success. Neither of them is married, has children, or even has a committed relationship with a man who is not already married to someone else. Yet, both Olivia Pope and Mary Jane Paul have moments when they seem to wilt under Huxtable's shadow in their yearning for a more traditional home life. If Pope and Paul are being judged by a shared standard, then Clair Huxtable is the measuring stick.

Data from all 30 study participants, collected through interviews and participant observation, informs this chapter. As they discussed various media texts, it became clear that black female media citizens sift through a long media memory in order to grapple with mediated

misrepresentations of themselves. That is to say that study participants bring past media figures into the present in order to piece together a script for black womanhood that fits their values, experiences, and aspirations. Rather than enacting the oppositional gaze that bell hooks (1992) proposes, black female media citizens are practicing the womanist strategy of making do. “In the midst of scarcity this ethic functions as a power of material survival and spiritual thriving” (Baker-Fletcher 197). When very few diverse representations of black womanhood exist in the media landscape, black women are forced to “make something out of nothing” (Baker-Fletcher 197). In other words, black women’s practice of negotiating media texts to arrive at affirmative readings that hold intact their personal definitions of black womanhood is made possible by their possession of a particular psychosocial dexterity. Hence, study participants enact complex strategies that enable them to embrace and denounce the same media text all at once. These ways of reading reveal a nimble interpretive practice whereby black women stretch between oppositional points of view in an effort to keep their own personal understanding of black womanhood intact.

Many study participants discuss their meaning making processes as embedded within larger dialogic interpretive communities where black women are constantly collaborating to make sense of the media landscape. The debates within the interpretive community are often amplified by religious tensions and historical legacies that stratify black women’s values and understandings of what it means to be a black woman. Study participants draw on various competencies and an intersectional consciousness informed by their lived experiences to shape their meaning making strategies. The participant data is best accommodated by the concept of plural and socially situated literacy. Situated literacy as defined by David Barton and Mary Hamilton is “a set of social practices... embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices

[that is] historically situated [and] acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making” (8). In my observation of study participants, I found that their interpretive strategies, or ways of making meaning from media texts, are socially constructed in and through their interaction in various social settings. That is to say that the interpretive work of study participants is collaborative and steeped in the normative structures of their immediate social contexts.

In negotiating their interpretive strategies, study participants are also negotiating their beliefs about the gender roles, the public and private behaviors, and the desires that are appropriate for black womanhood. Interpretation is not simply a process of evaluating a text, but also of making sense of and constructing one’s identity as a black woman. As defined by Joke Hermes, “identity construction [is] a process of meaning making whereby individual identities are formed as a result of social interaction based on or making use of cultural sources of meaning production” (71). Study participants tend to approach media texts and media figures as potential scripts, or “cultural resources,” that can be used to inform how they perform black womanhood in their own lives. Thus, their interpretive processes are never just about whether a media text is satisfying or enjoyable; rather, their engagement with mediated scripts for black womanhood are always a negotiation toward a satisfying understanding of the black female self.

The Sociocultural Dimensions of Meaning Making

Black women often lead the conversations about *Scandal* that dominate the social media universe during the show’s one-hour time slot. Writers have noted that black women think of the show as a “guilty pleasure,” but also as a commentary on black female gender roles in the new

millennium.¹⁷ For example, one television critic described Olivia Pope as “the ideal for so many black women, a successful career woman who didn't just reach the so-called 'glass ceiling,' but smashed through it,” while also noting that what makes Olivia especially compelling are her “tremendous flaws” (Prince 2014). On the one hand, Olivia Pope is a shining black female character who is well-educated, well-paid, and well-liked among her employees and her clients, who happen to be some of the most powerful people in the country. On the other hand, she is a 21st century rendition of the damsel in distress, constantly being out-strategized by the men in her life who fight, kill, and scheme to keep her firmly within their grasp. The fact that Olivia cannot quite seem to break away from the seduction of two white male lovers—one of whom is a married father of two and the President of the United States—also makes her a well-cloaked version of the Jezebel trope.

Olivia Pope is a single professional black woman discontent with her love life, but her backstory reveals that she opted out of the traditional fairytale and decided on a less conservative, albeit more tumultuous life. Olivia turned down the proposal of a prominent black male U.S. Senator to indulge her fantasy of life with a man whose status and family obligations would never allow the two of them to be joined in (un)holy matrimony. Inasmuch as her romantic choices leave her yearning for marriage, Olivia's career fulfills her in a way that rarely compels her to long for motherhood. While the overall premise of her love life is less than satisfying, it must be stated that Olivia Pope does represent a more nuanced model of black female aspiration and desire than Clair Huxtable offers. Olivia Pope is very much in touch with her sexual desires and her need for romance and companionship, so much so that she embraces one relationship for the sake of lust, and another for the sake of love. Unlike Clair Huxtable, who

¹⁷ Television critic Mary McNamara called *Scandal* “a social-media phenomenon and a test case for TV networks trying to navigate new media.” See ‘*Scandal*’ Has Become Must-Tweet TV in the [Los Angeles Times](#) (May 2013).

the viewer must imagine enjoying intimacy under the safe shield of respectability, Olivia is a part of scenes where she puts her sexual experiences on display and literally gives herself over to pleasure.

Furthermore, the allure of *Scandal* that attracts many black women, including most of the participants involved in this study, requires a re-examination of the ways in which black women engage media texts and make sense of the scripts for black womanhood embodied in characters like Olivia Pope. The study participants who embrace Olivia demonstrate how black women may negotiate problematic texts such that they bend, stretch, and knead a text until it fits their own understandings of black womanhood. These nimble interpretive strategies are not reserved for *Scandal*; they apply to multiple other texts in the media landscape that make some statement about black womanhood.

Meaning making is a dialogic process always occurring through social interactions among members of an interpretive community. During much of the time that I spent working on this project, I engaged in, or witnessed, collaborative meaning making around *Scandal*. Olivia Pope was a common topic of conversation in hair salons that I frequented; loved ones would bring her up in conversation; and I would occasionally hear students talking about her in hallways around campus. For a scholar studying black womanhood and media, Olivia Pope could not be escaped. When pastors at predominantly black churches began discussing *Scandal* in their sermons, which was around the same time that scholars started planning panels focused on the show at academic conferences, my curiosity finally usurped my frustration with the show and its troubling representation of black womanhood.¹⁸ I could not understand why several black women were so eager to embrace a character that, in my mind, embodied such untenable

¹⁸ One pastor, Olu Brown of the Impact Church of Atlanta, preached a three-part series based on the show's characters and plotlines. See Brown 2013.

behaviors and ways of being. The professional success, the non-traditional management of sexuality, and the fabulous wardrobe, for me, were not enough to compensate for Olivia Pope's deep-rooted alignment with the worst images of black womanhood. Her precarious affairs with the President of the United States and with a CIA operative situate Olivia as the Jezebel—a black woman whose insatiable appetite for sex compels her to make irresponsible decisions that carry major (societal) consequences. Specifically, Olivia's judgment is clouded by her love for the President, causing her to perform criminal acts, or to destroy the public reputation of his enemies, all to protect the President's image. Furthermore, once viewers learn more about Olivia's childhood in season three, it is clear that she has been raised by powerful, upper middle class blacks who are also criminals. Her mother is an international terrorist who literally eats through her own flesh to escape from prison. Olivia's father is a CIA operative who commands a secret spy division of trained assassins that will kill anyone, even the President's teenage son, to maintain the status quo. Despite her elite boarding school education and law degree, Olivia is a bad seed—a black woman who must constantly work to suppress the evil within her in order to meet the most basic expectations of productive citizenship.

In their discussions of *Scandal*, however, study participants reveal that they are not ignorant about the problems that a character like Olivia Pope incites, yet, they are looking beyond these issues to be able to enjoy the media text and to uphold Olivia as a role model of sorts. In this way, participants are engaging in nimble readings established through collaborative meaning making. Cocoa, a young professional working in the healthcare industry, spoke of a complicated relationship with Olivia Pope in her attempt to manage the gap between Olivia's presentation of black womanhood and her own understanding of what it means to be a good black woman.

Interviewer: What appeals to you about [Olivia Pope]?

Cocoa: She's in control. She is still vulnerable, even though I just talked bad about her being a strong black woman stereotype. I remember now, she cries. And, what else is good about her? She's very smart. She's usually the smartest person in the room. She's driven. She knows what she wants. She inspires others. You know, she's got a gang of followers that do whatever, whatever she needs because they trust her even though she's a politician kinda, so she's not very honest sometimes. She's on the good side of things. Even if things that she does aren't 100% honest, she still has, like, good intentions, I think.

Earlier in the interview, Cocoa stated that she did not think of Olivia Pope as an ideal black woman because of her association with the strong black woman stereotype. This stereotype is based on the idea that black women are expected to be all things to all people—sexually appealing and available wives, family and community nurturers, and stellar professionals in the workplace. In this case, “strength advances a virtuous claim about any Black woman whose efforts and emotional responses defy common beliefs about what is humanly possible amidst adversity” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2). Understanding the physical and emotional strains of fulfilling an image as impossible as the strong black woman, Cocoa further explained that the stereotype “could be a good thing, but can also be a bad thing.” While it is honorable that Olivia cares for the people in her life and assumes a nurturing role with many of her clients, her external output of care leaves her internal reserves empty. Nevertheless, Cocoa's statements indicate a hesitancy to categorize Olivia Pope with any one overarching label. Over the course of the interview Cocoa shifts perspectives, considering representations of black womanhood through various lenses. In the case of Olivia Pope, Cocoa can list her preferable attributes, just as easily as she can discuss Olivia's flaws.

Cocoa's process of reading and relating to Olivia Pope is not completely based in rational interpretation; rather, it is an interpretation better described as an aspirational or corrective imagining of black womanhood (Ang 1996). Ien Ang argues that in order to understand the

significance of female media citizens' appreciation of media subjects that embody disempowering characteristics, analysts must resist conceptualizing fictional characters as "realistic images of women" and instead approach these characters as "textual constructions of possible *modes of femininity*" (78). Cocoa's reading of Olivia Pope can thus be analyzed as an effective way of thinking through versions of the black female self in the imaginary, without risking the consequences of a disempowered black female subject position in real life (Ang 1996).

My initial approach to Olivia Pope was along the lines of what Ang describes as the "role/image" approach traditionally taken up in feminist scholarship. That is to say, I rejected Olivia Pope on the grounds that she was a weak role model for black women and generally reinforced the idea that black women in particular are criminal, sexually deviant, and easily overpowered by men. Study participants, by contrast, explain that meaning making is not fixed, and it produces less static interpretations. Meaning making is an ongoing process of exploring the question of what it means to be a black woman in and through media texts and media figures.

Ashley, a full-time graduate student in her mid-twenties, describes her nimble interpretive practice as a switch that she turns on or off, depending on her mood and the type of media content she engages. She credits her years of experience in academic environments, and the challenge of one professor in particular, with helping her develop a critical lens that now causes her to question the motives behind media content.

Ashley: I think now [the critical lens] is more on than off. So, like, so on to the point that it makes it difficult for me to engage with rap. Because, rap is extremely homophobic and misogynistic. It is so turned on that even though I love *Scandal*, I'm like, dang Olivia! Why you gotta be the sidepiece and telling everybody that it's okay to be the sidepiece? I'm like it's so on, and I see it's so on that sometimes it determines what I can and cannot, will and will not engage with. So, that's part of the reason I don't have cable right now. Because I refuse to engage with, I wanna choose what I engage with when I turn on my TV. So, Netflix, Hulu Plus is all I have and use, but I also have watched ABC. But

that all allows me to control the type of media that I engage with and how/what enters my mind.

Like many other study participants, Ashley believes that her experiences in higher education, specifically with women's studies courses, give her a more critical edge that she wields within and outside of the classroom during her time of leisure media engagement. She can enjoy a show like *Scandal* while also challenging the show's depiction of black womanhood. Specifically, Ashley disagrees with a glorification of the "sidepiece"—the idea that the role of mistress, or the woman on the side, is a viable and even appealing alternative for black women in romantic relationships.¹⁹ Ashley uses her interpretive instincts as a guide, which draws her into some media texts and away from others. The digital tools that best facilitate her style of media engagement are content delivery systems that allow her to view specific shows or films at her own discretion, rather than requiring her to subscribe to entire channels. Netflix and Hulu Plus, for example, are web-based content providers that allow subscribers to stream television and film content, as well as web series, for a monthly fee. A departure from cable, Netflix and Hulu Plus do not subject subscribers to imposed programming schedules or channel structures; rather, they pick and choose what content they want to watch, and when they want to watch it. In an effort to avoid those media texts that do not resonate with Ashley's view of black womanhood, she opts out of certain content altogether.

Meaning making for Ashley, then, is an autonomous act that requires her to bring her intellectual self to bear on media texts. Her interpretive practice reflects the same type of culturally situated meaning making described in new literacy studies, which holds that "literacy

¹⁹ Kerry Washington, the actress who portrays Olivia Pope, stated that the categorization of Olivia Pope as a sidepiece is "debatable" during a visit to *The Wendy Williams Show*. She explained: "I don't like the expression sidepiece because I think when you call a woman a 'piece,' it objectifies her. But I think also: the president has said to her 'I will leave my wife for you' and she said no. Is she a sidepiece or is she just somebody who's afraid to be all in? I don't know." See Carter 2013.

practices...refer to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts” (Street 79). In this case, the context of academia and feminist theories of analysis inform Ashley’s way of critiquing rap music and a character like Olivia Pope, despite her enjoyment of the character. Media literacies, as described by study participants like Ashley, then, are constructed individually and collaboratively through media citizens’ interaction with theories and resources in specific social contexts.

In addition to reading media through a critical academic lens, study participants also discuss faith beliefs and collaborative thinking with other black women as critical to their interpretive practices. For example, Diane is a middle-aged mother who understands media interpretation to be a social act that enhances her ability to interact with others who do not share her beliefs as a Christian. She finds that working with young women and collaborating with them in the interpretation of media texts keeps her well-rounded.

Diane: For the most part, I really do like things where I can glean—what I find is I can glean from a lot of stuff. It’s a shifting of my perspective and not living in a box, ‘cause I think sometimes we get, we get in a church box, and you lose sight of the whole world. And when you meet people and connect with people you have to be able to be diverse in your thinking. Sometimes you gotta, I work with young people. You have to be quick on your feet. They keep me current in all of this [media] stuff, and so you gotta stay relevant.

Diane spoke in particular about her affinity for Steve Harvey’s radio show and talk show, and her occasional engagement with shows on the Black Entertainment Network (BET). The content broadcast through these media outlets often conflicts with Diane’s personal value system, which is shaped by her Christian faith—specifically Steve Harvey’s “90-day rule” which suggests that women avoid sexual intercourse until they have been in a monogamous relationship for three months. “If I put on my Christian hat, of course I have to disagree with the three-month rule. [However] if you’re gonna be in the world then you need some worldly principle” (Diane). “Worldly” or secular principles, like waiting three months to engage in sexual intercourse, are

distinct from Diane's religious principle of reserving sexual intercourse for marriage. Her engagement with the media landscape, then, is guided by her beliefs and entertainment preferences, but also by her desire to broaden her understanding of the world through considering issues from multiple viewpoints. Diane believes that there is a tendency among Christians to resist all media content that deviates from their internal values—causing one's spirituality to function more like a blinder than a lens from which to view the world. In order to prevent an obscured or limited worldview, Diane intentionally engages in collective meaning making with the distressed female youth who are supported by the social service agency where she works. Diane therefore employs an interpretive practice that is constituted through her engagement with other black women, and a conscious effort to balance the multiple social contexts that color her understanding of media and womanhood.

Much like Diane, Sammy Jo, a retired mother in her sixties, also practices nimble interpretive strategies that allow her to find value in media texts that do not always align with her way of thinking about womanhood and relationships. Although she is, at times, deeply troubled by the portrayal of black womanhood presented in *Scandal*, Sammy Jo continues to engage the show as a social tool that enriches her participation in an interpretive community that also values *Scandal*. Furthermore, Sammy Jo's relationship with the Olivia Pope character is coiled around scenes that display the fictional black woman's bridled holster of power, which simultaneously beguiles and repulses Sammy Jo.

Sammy Jo: I will watch episodes four or five times. I don't care how many times I've watched an episode, I always get something new, or there is a nuance, or a line that I missed before that helps me understand the entire 45 minutes. Now, there were a couple of episodes where I turned the TV off totally upset with what had taken place. Um, and upset isn't the correct adjective. I felt betrayed. I felt that Shonda Rimes had betrayed us, meaning black women, in what had taken place in the episode, and I felt even though I knew that was her job, that Kerry Washington had disappointed me in allowing this scene itself to take place.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Is there...do you remember one particular episode or particular scene that made you feel that way?

Sammy Jo: Definitely. When everyone was at the christening ceremony, she turned around and walked out, and Fitz followed her down the hall and dragged her into this little equipment closet/sound closet, and after their little tryst was over, he said something like “that was just my loins longing for you.” In other words, I just used you; that’s all I wanted. And, I was like how could you do this?

Interviewer: So, what keeps you watching? Given that there are those moments where you are into the political thrill of the show, but then there are those moments where you feel betrayed.

Sammy Jo: I think there is a community and that community is those friends of mine that watch also, and we can have hours and hours of discussion about what took place and the nuance, and I belong to two *Scandal* online groups.

Sammy Jo’s words reveal the intensity of her engagement with media texts that speak directly to the limitations and possibilities of black womanhood. As a self-proclaimed “political junkie,” she does not engage *Scandal* the same way she engages non-fictional narratives about power and government, such as *Morning Joe* (MSNBC). Rather, there is an intimacy established between Sammy Jo and the fictional characters that inhabit the story world of *Scandal*, as well as the individuals who write and perform the narrative. The social, or dialogic, quality of black female media interpretation may therefore be dual in nature—existing between audience members, and between producers and interpreters. Within this union built on a shared identity of black womanhood, Sammy Jo has established her connection to *Scandal* and its black female leads as a mutual exchange where she invokes her rights as a media citizen. Sammy Jo expects a particular treatment of black womanhood as a return on her investment of viewing and supporting the show. Although the show does not always meet her standards, Sammy Jo is no more compelled to dismiss the text than she would be compelled to dismiss a friend over a disagreement. She maintains her commitment to the show, but more importantly, to Shonda Rhimes (creator and director of *Scandal*) and Kerry Washington (the actress portraying Olivia Pope) as the black women behind the show. In Sammy Jo’s mind, these women are just as much

a part of her interpretive community as the friends and the members of the online community with whom she collaboratively interprets the show.

Jacqueline Bobo describes the relationship between black female content creators and their black female audience as one based on an “instant intimacy” constituted by a common body of codes and symbols that make black women particularly attuned to implicit connotations of texts produced by black women (59). Both content creators and interpreters are aware of the expectation of instant intimacy and play their role in the relationship accordingly. The concept of intimacy distinguishes black female interpretive communities from Stanley Fish’s original definition, because it speaks directly to shared experiential *and* cultural-linguistic referents. Thus, Sammy Jo’s connection to Shonda Rhimes and Kerry Washington/Olivia Pope is not a parasocial relationship based in fantasy, but rather, a psychosocial link (re)produced through the broad commonalities embedded in living in a black woman’s body. Indeed, Sammy Jo’s nimble reading of *Scandal* is also a product of her being able to understand Rhimes’s interplay between real and imagined issues of blackness, womanhood, and power. She reads the show with the real history of American race relations in mind:

Sammy Jo: Oftentimes, as parents, as mothers, as mothers of black children, we become, I’ve known several personal incidences where parents have become very upset because no matter how much they try to instill this sense of pride in their children and self-confidence, the world outside, especially African American children, the world outside of those walls, still has a way of destroying some of that self-esteem and self-confidence. And for parents especially, it becomes troublesome when their child goes to a toy store and selects the blue-eyed blonde-haired doll, or sees a character on TV and says, “that’s who I want to be” and the parent becomes upset that they have not done their job. But, what they’re not realizing is what that child is expressing to them in the only way that a child knows how to express it; is that even at age 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10, they recognize who the power holders in our world, here in the United States, who the decision makers are, who the people are that have a real hand in their destiny. And so for me, Olivia Pope breaks the majority of those stereotypes. She has the audacity to be smart. She has the audacity to be independent, but she still has a vulnerability of wanting a love. But I’m not sure if it’s love that she wants, but she certainly wants power. And can you find a power broker any stronger than the president of the United States? And then does she bring him to his

knees? Absolutely. So, Olivia Pope is able to break down a lot of walls and fences, visibly on screen.

Within the larger context of structural disempowerment among blacks in the United States, Sammy Jo willfully embraces Olivia Pope's character as a reprieve, and even a role model. Sammy Jo clings to the idea that in order to "have a real hand in their destiny" black women must break through stereotypes. Only certain stereotypes, however, fit Sammy Jo's argument; specifically that of the gold digger who must seduce men for her wealth because she has no way of attaining success through the route of corporate labor, and that of the strong black woman. Since Sammy Jo sees Olivia as maintaining a balance between power and vulnerability, Olivia becomes an anti-stereotype.

Olivia stands out for all of the wrong reasons because of her affair with the President; however, she stands out for all of the right reasons because of the boldness required to build an enviable career managing the public embarrassments of others while simultaneously perpetrating one's own scandal. The very source of Sammy Jo's anguish stated earlier in the interview, which was Olivia Pope's inequitable affair with a married man, becomes a source of power when Sammy Jo reflects on the history of black female victimhood. The unsavory affair is also an unapologetic claim to power. Hence, Sammy Jo is forced to reach back into a history of race relations in order to make Olivia Pope function as a role model for the present. Using the limited cultural resources available, Sammy Jo stretches Olivia Pope's few respectable qualities to conceal her glaring inadequacies. Rather than breaking barriers, Olivia Pope continues to be further and further restrained by the desires of each man that enters her life. Perhaps even worse than older renditions of Jezebel, Olivia Pope is a black woman who actually has the intelligence to defy stereotypes and achieve success on the basis of her merit. Yet, her deficient emotional intelligence leaves her powerless under her abusers. Olivia only has as much power over her

environment as her father and lovers will allow her. It is in an act of aspirational interpretation that Sammy Jo dismisses these problems and sees Olivia Pope only in a way that fits Sammy Jo's own understanding of ideal black womanhood.

Similarly, Skylar, a corporate professional in her twenties, has a complicated relationship with media texts like *Scandal*. She makes sense of the media landscape in collaboration with fellow Christian women whom she trusts and admires, causing her to pivot when a text fails to meet her personal standards of lifestyle and behavior. Skylar, in fact, originally began watching *Scandal* at the encouragement of her aunt.

Skylar: You know, it's so funny because my aunt, somebody who I really admire and respect her opinion, she actually had been telling me "Hey, you've got to rent and watch *Scandal*." She's like "Hey, you gotta watch it, like it will even help you in your career." and you know she was really touting the show if you will. So, during Christmas break, I spent time on my I-pad on Netflix and I caught up on seasons 1 and 2. So, yes, I am watching *Scandal* now.

The interpretive community, as reflected in Skylar's comments, consists of black women who share similar beliefs and ways of interpreting media texts. At times, members of the interpretive community, like Skylar's aunt, will guide others in meaning making by leading them toward certain media texts and establishing preliminary terms of interpretation. Skylar's relation to the Olivia Pope character, like Cocoa's, is also situated within the context of an aspirational or corrective imagining of black womanhood. She uses Olivia Pope to think about ways of confronting dilemmas that are common to black women in high stress professional environments (Ang 1996). The fact that Skylar's aunt advised her to treat *Scandal* as a career playbook of sorts suggests that she, too, has evaluated the show as a fantastical exploration of black women in corporate America. Given that Skylar is also a Christian, however, and she disagrees with Olivia Pope's relationship decisions, it is difficult for her to marry her aunt's assessment of the show with her own understanding of the public and private behaviors appropriate for black women.

Skylar: Like I said, my aunt was somebody who really wanted me to watch Kerry Washington's character and see how she handles herself in different situations and her temperament, and you know how her confidence is a good thing, and that would kinda, you know, be used as a navigator for me at this point, especially in my career. However, the spiritual side of me knows that a lot of the things that happen on this show aren't right—being the fact we are glorifying a woman who is having an affair with a married man. I mean, that is not something that sits well with me, even though, the way that it's portrayed, and it's mixed in well, and it is pretty riveting watching that affair unfold. But at the end of the day, you're like, wow, like you know, that's not right. And it's not something that I should be supporting because I sure wouldn't want it happening in my own household.

At the core, Skylar's reading of Olivia Pope and *Scandal* hinges on the tension between the pleasure of fantasy, and the responsibilities and values that shape everyday experience. As long as Skylar treats the show as a work of fiction that is entertaining, informative, and a source of connection between herself and her aunt, then her enjoyment is maximized. When Skylar reflects on the real-world implications of a woman like Olivia Pope living out a script of black womanhood that diverges from Skylar's values and belief system, her connection to the show and her relation to the character are weakened.

Importantly, if Skylar only considers *Scandal* within the world of fictional entertainment, she clings to Olivia Pope as a role model. When Skylar considers *Scandal* within the context of real-world consequences, however, she aligns herself with the wronged woman, Mellie, who is the wife of Olivia's lover. "The spiritual side of me knows that a lot of the things that happen on [*Scandal*] aren't right," Skylar says, "being the fact we are glorifying a woman who is having an affair with a married man. At the end of the day I can't support it because I wouldn't want that happening in my household. I mean, I definitely see myself more as the wife in that situation, as Mellie." Since Mellie is a white female character, Skylar's statement suggests that when she pivots her perspective as an interpreter, she may be repelled away from black female characters altogether.

Skylar's rules of media engagement are strict: "There just needs to be a link there between me and whatever it is that I'm spending my time on... There is no reason for me to even watch if it's not adding to my life in any way, shape, or form." Ultimately, her assessment of whether or not a media text can bring value to her life depends on the extent to which that text reflects Skylar's beliefs, values, and aspirations as a Christian black woman. Furthermore, Skylar's reading indicates that meaning making does not necessarily lead media citizens to assess some media figure or text as negative or positive. Rather, meaning making is a fluid process that allows media citizens to draw on mediated scripts as cultural resources that help them define black womanhood on their own terms.

Reading Black Womanhood *into* Media Texts

It is clear from Skylar's account that she approaches media with thoughts about her own life beliefs and experience in mind. While she can relate to Olivia Pope's professional skills, she cannot relate to Olivia's expression of sexuality. Skylar's preferred script for black womanhood is derived from the bible and an interpretive community of women who have also embraced scripture as a lifestyle guide. These women, some of whom are Internet acquaintances, are Skylar's most trusted sources for collaborative meaning making.

Skylar: My guidelines come from the bible. They come from other young, black women for Christ who write blogs, like Heather Lindsey is someone that I follow. She has the Pinky Promise organization and it's all about waiting until you're married to be [sexually] intimate. So you know, people like that who you trust, almost like you would trust your pastor.²⁰

²⁰ The Pinky Promise Movement is a national network of Christian women who have vowed to "honor God with your body and your life. To refuse to give your body to anyone that hasn't paid the price for you called marriage. It's a promise to stay pure before God in EVERY single way...It's a promise to God that you will honor your marriage covenant. It's saying that I promise not to step outside of my marriage, cheat on my spouse and that I'll work through every issue." It was established by Heather Lindsey in 2012. Lindsey, a black woman, is also an author and a mother and co-founder of The Gathering Oasis ministry with her husband Cornelius Lindsey. See www.pinkypromisemovement.com.

Heather Lindsey's online presence and outreach facilitates a digitally interactive relationship between herself and Skylar, despite the fact that the two have never met in person. Furthermore, Lindsey's blogs and everyday religious rhetoric are just as central to Skylar's understanding of black womanhood as the advice of her aunt. Thus, Skylar draws on her relationships with both black women as they co-construct a definition of black womanhood that fits their common values and beliefs. The definition of black womanhood that Skylar holds in heart and mind is the measure by which she ultimately evaluates *Scandal*, Olivia Pope, and media texts in general. Still, it is necessary that Skylar's interpretive practice be nimble, because she must be able to pivot perspectives in order to map the script for black womanhood presented in *Scandal* onto her own aspirations. Skylar can make sense of Olivia Pope through her aunt's eyes and benefit from the professional role playing and career motivation that the character offers. In this way, Olivia Pope can inform the part of Skylar's black female self that is the most professionally ambitious. Skylar can also make sense of Olivia Pope through the eyes of Heather Lindsey and create distance between her own relationship choices and those glamorized in *Scandal*. In this way, Olivia Pope does not sully the part of Skylar's black female self that is focused on living a life in tune with Christian principles.

Returning to Cocoa, it becomes clear that she also holds an understanding of black womanhood that makes it difficult for her to fully embrace Olivia Pope as an ideal representation. Like Skylar, she reads Olivia Pope in pieces, grasping the parts of the character that align with her personal values, and releasing those fragments that do not align. While Cocoa values Olivia's positive attributes, she also uses other media figures to fill in the gaps of the insufficient script for black womanhood that Olivia embodies. That is to say, she creates a hybrid

ideal of black womanhood based on the best attributes of multiple black female characters. She then reads Olivia Pope in conjunction with these other subjects.

Interviewer: How do you try to emulate those traits of your favorite characters in your day-to-day life?

Cocoa: Okay, let's start with Clair [Huxtable]. Even though I'm not a wife and mother, like you said, she has a very good work/life balance, so basically I kinda try to do it all. I know that's not a very good thing, but I try to have a, you know, be good at my job and at school, and also keep up home, so keep my place nice, you know, cook every now and then for my boyfriend, you know, stuff like that. Olivia Pope, I use her, like, confidence. I just, I was promoted at my job over a lot of people that have higher degrees than me and that have been there a lot longer, so that confidence when she walks into a room like she knows her stuff. You know, she's about that professional work life, and I like that about her, so I try to emulate that too, so her professionalism and her control.

Cocoa situates her reading of mediated scripts for black womanhood within the context of the larger media landscape. Even if a character does not reflect her exact life circumstances (e.g., a character that is married, or a mother), she finds points of relation that allow her to map the character's portrayal of black womanhood onto her own daily performances of black womanhood at work, at home, and at school. Importantly, rather than narrow her focus to one character, Cocoa's expansive interpretive practice compels her to weave traits from multiple characters together in order to achieve a comprehensive model of black womanhood that will fit the scope of her life.

The practice of reading a media text in relation to their own ideal way of being leads some study participants toward readings that contradict those embraced by their interpretive communities. Melanie, for example, is one of a few study participants to discount race when engaging the media landscape to find sources of affirmation for her life goals and a general definition of womanhood. Despite the fact that many of her friends favor Olivia Pope, Melanie, a 20-something healthcare professional, is much more drawn to the lifestyle that the First Lady in

Scandal has achieved. Olivia's non-traditional professional life and chaotic romantic life are far from what Melanie would like to achieve in herself.

Melanie: I think [Olivia] has an interesting job. I mean Mellie, by far, is my favorite character on the show, so I'm not gonna say I watch the show for like, for Olivia per se. She's not my favorite, but she has an interesting job. She definitely helps people. It's an interesting career; something I would've never thought of if it wasn't on TV.

Interviewer: What about Mellie attracts you to her character?

Melanie: She's living the American dream. I mean she's the First Lady of the United States. She's married. She has three children, and she's educated, and she has some power. I mean you literally have everything I would want. I just think I relate more to Mellie than I do to Olivia. I mean Olivia is just a single person sleeping with someone's husband.

Mellie is a white character with a law degree who gave up her career aspirations of becoming a partner at a law firm when her husband decided to enter politics. As the First Lady, she has played a major role in developing campaign strategies and in keeping her husband's approval ratings high. During a particularly tense time in her husband's career, Mellie falsely presented herself as pregnant during a press interview. Unable to renege on her lie later in the season, the fictional First Lady hastily became pregnant and labeled the child "America's baby." As a young black woman who also holds a professional graduate degree and longs for the day when she will be able to trade her job for a career as a wife and homemaker, Melanie reads these scenes as the productive works of a dutiful wife. While other viewers, including myself, might read Mellie as a character who miserably makes due with a life that has cost her more than she imagined having to pay, Melanie views the fictional First Lady as having the greatest advantages of any other female character on the show. The fact that she and Mellie do not share the same racial identity is superseded by the fact that Mellie is living the type of life to which Melanie aspires. Since Melanie's understanding of black womanhood deviates from some of the most popular mediated scripts of black womanhood, she is often drawn away from black female media characters. Such an interior understanding of the black female self—which is largely based on white female

characters—causes Melanie to depart from the values and aspirations coveted among women who constitute her interpretive community.

While many of the study participants, some of whom are also friends of Melanie, reference black female professionals like Clair Huxtable and Melissa Harris-Perry as their media role models, Melanie describes Alicia Florrick of the CBS drama *The Good Wife* as her favorite female media character. Alicia Florrick, similar to the First Lady in *Scandal*, is a white law school graduate and mother of two who spends 15 years as a homemaker after marrying a politician, Peter Florrick. The contrast in favored media characters among Melanie and her friends is symbolic of the contrast in their life aspirations. Within the interpretive community, there are different ideas of the gender roles that will lead to the most happiness.

Melanie: I have probably six really, really good friends who have told me that they want their husbands to be stay-at-home dads... That's the way they are. I don't want to be like them. I still believe it is important to have a parent home, but I would want to be the one at home. I'm not that super-girl. I respect those girls. I understand where they're coming from. I see it. I see they want it. They're working hard for their education. They want to work, but they want someone to be at home with their kids. So we kind of have the same, we have the same thought process. It's just I want to be the one staying at home, and they all want to go to work.

Interviewer: Hmm. And so why would, why do you want to be the one to stay at home?

Melanie: Because I think, I think I can be a really good wife. I think staying at home is more than just taking care of your kids. I think it's promoting your husband, promoting your family, promoting your brand, what makes you money. If your husband is an attorney, that means you going out there, when you're going to lunch you're mentioning your husband's name, like, hey, maybe you should talk to him. Or, maybe, I think I could add just as much value working as I can if I stay at home. I think I could promote my husband. I think I could add. I think I could make our family money in a whole totally different way that'll be more enjoyable and allow me to be with my kids more.

Melanie's description of the life that she imagines for herself and the agency and power she ascribes to the role of wife-mother are reflective of a more nuanced reading of the dutiful wife role than is typically understood in relation to such fictional characters. Her reading is neither informed by the dominant understanding of wife-mother, nor by the meaning of wife-mother that

friends in her interpretive community uphold. Rather, Melanie interprets characters like First Lady Mellie Grant and Alicia Florrick within the realm of her interior logic of the advantages of fulfilling traditional gender roles. Melanie can therefore see strength, efficacy, and joy, where others might read weakness, inadequacy, and pain. She demonstrates that the interpretive practices of black female media citizens fall along a continuum that may be more or less in line with imposed gender norms depending on their personal aspirations and desires.

Black Women and the Specter of Clair Huxtable: Historically Situated Media Literacies

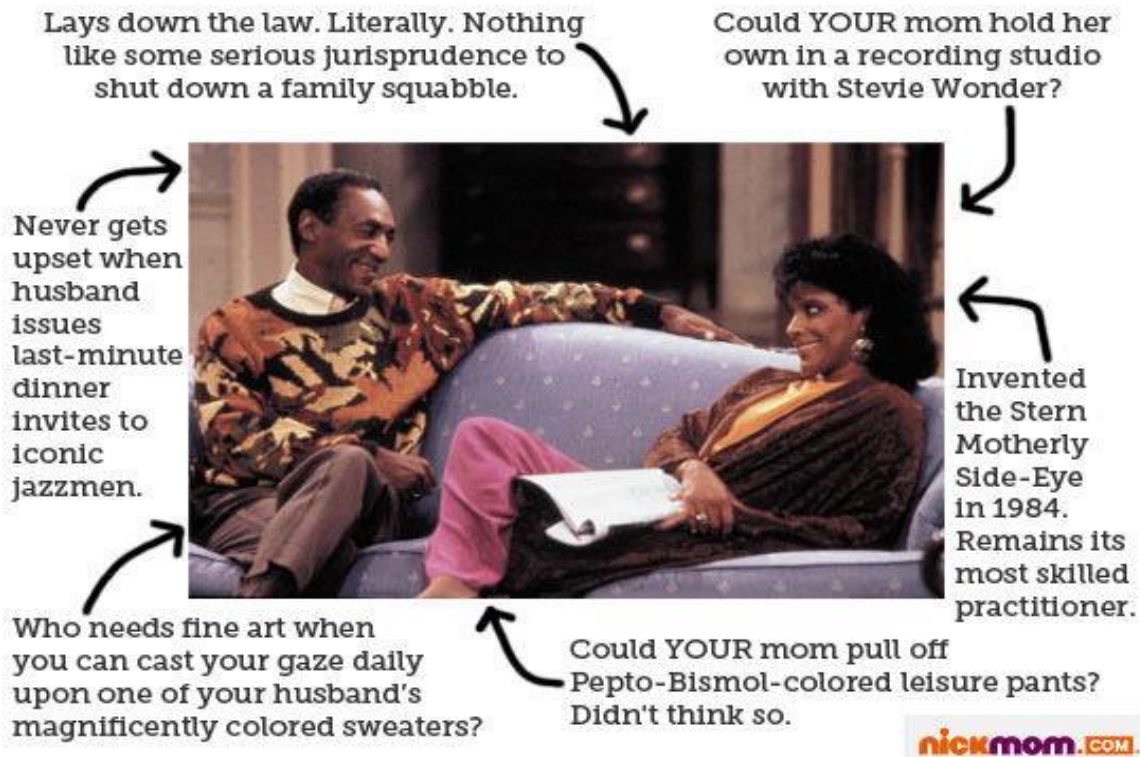


Figure 2.2: Clair Huxtable
 This image depicts Clair Huxtable (Phylicia Rashād) and Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable (Bill Cosby) lounging in the living room of their home. The image, titled “I Wish I Could Be Like: Claire Huxtable” is a promotional tool for the NickMom network which broadcasts re-runs of *The Cosby Show*. Source: <http://www.nickmom.com/more-lols/wish-i-could-be-like-clair-huxtable-cosby-show/>.

“I think that there are times when you certainly feel that pressure that every woman needs to be, or everything you talk about needs to be built around like this sort of Clair Huxtable-type image, and that’s just not, you know, realistic.”-Bethany

In ongoing conversations about the meaning of black womanhood among study participants and the (virtual) communities that they inhabit, Olivia Pope is a symbol of non-traditionalism. Another icon embedded in this debate, representing a distant point on the spectrum of black womanhood, is fictional television wife-mother-attorney Clair Huxtable. She is the black female character against whom most others are measured and has yet to meet her match. In the 1980s, Clair Huxtable (portrayed by Phylicia Rashād) reigned from her corner office at a reputable law firm, and from her posh Brooklyn brownstone, alongside other female characters on shows like *Frank's Place* and *A Different World* that complicated popular depictions of black womanhood.²¹ A married mother of five portrayed as both professional and sexually desirable, Clair for many media citizens was and is THE ideal black woman. In syndicated re-runs of *The Cosby Show*, one finds Clair to possess a nearly perfect harmony between grace and aggression which enables her to be just firm enough to be called a feminist, but not rigid enough to be read as unfeminine, undesirable, or unlovable (Wanzo 2013). Unlike Olivia Pope, Clair waltzes around enduring black female tropes; gliding past the caricature of Jezebel and tip-toing around Mammy without falling into their traps. Still, scholars have questioned whether or not a character like Clair is too sanitized to effectively confront deep issues around gender, labor, race, and class, or too pristine to be relatable to most black folks (Press 1991; Gray 1995). Nevertheless, Clair remains viable in the minds of many study participants as they make meaning of contemporary representations of black women.

Clair, and more importantly the distance between Clair and Olivia Pope, represents a complex entanglement with the past, which indicates that the situated media literacies study

²¹ Clair Huxtable is the subject of multiple online media creations including blog posts, memes, and gifs that speak to her continued significance as an icon of ideal womanhood in the 21st century. One such creation on [buzzfeed.com](http://www.buzzfeed.com) describes Clair Huxtable as “the mom you always wanted, and the woman you now want to be.” [“28 Reasons Clair Huxtable is Perfection Embodied” <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ariannarebolini/reasons-clair-huxtable-is-perfection-embodied>].

participants deploy are indeed historically situated. The media figures referenced in this study, and the interpretive practices that would render one (Clair) more respectable than another (Olivia), are therefore cultural resources that help to reproduce ideas about the appropriate ways of being for black women. As study participants work to construct an identity in and through meaning making, they must also confront the logic of the larger interpretive community which often reifies fantastical notions of an ideal black woman that can fully serve husband, family, and community, without ever neglecting herself (Barton and Hamilton 13; Wanzo 2013).

Some of the content creators participating in this study, like Bethany, complain that black female audiences tend to judge the quality of black female media subjects on the basis of their proximity to Clair Huxtable. Other study participants tend to agree, noting that engaging media in a social context with other black women could mean sacrificing the pleasure to be experienced in exploring a range of representations that have little in common with Clair Huxtable. Still, other study participants cling to Clair as an anchor in the midst of a turbulent media landscape where drifting too far into the unknown feels risky. Releasing one's understanding of black womanhood from the comforts of respectability embodied in Clair Huxtable is troubling when one understands that the same stereotypes that made Clair so un-conventional in the 1980s continue to haunt black women in the present day. The gap between Olivia Pope and Clair Huxtable is therefore one manifestation of the media memory that impacts the ways in which study participants interpret contemporary scripts of black womanhood. The overarching struggle that study participants experience in their everyday media engagement is a tussle between the enduring tropes that perpetually distort how black women are seen and understood at large, and the inadequate black lady icons of the past that fail to fully accommodate a liberated and autonomous understanding of the black female self.

Respectability Readings and the Baggage of Black Womanhood

Historically, blackness has always registered as the inferior opposite of whiteness in the “racialized regime of representation” in popular culture (Hall 1981). Hence, black women’s images are already pre-defined as carnal, immoral, uncivilized, animalistic, and pathological within the context of the dominant American point of view (Hammonds 1997). This imagery positions blackness as the other and helps to rearticulate whiteness by defining what is not white. The ways in which black female media citizens have responded to their positioning in the “racialized regime of representation” are weighted with the fact that mediated narratives of black womanhood are not just stories; they are petitions about blackness always in conversation with dehumanizing constructions of black womanhood.

Respectability therefore becomes a convenient remedy for the ailment of misrecognition in popular culture. Content creators have used the strategy of re-presenting the black female self as a symbol of model citizenship for many generations. Clair Huxtable is just one of multiple iterations among others, including Julia Baker (*Julia*, 1968-71) and Vivian Banks (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, 1990-96).²² Black women can use these cultural resources available in the media landscape to make an argument *for* their own humanity, and *against* the stereotypes that haunt black womanhood. The allure of this convenient remedy compels study participants to, at times, lean toward what I call respectability readings. That is to say, they deploy the politics of respectability as a lens through which they might envision their humanity in accordance with the recognition of others. For some black women, the desire to be recognized as human, as something other than Mammy or Jezebel or Sapphire, has meant achieving the highest standards

²² See Bodroghkozy 2003 for a detailed analysis of *Julia*. Also, see Means Coleman 1998 for an analysis of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

in all lifestyle matters—including dress, labor, demeanor, home décor, sexual restraint and, in the case of this study, media engagement (White 1999; Rooks 2004).

A group of media citizens became so troubled by contemporary representations of black womanhood in 2013 that they established an online social media movement. The online community, named “I Am NOT Mary Jane,” was founded in direct response to two fictional black female television characters willfully involved in affairs with married men. Olivia Pope was the first character to incite a reaction, but audience frustration seemed to be amplified by the introduction of the BET production, *Being Mary Jane*.

Being Mary Jane follows the life of thirty-something broadcast journalist Mary Jane Paul (portrayed by Gabrielle Union) whose career catapulted when she landed her own show on a cable news network. Mary Jane’s face is literally plastered all over the Atlanta metropolitan area that she calls home with billboards promoting her daily news broadcast. Her professional success affords her a sprawling home complete with a pool, a housekeeper, a luxury vehicle, and the ability to fulfill perpetual financial requests made by members of her family. She socializes in a network of equally successful women of color with post-graduate degrees who complain about the tax burdens waged against them, the top one percent. Yet in the midst of personal prosperity, Mary Jane and her family, including her parents, brothers, and niece, struggle with lifestyle choices and circumstances that threaten their status as African American elites in Atlanta. Mary Jane is the ideal race-conscious journalist who has maintained a sense of integrity and an attention to racial community on her journey to the heights of her field. Yet, she engages in an affair with a married man, even after he reveals that he has a wife and two children. Mary Jane is also rich and professionally successful, but her status as an unmarried adulterer registers her as a failure by black female respectability metrics.

Specifically, the catalyst for the “I Am NOT Mary Jane” movement was a promotional campaign featuring everyday black women in short video snippets that all featured the phrase, “I am Mary Jane because...”. The rhetoric of the campaign was intended to support the idea that Mary Jane is a black “every woman” who confronts joys and burdens that all black women can relate to in some way, shape, or form. The women who formed the “I Am NOT Mary Jane” group are particularly invested in debunking that claim. The following message is posted on the community’s Facebook page:

With the recent #IAMMaryJane campaign, we are concerned with what the portrayal of African American women has become in primetime media. There was once a time when individuals such as the characters that Ms. Phylicia Rashad played were who we strived to emulate. Those characters represented strong, African American women with values. Now our generation strives to be like and relate to the characters of Mary Jane and Olivia Pope who are "addicted" (as *Being Mary Jane* puts it) to love affairs with married men. Our frustration with this portrayal birthed the idea of #IAMNOTMaryJane!

The introductory message displayed on the group’s Facebook page indicates two important claims about black female media citizens: (1) mediated portrayals of black female sexuality tend to be read in relation to how others will perceive black women, and (2) the closer one comes to emulating Clair Huxtable (Phylicia Rashād) the better. The creators of the group represent those black female media citizens who are dissatisfied with expressions of black female sexuality that do not fit the traditional standards of respectability. It is not enough that Mary Jane and Olivia Pope are fictional black female characters whose careers and academic pedigrees position them among the most elite black professionals, male or female. Moreover, some black female interpreters are unwilling to overlook personal shortcomings in these fictional characters for the sake of emphasizing their more favorable characteristics. They are invested in an image of black womanhood, much like that which was propagated in racial uplift narratives at the turn of the

twentieth century—when a collective urgency around African American image and progress permeated black discourse.

Michele Mitchell describes racial uplift as the belief of a linked fate among African Americans and the idea that individual members of the race naturally share the burden of serving collective interests. Although racial uplift typically yokes black men and women with specific expectations, these racial obligations have often been expressed differently across gender lines. Mitchell’s study of African American discourse from 1877 to 1930 offers an explanation of how the aims of racial advancement came to rest largely on the behaviors and life choices of black women.

Reform activists who labored on behalf of the race were imbued with a politicized mission to change the habits, environments, morals, and lives of African Americans. Two of their most effective and sweeping attempts to do so occurred within the realm of sexuality and domesticity... This cohort reached the conclusion that racial survival was especially contingent upon eliminating poverty, alleviating morbidity, promoting mainstream gender conventions, eradicating vice, reducing illegitimacy, and ensuring robust production of morally up-right, race-conscious children (Mitchell 12).

Mechanisms of racial uplift among black Americans have focused more on individual discipline than a collective challenge to structural oppression. Furthermore, the emphasis on “mainstream gender conventions” has idealized empowered black manhood and sexually pristine black womanhood. Sexuality was a key lifestyle element emphasized among racial uplift activists because it was linked with citizenship and basic civility. Citing Paula Giddings’s historical record of black sexuality, Evelyn Hammonds notes that an “unbridled sexuality” was one of the “characteristics that made [blacks] unworthy of citizenship” (95). The connection between sexuality and black womanhood, initiated through European conceptions of black bestiality, persists in shaping public narratives about black women at the present moment.

Indeed, sexuality is the topic most emphasized by black female media citizens who take issue with Mary Jane and Olivia Pope. Other flaws—which include, in the case of Olivia Pope, criminal acts such as kidnapping, election rigging, and tampering with a crime scene—rarely emerged in my conversations with study participants, nor in the online discourse on *Scandal* and *Being Mary Jane*. Using terms like “sidepiece” and “ho” to describe the fictional characters, many viewers have become frustrated with the very thing that other viewers appreciate most about a tainted black female character. That is to say, that some black women welcome a mediated representation that frees them from the specter of Clair Huxtable—particularly as it pertains to autonomous expressions of sexuality. Others have grown comfortable within the confines of a Clair Huxtable image that, while it may not allow for much flexibility, comes with the promise of a public perception that deflates repressive ideologies of blackness.

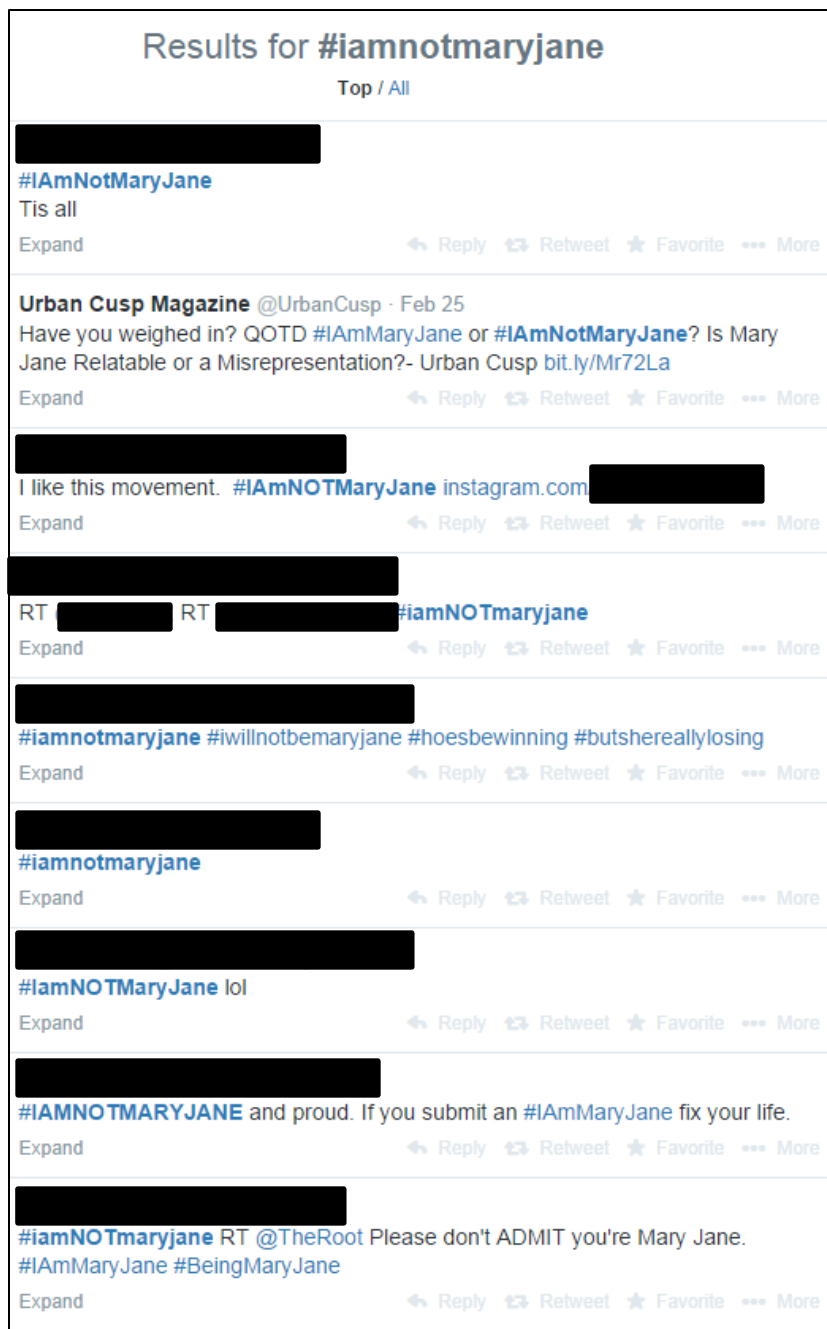


Figure 2.3: Mary Jane on Twitter
 This screenshot shows the search results produced by searching the phrase “#IAMNotMaryJane” in the Twitter trending topics search engine.

Sasha, a study participant in her late twenties, found Mary Jane to be a relatable character and grew frustrated with the comments she saw unfolding on social media sites as the show progressed. Although Sasha also questions the character’s relationship judgment, she believes

that many black women's responses to Mary Jane are indicative of a larger interpretive practice: respectability readings.

Sasha: My sentiment was that if all you saw was a black woman engaging in an affair, then you are just as shallow as she seems and didn't take the time to pay attention to anything else. There was no need for anyone to act holier than thou because EVERYONE has a sister, bestie, friend, parent, sibling or coworker that has done something less than holy. Why harp on that, but not harp on this black woman who is a professional with great parents. Why not discuss her friendships more? Why not discuss why she may be single? In conclusion, some of us get uncomfortable looking in a mirror that we find in the least likely place: TV.²³

Sasha's response is based on the belief that black women read media texts in relation to their own lived experiences. Any judgment of Mary Jane that fails to take into account the character's flaws and achievements is oversimplified. Importantly, Sasha is arguing for what she understands to be a more realistic vision of black womanhood—one that leaves room for the messiness of being human. Respectability readings measure mediated representations of black womanhood in much the same way that a white supremacist society measures real black women every day. The scale is already weighted against black women so that they must actually behave as super-human, nearly perfect, in order to be recognized as equal to the least of white women. Thus, according to Sasha, when black women criticize fictional black media subjects, they are really pulling at the fiber of their own being.

Sasha: So, since black characters are absent in Hollywood, especially black characters sharing a "black experience," I think that we want to be portrayed in the best light, the perfect light. Unfortunately, black women, and I'll say that PEOPLE in general don't live perfect lives, so if they wanted cookie cutter perfection, this wasn't the show to watch. [Laughs] I think that the audience was hopeful and at times unrealistic.

Sasha understands respectability readings to be the product of an exhausted black female media citizenry who have grown tired of the controlling images that haunt black womanhood. Still, she

²³ One unrealistic aspect of *Being Mary Jane* that Sasha fails to address is Mary Jane's ability to evade any physical consequences that accompany her multi-partner sex life. Given that sexually transmitted infections and viruses like HIV disproportionately impact black women in the United States, it is curiously convenient that this "realistic" black female character is never forced to confront potential sexual health risks.

offers that continuing to suppress the range of urges and desires that black female media subjects can possess only further promotes an unattainable ideal and denies black women their just right to a flawed humanity.

Nevertheless, the legacy of racialized terror and disenfranchisement waged against African Americans on the basis of deviant black female sexuality has led some media citizens to conclude that black women need a reprieve from flawed subjecthood, and not deliverance from respectability narratives. For example, Mary, a married professional and mother in her late 40s, traces the objectification of black female bodies in mass media back to chattel slavery. The historically familiar molds imposed on contemporary black women frustrate Mary and compel her to question the motivation behind broadcasting such images.

Mary: We've always been portrayed, as African Americans, as lacking morals in general...There's always been the element of the black woman as sexual, you know, going back to the slavery times. Especially on TV we're more valued for our sexuality than we are for our brains—than who we are, you know, as people...It seems like the top television network shows that black women are in now, they play some type of scandalous, adulterous role. And I'm like, what are they saying? Are we only marketable if we're, you know, being presented that way?

Characters like Olivia Pope and Mary Jane can feel like a consolation prize for some black women who read these portrayals as repressive images based on their deviant expressions of sexuality. Like Mary, other study participants are also unwilling to embrace a reductive binary whereby black women are portrayed either as upper middle class professionals or as ordinary sexual beings in conventional relationships. Their historically situated interpretive practices may hinder them from embracing a mediated script for black womanhood that is reminiscent of stereotypes that their antecedents labored to escape. When the limited selection of role models leaves one to consider Olivia Pope/Mary Jane or Clair Huxtable, the constrained benefits of the latter may easily outweigh the costly liberties of the former.

In poetic irony, BET titled episode three of *Being Mary Jane* “The Huxtables Have Fallen.” The “fall” that the title references is an indicator of the trysts with drugs, criminality, and adultery that beset Mary Jane and her family. For many black female media citizens, however, Mary Jane, similar to Olivia Pope, also represents a plunge from respectability among black (female) characters in general. Skylar, who struggles with her feelings of affection and disgust for Olivia Pope and Mary Jane alike, is nostalgic for what she believes was a more respectable media landscape before the second decade of the new millennium. “We are so far away from what our ancestors did and the fight that they had to endure in order to give us certain liberties... People are always telling me, like it’s not that deep. And I’m like, but it actually is, because [media content] is embedded in our subconscious... it does shape attitudes and then actions.” For Skylar, the risk of pushing the envelope, of articulating less traditional ways of being, is too great a cost for black media citizens enjoying privileges that they have not fought for themselves. As a black woman, Skylar envisions her media engagement as a political statement through which she either honors or tarnishes the legacy of racial progress in the United States. Supporting pejorative images, even if they are entertaining, may mean supporting a culture that so often disparages blackness. Hence, her interpretive practice is situated within a racial history that places contingences on her experiences as a media citizen.

Media engagement, for Skylar, is also a practice with spiritual implications—which further compels her to sacrifice her own viewing pleasure for the sake of meeting a scripturally-informed definition of righteousness. Skylar describes this struggle between pleasure and righteousness as a “battle of flesh.” “You like what makes you feel good, that’s your flesh. That’s not spiritual.” The virtue of denying one’s own desires for the sake of meeting a larger and more enduring aim is valued in Skylar’s socio-cultural tradition. Taken together, her racial

and spiritual values burden Skylar's media engagement practices with the weight of respectability. She is prone to resist the tug of representations of black womanhood that do not honor the heritage of racial uplift and righteousness where she locates herself. Still, as reflected in Skylar's earlier comments on Olivia Pope and *Scandal*, respectability is a desired ideal that may be relaxed and re-worked in order to fit one's own understanding of black womanhood.

Coding Interpretation: Interactions Between Big Media and Black Female Media Citizens

Interpretation, as participants have discussed, is imbedded within a turbulent web of intersections between internal and external ideas about the possibilities, limitations, and highest purposes of the black female self. The media content that black women engage, embrace, and reject is determined by a dialogic process facilitated by collectives that mutually come to a set of interpretive strategies. In planning how they will navigate the media landscape, black women evaluate content options according to where such content stands in proximity to their beliefs about black womanhood as they perform it in their everyday lives, and black womanhood as they understand it to be defined at large.

Commercial media corporations, which I refer to as big media, are deeply invested in the ways that black female media citizens engage media texts. In the media business profits are mostly reliant on corporations' ability to successfully deliver an audience of likely consumers to the advertisers who sponsor content. The more media corporations know about their audience, the easier it is for them to present that audience as an obvious target for advertisers. Consequently, media corporations have developed various strategies to better understand and influence their audiences. In some cases, media corporations have inserted themselves into the interpretive communities of black female media citizens. Sasha, a black woman who manages

social media strategy for a cable entertainment network, is one such media professional who leverages her membership in black female interpretive communities to increase ratings at her network.

According to Sasha, media companies often employ professional content creators that have the same demographic profile of the target audience to work on audience relations. These content creators, by virtue of their identities, have a unique opportunity to establish a sense of camaraderie between the media companies and their target audiences. Sasha describes herself as a “virtual home girl” to the black female viewers she is responsible for engaging weekly. Using social media Sasha participated in and at times steered the conversations that black female interpretive communities were having about specific television shows, offering her network a unique perspective of how black women were interpreting and thinking about the media content.

In the contemporary media landscape one no longer has to question whether or not media corporations have access to audience feedback; rather, one must question what media corporations do with that feedback. How do big media interpret black women’s meaning making practices? According to the professional black content creators who participated in this study, many media corporations fail to accurately understand the complexity of black women’s media engagement. Feedback that media corporations receive from audiences is not treated indiscriminately. In fact, some viewer interpretations are rendered more valid than others. At her cable network, Sonya, a professional content creator in her thirties, says ratings supersede all other data that can be used as an indicator of how well a particular show has been received. The higher the ratings for a series, the more successful it is by network standards. The lower the ratings, the more likely it is that a show, which could be satisfying for many viewers, will be canceled.

Sonya: It's a weird feeling after a premier and we all get together and it's like what's more important, the social sentiments, or the ratings? If people are like 'Oh my gosh, I love this show.' but they aren't watching it then, I don't know. Do we try to change it, or do we just take it off the air? Or, if everyone's watching it but everyone says they hate it, it's like oh don't listen to them, because only the people that hate it are talking about it.

In the struggle to maintain a large viewing audience, networks may be satisfied with high ratings and fail to analyze the implications of those ratings. When audience data seems to contradict itself, Sonya notes that media corporations are tasked with analyzing messy data. It seems logical then, to sort data so that it fits the most profitable hypothesis: media texts are effective and valuable when they attract large numbers of individuals from the target audience.

The number of black women who watch a show, however, does not tell media corporations or advertisers *why* black women may be drawn to a particular show. The ways in which black female media citizens navigate the media landscape indicate that engagement and personal satisfaction, or agreement with a particular media text, are not always positively correlated. Black women may regularly engage a media text with which they take great issue. In addition to engaging media content to gratify some personal desire, black women may also engage media texts to maintain social relationships, to signal their support for black representation in general, or to experience the pleasure from seeing other black women in media. Ratings do not account for the ways in which the study participants who watch *Scandal* faithfully are stretching and re-shaping Olivia Pope to fit their own standards of black womanhood. Likewise ratings do not capture the attitudes of the women who watched *Being Mary Jane* to maintain a basic knowledge of contemporary representations of black womanhood but who were nonetheless disturbed by the show's protagonist.

Despite having an understanding of the complexity of black women's media engagement practices, multiple content creators who participated in this study found themselves defending a

common refrain among big media—content is the direct result of audience desires. In their frustration these content creators declared that media corporations would not produce repressive content if black women were not watching/reading/listening to it. When corporations and professional content creators argue that they act in response to pre-existing attitudes among media citizens, evading their own responsibilities and interests, they misrepresent the messy process of scripting black womanhood.

On the one hand, these content creators argue that the stereotypes of black women found in mass media are the result of racist theories and under-researched ideas supported by willfully ignorant media executives. On the other hand, content creators also argue that black female media citizens have the power to shape representations of black women by being more discriminate in their media engagement habits. Black female media citizens therefore confront a unique set of tensions when they are employed at media corporations and are thus partially responsible for the problematic content that is produced. Displacing the burden of representation from their own shoulders and onto those of black female audiences is a way of easing that tension. Yet, in easing their own tensions these content creators relieve media corporations of their responsibility in shaping a limited view of black womanhood. Additionally, these content creators reduce media engagement to a resistance/accommodation model that no longer fits.

For example, Sonya, who is deeply disturbed by some of the content that her television network produces, reported that ratings drive content decisions. According to Sonya, the demand for extreme content outweighs the demand for more mundane content that portrays black women in everyday situations. Content producers develop the kinds of texts that they believe will elicit strong emotional reactions, because those are the kinds of texts that seem to get the most attention. As Sonya argued, “Look at *Tia & Tamera*; it wasn’t making people laugh, it wasn’t

really making them cry. It was just, a good show—a good show. And that just doesn't get enough viewers.”²⁴

Similarly, Bethany proposed that the mediated representations of black women that circulate in popular culture continue to be produced because they appeal to audiences. She sees the increase in black women in reality television as an example of what can happen when black women (and others) engage television irresponsibly: “When you look at these shows you can't really blame anybody but the people that watch, because if you weren't watching, they wouldn't create this content.” Bethany and several other content creators believe that derogatory television shows say just as much about the interests, values, and preferences of the people watching as they do about the values of the networks creating the shows.

As much as she is disappointed in the institutions that fund and produce one-dimensional portrayals of black women, Adrianna also takes issue with black female audiences who fail to take responsibility for the results of their own indulgences.

Adrianna: As crazy as it sounds, we love train wrecks... There's actually a sad component in this where you have black women who enjoy seeing other black women look like a damn fool. So because it's like this crazy factor with reality TV where you're getting a hodge-podge of all these different characters from the side chick, to the gold digger, to the baby mama...because it's one of those things where people, they may know someone like that and maybe they don't, but because it's something that draws their attention, they're watching it. And because reality TV is seeing people without necessarily being nosy—you can watch it without anybody going, *why you looking at her like that*. So because there's the guise of no one seeing you watch all these things, it's like a guilty pleasure for a lot of women. That's the exact wording that a lot of women use. They're like oh I know it's so trashy, but I can't pull away from it.

The black woman who watches other black women being exploited and degraded in a television series, Adrianna concludes, deserves just as much critique as the media executive who green lit

²⁴ *Tia and Tamera*, a reality show based on the lives of celebrity twin sisters Tia Mowry-Hardtrick and Tamara Mowry-Housley, was cancelled after three seasons on the Style network. The show dealt with themes such as interracial marriage, childbirth and parenting, and various issues that working mothers encounter. While the sisters had mild disagreements with one another from time to time, profanity, name-calling, and physical altercations were never staples of the show.

the project. Much like Bethany, Adrianna evaluates black female viewership as an expression of interior feelings about what is acceptable and what is worthy of disdain and mockery in the media landscape. Hence, while black women may be perceived as the victims of a racist mass media hierarchy, they are also seen as the kind of audience who will exploit their own oppression for pleasure.

An underlying thread woven throughout the testimonies of Adrianna, Bethany, and Sonya is their access to status and respectability. All three of these black female content creators are college-educated professionals who work in an industry that is deemed glamorous. Thus, when Adrianna talks about a kind of voyeuristic pleasure that can be derived from black women watching other black women “act a fool,” she is speaking through a classed gaze that is only accessible to women who share her social status. From Adrianna’s perspective, the humor or entertainment value derived from watching black women behave recklessly is based on the viewer’s standpoint. If a viewer occupies a place of privilege over the deviant black female characters presented in media texts, then she engages these characters from a place of safety. In fact, there may be added pleasure in the belief that the ridiculous performances of black womanhood presented in the media landscape will, by contrast, affirm one’s own position as a respectable black woman. There is also a chance that black women who judge the cast members on a reality television show like *Bad Girls Club*, for example, condemn the behavior being glorified but find no problem in having a laugh at the expense of women who have chosen inferior lifestyles.

My intention is not to evaluate which media texts black women should or should not be engaging, nor is it to judge media citizens based on the kinds of media content that they engage. I believe that one would be hard pressed to find any media text free from stereotypes or other

problematic content in the media landscape, past or present. Rather, I have incorporated viewpoints from professional content creators here to demonstrate that black female meaning making is as much about class as it is about race, gender, and religion. Media tastes and preferences are classed (Bourdieu 1984, Kuipers 2006). Taste, in this sense, is best defined as “a form of cultural knowledge: a mental framework for interpretation and evaluation leading to the preferences and aversions that make up taste” (Kuipers 361). The “system of preferences” that Giseline Kuipers explains as constituting taste cultures and taste hierarchies is correlated with class (361). Since class often dictates lifestyle, and a person’s lifestyle offers a living record of his or her tastes, then media engagement preferences must denote more than trivial desires.

Study participants offered detailed explanations about media engagement habits, suggesting that these habits indicate one’s level of respectability and responsibility as an adult. The testimonies of professional content creators also show that what big media perceive or believe to be true about what black women will or will not watch, read, or listen to is largely shaped by what big media believe black women value. When a population, like black women in America, has already been marginalized and denigrated, their values and interests are taken as further evidence of their worth and capability as citizens. Thus, even in the age of increased direct interaction between commercial media and black female media citizens, the relationship between these two parties is fraught with complications. When black female media citizens talk back to media institutions and negotiate media texts using their own interpretive strategies, the hierarchies which position black women as inferior media subjects continue to constrain black women’s participation in the media landscape.

Conclusion

The black women who participated in this study demonstrate that many black female media citizens are very much aware of the myths embedded in the media landscape, and they choose when and how to activate the multiple lenses that shape their nimble interpretive practices. They are no more bamboozled by images of Olivia Pope, Mary Jane, or Clair Huxtable than they imagine their predecessors were by historic images of Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy. When study participants engage with media texts they are not required to feign ignorance of pejorative tropes. Rather, they possess a psychosocial dexterity that enables them to twist and stretch a text until it fits the definition of black womanhood that offers them the most satisfaction. Importantly, their interpretive practice is a way of making do. It is a technique developed out of the scarcity of representations, and a desire to realize an ideal black womanhood.

Among the sociocultural contexts that inform black women's meaning making practices are intellectual frameworks and value-based institutions that also undergird their understandings of the black female self. Study participants will therefore call on their learned textual analysis skills and spiritual guides to bolster their sophisticated navigation of media texts. The intensity with which they engage and read the media landscape supports the theory that meaning making only minimally concerns the enjoyment or basic reception of a media text. Interpreting mediated scripts of black womanhood is also a profound practice of co-constructing what it means to be a black woman. Study participants survey the media landscape, past and present, to create a mosaic of black womanhood that reflects the traits they believe are necessary for achieving ideal black womanhood. This effort is both deeply internal, and collaborative, as study participants

move back and forth between their own conceptions of black womanhood and those valued within their interpretive communities.

Although study participants failed to name this dimension, the data show that interpretive practices are also informed by class. Implicit in how black female media citizens stretch and knead a text, and whether or not they engage a text at all, are notions of respectability that embed meaning making practices in larger debates about social standing. Class tensions are especially pronounced in the testimonies of professional content creators who discussed media citizenship as being accompanied by certain responsibilities. If they embrace or glorify deviant representations of black womanhood then black female media citizens can be deemed irresponsible. However, if black women condemn *Basketball Wives* and embrace the likes of Clair Huxtable then they are deemed responsible media citizens.

Of course, some study participants are not very focused on ideals at all and instead cling to scripts of black womanhood presented in shows like *Scandal* and *Being Mary Jane* that are messy and, in their eyes, more authentically human. Still, others feel security in the model of black womanhood embodied in a more traditional black female character, Clair Huxtable. Though these study participants also seek a liberated way of being, they are so haunted by historical notions of deviant black female sexuality that they have a tendency toward respectability readings. They seek mediated representations that offer proof of black women's worthiness and civility. Such notions of the black female self are bounded by duty, community expectation, and self-sacrifice. The problem with creating a mediated black female self to fit within the constraints of respectability, however, is that this strategy attempts to prove black women's humanity based on a system of ideals that do not allow for humanity, only perfection. In addition, black women, because they are placed in the position of having to prove their

humanity and value as citizens, forsake their natural right to set personal standards of living in exchange for community-sanctioned, imposed standards within the framework of respectability.

What hope is there to be found, then, in reflecting on the situated media literacies of black female media citizens? What do the study participants' meaning making practices represent within the broader conversation on audiences, media institutions, and the prevailing ideas about black womanhood? First, the data presented in this chapter advances that black women are adept media analysts whose interpretive strategies are mostly acquired through informal social interactions. The data show that many ordinary black women are quite reflective about their media engagement habits and must therefore be taken seriously as the experts of their own experience. In addition, this chapter highlights a quality of resilience that supports black women's capacity to, as Katie G. Cannon describes it, "decipher the various sounds in the larger world, [and] to hold in check the nightmare figures of terror" (125). This is the power of making do. Such a strength not only helps black women to maintain their own "material survival" but also to thrive spiritually in the midst of an often depressing media landscape (Baker-Fletcher 197).

Still the question remains of why black women are forced to make do in a media landscape where corporations have more access to audience experiences than in prior times. Why must black female media citizens stretch characters like Olivia Pope and Mary Jane Paul when the very creators of these media figures are black women themselves? These questions about the driving force behind patterns in representation will often elicit a chicken-and-egg response where content creators argue that their practices of privileging a narrow set of black female bodies is informed by audience preferences rather than commercial politics. In reality there are no simple answers to the how and why of producing commercial media content. Just as black female

interpretive communities have developed complex meaning making practices steeped in larger ideologies, so too have media corporations established intricate strategies for scripting black womanhood.

In the following chapter, I focus on the interviews with professional black female content creators to tease out the details that go overlooked when one reduces the interaction between big media and black female audiences to a narrative of villains and victims. Indeed, as more media corporations target black female audiences it becomes clear that the gap between what black female audiences want to see in their media landscape and what big media actually produce is often smaller than it appears at first glance.

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Chapter 3

Inscribing Black Women in ‘White Space’: Marketing, Prototypes, and Commercial Media

In the year 2000, Oxygen Media was established as an Oprah Winfrey-backed cable television network for women, featuring entertainment and wellness programming. A decade later, the network was best known for a reality series *Bad Girls Club* featuring barely-clothed women in their twenties who made a habit of explosive altercations. In the transition from shows like *Inhale Yoga with Steve Ross* to the infamous *Bad Girls Club*, Oxygen Media exchanged the established, college-educated female viewer over the age of 35, for a younger, less affluent viewer. Rather than competing with networks like Lifetime, Oxygen shifted to the type of programming that one might see on WE TV (Women’s Entertainment Television). The brand seemed to have come to the realization that they stood to gain the most capital in not only targeting young women, but the black female demographic specifically.

Armed with statistics on the importance of faith and religious life for black women in America, in 2013 Oxygen introduced a cast of polarizing Los Angeles-based preachers and their romantic partners in a reality series.²⁵ *Preachers of LA* was a bold move that few other networks had attempted because it mixed sacred content with secular backdrops that made many

²⁵ Although writers like Candace R.M. Gorham have documented the trend of once active black Christian women renouncing their ties to religious institutions, research shows that 74 percent of black women in America say that “living a religious life” is important to them. Even atheists like Gorham agree that religion (and often Christianity specifically) is a significant part of black culture in the United States and elsewhere. See Labbé-DeBose’s “Black Women are Among Country’s Most Religious Groups” for more information.

Christians uncomfortable.²⁶ The producers of *Preachers of LA* drew on the aesthetic logic of series like the *Real Housewives* franchise that masterfully juxtaposed conspicuous consumption with salacious gossip and increasingly physical disputes between cast members. Preachers on the show included award winning gospel artist-turned-preacher, Deitrick Haddon, who made headlines when it was revealed that he would father a child with a girlfriend, before his divorce was finalized. Bishop Ron M. Gibson, a former drug dealer who claimed that he bought a multimillion-dollar mansion because his previous home no longer accommodated his wife's shoe collection, was also part of the cast. Meanwhile, the show continued to confront themes such as scriptural rulings on pre-marital sex, transgender Christians, and church politics.

Even after the preachers made their small screen debut, shows that featured drunken brawls between young black women seemingly competing to see who could be the worst “bad girl” in the club remained in rotation at Oxygen. A singular brand identity was difficult to locate. Why would a network bolster competing models of black womanhood—preachers' wives and “bad girls”—in the same television season? What did this contradictory programming schedule suggest about Oxygen's understanding of black women as a viewing public?

The case of Oxygen Media, with its patchwork of extreme black female characters and even more black female casts in the works, serves as a launching pad into the questions explored in this chapter. Specifically, how do corporate media institutions approach representations of

²⁶ Study participants reported that television networks rarely promote overtly religious programming because potential sponsors tend to avoid this type of content. Still, the increased focus on the black female market has compelled some networks to reimagine the value of faith-based content. Media moguls Tyler Perry and T.D. Jakes have proven that the faith-infused romance genre has the potential to attract large crowds and garner significant profits. See Coleman and Williams “The Future of the Past: Religion and Womanhood in the films of Tyler Perry, Eloyce Gist, and Spencer Williams, Jr.” in *Interpreting Tyler Perry: Perspectives on Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*. The approach taken in *Preachers of LA* caused uproar among black church leaders and parishioners. Multiple pastors, including T.D. Jakes, publicly denounced the show. Many viewers expressed their distaste via social networks like Twitter. Critics disagreed with broadcasting the flaws of men of faith for the world to see. Still, other prominent Christian figures such as gospel artist, Fred Hammond, labeled the most vehement critics of the show hypocrites for failing to embrace the cast with God's love.

black womanhood, and how do these institutions relate to black female audiences? What cultural theories and ideologies undergird institutional practices within the enterprise of scripting black womanhood?

Sonya, a woman in her thirties who does freelance work for cable networks like Oxygen, said confused programming is typical of mainstream networks that target black women. In her experience, television networks tend to approach black programming carelessly. Rather than conduct research to explore the diversity of black women and plan programming around those findings, networks will typically replicate what they see in other black female-targeted programming.²⁷ The idea that black women are a monolith with relatively low standards for viewing content undergirds this indiscriminate method.

Sonya: It's like you don't really know what [the audience] would want to see because you don't really know *them*. That's why you have *Bad Girls* and *Preachers of LA* on the same network... It's white people making things for minorities, people who aren't being served, because that's where the money is.

Dissatisfied with what she sees as an operational model that fails to attend to viewer needs, Sonya argues that networks usually know very little about black women before deciding to focus on this demographic. The result is a platter of incompatible images that present a schizophrenic black female subject. Part of the problem, Sonya argues, is a lack of black female representation in decision-making roles at media corporations, which suggests that black women are best equipped to create the type of content that will draw black female viewers (Mul y 2009). According to Miriam Mul y, many corporations have missed the connection between “engaging [women of color] as consumers” and “recruiting and retaining [women of color] as employees” (xx). The complexity and intragroup diversity that exists among black women can only be

²⁷ Marketing campaigns directed at women in general, and more recently those targeting specific ethnic groups, have been mostly ineffective because “early marketers failed to ask [women about their preferences and desires]. They assumed they knew the answers” (Mul y 3). See Mul y 2009.

accessed through sustained conversation with black women. Putting black women in key decision-making roles allows media corporations to benefit from their interior knowledge, while also signaling to black female media citizens that the company values black women as professionals.

It seems rational to think that black female media executives would be more intentional about offering a variety of portrayals of black womanhood outside of the stereotypical extremes. Nevertheless, Sonya's comments fail to account for the black women who shape content as executive producers, directors, editors-in-chief, screenwriters, and editorial directors. Professional content creators like Mona Scott-Young, creator and executive producer of the infamous reality show franchise *Love and Hip-Hop*, have proven that the link between black female media decisions and uplifting programming is not automatic. Scott-Young's shows are consistently critiqued for their portrayals of black men and women (Hope 2014). Critics are especially troubled by the fact that Scott-Young, a black woman, has built a media empire based on the degradation of other black women.

Mona Scott-Young is well-known for espousing that her shows do not exploit black women, but rather that black female cast members use the show as a platform that launches them into new ventures in the entertainment industry (Hope 2014). Importantly, Scott-Young also contends that her show sheds light on real minority women whose stories are worthy of documentation—even if they are in line with the worst of black female stereotypes. “Should we just act like these women don't exist or shove them under the rug?” Scott-Young suggested in an interview with *VIBE* magazine (Hope 2014). She raises a critical point. The content produced by Scott-Young, Tyler Perry, or even the editors of *Essence* magazine will never speak to all black women, but these media companies each produce something that appeals to some group of

black female media citizens on some level. With profit motives at the fore, all audience (read consumer) dollars are equal—including the dollars of those who enjoy watching adult women fight on reality TV, laughing at a 6-foot black man as he impersonates a scripture-quoting gun-toting black grandmother, or reading about eligible black male bachelors in a “Single Guy of the Month” feature story.

Despite the diverse range of tastes and preferences that exist among black female media citizens, media corporations must continually grapple with the tensions between the image of black womanhood that black women prefer to broadcast around the world, and images of deviant lifestyles that some black women (and men) would rather keep private. The debate of respectable mediated representations persists in popular culture because of a heritage of pejorative images. The cultural baggage associated with black womanhood raises the stakes suggesting that quality content cannot just be based on entertainment value, but must also make an uplifting statement about black women. Yet, as participants discuss in this chapter, many big media corporations are willfully ignorant of the implications of the content that they produce.²⁸ Ignorance often leads to the kind of content that presents a monolithic portrayal of black women and fails to acknowledge, and attend to, the diverse preferences of black female media citizens. The fact that this ignorance is willful, however, suggests that when refocusing their attention on black women, media executives purposefully reject the more careful strategic planning that they use when managing “mainstream” audiences.

In this chapter, I further develop the narrative of scripting black womanhood through the perspective of black female media citizens who are currently (or were formerly) employed by

²⁸ Throughout this chapter I use terms such as “big media” to refer to the publicly traded media networks that are part of large conglomerates (e.g. Oxygen Media, owned by NBC Universal; and Essence magazine, owned by Time, Inc.). I use this terminology to distinguish the Fortune 500 companies under study, and their longstanding hierarchies, from smaller independent companies.

large media companies including entertainment television networks, print and online magazines, newspapers, web sites, advertising agencies, and broadcast news stations. The data reveal that commercial media institutions tend to base their content strategies on marketing schemas that are inherently racist and sexist, even when the black women employed within these companies attempt to offer correction.

Building on the findings in the previous chapter which reveal black women's complex meaning making practices, I also detail the extent to which professional content creators perceive that media corporations actually confront black women's interpretive work. As study participants discuss, their white counterparts often draw on unquestioned hegemonic ideas of black womanhood when determining how they will interact with black female audiences and the kinds of images they will produce for those audiences. The interior ideas that media executives have regarding black women are important because there is no objective standpoint from which to engage the media landscape as a professional content creator. In addition to marketing logics, professional content creators' various ideas and beliefs about an audience will also shape the way that audience is ultimately portrayed in the media landscape (Anderson 1996).

Ultimately, this chapter explains why some black women are forced to make do as they engage media texts and look to black female representations for some semblance of their own personal understandings of black womanhood. I also discuss what is at risk when big media or the professional black female content creators employed at these companies flatten black women into one large monolith with one shared set of tastes.

A Note on the Financial Structure of Commercial Media and Content Strategies

Commercial media, which are the focus of this chapter, are a complex institution because of their dependent relationship with another set of stakeholders: corporate advertisers. Such

media outlets—including magazines, television shows, radio broadcasts and web sites—rely more on advertisers for financial stability than any other source (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). Thus, these outlets are equally as concerned with maintaining their appeal to corporate sponsors, as they are with maintaining their credibility and appeal with their target audience. Advertisers use media to provide a space where they can reach pre-classified audiences with their own content focused on their brands and products (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). That is to say, they desire to reach an audience already grouped by common interests and values—an audience of consumers that will be equally compelled by the same message. The relationship between commercial media and corporations hinges on the mutual interest of producing the kind of content that will appeal to the hearts, minds, and intellects of consumers. Media outlets provide the audience, commonly referred to as “eyeballs” in the mass media industry, and corporate advertisers provide the capital needed to support content production (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). Given a business structure that interlocks corporate media outlets with corporate advertisers, a comprehensive exploration of the media landscape must consider both institutions and the processes that bind them.

How Big Media Sees Black Women

Big media corporations see black women, first and foremost, as consumers that must be compelled by culturally-specific advertising content (Muléy 2009). Thus, the programming shifts initiated at Oxygen in 2013-14 which featured more black female casts were also occurring at a number of other networks around the same time.²⁹ Cable properties like Bravo, Lifetime and WE

²⁹ Frances Berwick, the executive overseeing the rebranding of Oxygen and its big sister network Bravo, reported that Oxygen is focused on “authentic and relatable characters.” Although the language of authenticity hints at a certain type of female character, Berwick expertly avoids naming black women as a specific target in her public statements. Furthermore, Berwick states that the original programming she has overseen at Oxygen has been

also recast their programming agendas to follow the passions and purses of black women in the 18 to 34 age group, with a specific focus on women under the age of thirty.³⁰ During the same time period magazines that target a black female readership such as *Essence*, *Sister 2 Sister*, and *Hype Hair* continued to survive and even expand, demonstrating that black female audiences are enough to keep advertisers investing in print publications in a mostly digital world. In addition, web-based companies also set their sights on black women. *ClutchMagOnline.com*, *MadameNoire.com*, and *MommyNoire.com* all launched between the years of 2007 and 2012 to reaching black women in the digital media landscape.

Black women are an especially lucrative group of consumers to target because they manage many of the purchasing decisions in their households. In addition, black women have been said to “generate 62 percent of all African-American wealth,” making them stand out among other women of color in the U.S. (Muléy 90). In spite of this fact, as recently as 1998, many Hollywood institutions continued to question the profitability of creating media texts aimed at black women. The success of the film *Waiting to Exhale* (1995)—which featured a cast of four African American female actors in lead roles—played a major role in convincing Hollywood that black women would show passionate support for movies that told their stories on their own terms. *Variety* magazine heralded the film as one of the sixty top-grossing movies released in the U.S. in 1996. Consequently, the companies that marketing specialists once said

designed in response to the type of “freshness, authenticity, high emotional stakes and optimism that [young women] are looking for.” See Goldberg’s “Oxygen Orders Seven New Series, Sets Network Rebranding” for a detailed programming list.

³⁰ Oxygen is one of multiple NBC cable properties aimed at women. In 2013 two of those networks, Oxygen and Bravo, merged. In addition to sharing executive leadership, the networks also developed a collective strategy to reach black women. Oxygen developed programming for the younger, more carefree under-30 black woman, while Bravo targeted her older, more affluent big sister. Bravo added *Blood, Sweat, & Heels* and *Fashion Queens* to their programming roster in 2013. Each show featuring an all-Black cast. These shows complimented the popularity of the network’s highest rated show *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

were “in denial about the significant influence that black women have on their businesses” are awakening to the power of having the attention of black female audiences (Muléy 91).

According to study participants, network executives use a common equation based on potential advertising revenue to inform their business models. The equation relies on a content grid made up of programming from networks that tend to compete for similar audiences. The grid allows executives to draw a map of the media landscape according to market segments based on demographics such as race, gender, and income. The “white space” that networks look for is the empty area on the grid that indicates which demographic(s) is underserved by current television offerings. For example, the tween demographic was targeted with a number of shows (e.g. *Pretty Little Liars*, *iCarly*, *America’s Next Top Model*) and even entire networks (e.g. ABC Family, The Disney Channel, The CW) in 2013, while black female millennials could be located in the white space, having had relatively meager offerings in the same year.

The white space/grid model indicated that corporations were missing opportunities to reach black women, a population subgroup with significant spending power and the authority to make decisions about large and small household purchases (Muléy 2009). Using these data, networks could sell the value of airtime based on a guarantee of reaching young black female consumers who spend heavily on things like cosmetics, fashion, and entertainment; who have not yet established brand loyalty; and who have had few other cable brands to turn to for entertainment and lifestyle advice. Hence, media corporations began to see black women as an overlooked reservoir of consumers primed for commercial content.

Despite the importance of marketing and advertising for attracting new customers, advertisers consistently miss the mark in their aim to appeal to black women. Black women have repeatedly been ignored by certain brands altogether, or targeted through marketing strategies

that feature black female images in the kind of narratives that appeal to white mainstream sensibilities.

Indeed, the history of black images in American advertising at large is heinous. In addition to proliferating repressive images of black men, women, and children, many consumer products exploited derogatory terms like Mammy by integrating them into their product names (Weems 1998; Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). Robert E. Weems argues that many mainstream marketing campaigns of the early 20th century “graphically reflected the callous disrespect that many businesses had for black consumers” (1). These images exploited the worst stereotypes of blacks in ways that white consumers would find appealing.

Stereotypical notions of black womanhood in particular have also become commodities used to bolster mainstream consumption (hooks 1992; Hall 1997). Notably, corporations have used the caricature of Mammy to sell pancakes and fast food fried chicken for years,³¹ And recently, Pepsi Co. drew on the “angry black woman” trope to sell soda in a 2011 super bowl advertisement.³²

Beauty and Prototypes: Making Black Women Palatable

Kelly, a black woman who works at a multicultural advertising agency on the east coast, says that large corporations selling products like cosmetics and automobiles are specific about the kinds of black women they want featured in the content that represents their brands. Since the demands of corporate clients largely drive the creative process at her agency, Kelly says she and her colleagues automatically select certain kinds of black women and avoid others (e.g., those who are over-weight or have extremely dark complexions), for marketing campaigns. Clients

³¹ For background on the historical progression of Mammy see *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Wallace-Sanders 2008) and *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (McElya 2007).

³² See <http://www.eurweb.com/2011/02/video-pepsi-super-bowl-ad-another-angry-black-woman-stereotype/>.

rarely include details like height, weight, or complexion in their requests during the planning stages of any particular campaign, but their demands have become so common that even black female content producers will stick to the general prototype without being asked.

Kelly: Although we are familiar with diversity and all of that, our clients are still very clear about a certain look, or a certain image, that they want. So we are aware of that when we're selecting people for different campaigns. They're usually attractive. They're usually all a similar frame and figure. Um, they have a certain look that we know the client will go for, that they historically feel is best.

Interviewer: And if you could sort of pin that look onto some popular actress or singer or whatever so that I could imagine how that person might look—what is that look?

Kelly: I would say [pause] I would say it's almost kind of like a Halle Berry, or a maybe like a Sanaa Lathan you know. It's friendly. It's thin, but built. It's not necessarily, we don't have anything where it has to be typical long hair or anything, but it's attractive, fit, like a Halle Berry type.

Interviewer: And what about complexion?

Kelly: I'll say this, our talent team has never selected—the color is always the same. It's almost like, usually like a Halle Berry/Sanaa Lathan kind of complexion. If we're talking about African Americans, that is usually the range that we stay in. What happens is we work on the campaign and different actresses will be recommended from the talent department, and then we pull who will be selected. Sometimes the client will get very specific like: I want bald head, straight teeth, you know, and we'll pull based on that. But they all, unless the client is very, very specific, they all have a similar shade.³³

Media privilege black women who fit what is considered a “safe” profile, while marginalizing anything they perceive as a potential deterrent for the target audience. Prototypes of mediated black female subjects have been engineered with specific attention to aesthetic details (e.g., perceived age, complexion, body type, hair texture etc...) that collectively constitute a character that will attract consumers. Similar to the politics of respectability that inform how black female content creators manage portrayals of black female lifestyles, the capital-centered schema used by various media restricts portrayals of black female aesthetics to a narrow ideal.

³³ Notable exceptions include figures such as Queen Latifah, Lupita Nyong'o, and Alek Wek who have all acquired modeling contracts with major cosmetics brands.

Women of all racial backgrounds tend to be presented in advertisements with bodies that are so extreme that they are anatomical impossibilities, but the black female bodies used to market brands undergo increased manipulation to address the subtleties that signify race. The curl pattern of her hair, the width of her nose, the thickness of her lips, and the continuity and hue of her complexion are some of the critical components that must be managed on the black female body for consumption-provoking content.³⁴

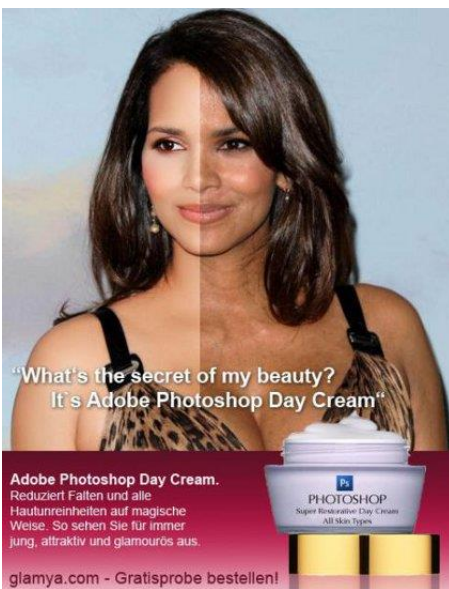


Figure 3.1: Colorism in Advertising
Manipulated advertisement featuring actress
Halle Berry. Source: www.deceptology.com.

Black female prototypes are not limited to advertising content; these standards of physical appeal are also common in other genres such as television news. Wendy, a reporter for a news station on the west coast, says that the aesthetic standards at most local news stations make it impossible to ignore the additional baggage that black women carry in the media landscape.

Wendy: It's not easy being a black woman, especially a *dark-skinned* black woman in broadcast news—in media in general, but especially in broadcast news. You don't see that many of us. And um, you know part of our contract, your appearance is part of your job, believe it or not. A lot of people don't know this but in my contract it says that any

³⁴ Many cosmetic brands and consumer magazines have been the target of allegations claiming that advertisers manipulate images of already fair-skinned celebrity models. Figure 3.1, taken from an online blog site that analyzes deceptive content in popular culture, re-appropriates a typical cosmetics advertisement to communicate the absurdity of skin-lightening practices. The celebrity featured in the false advertisement, Halle Berry, is of mixed-race descent.

alteration of my appearance essentially has to be *approved* by management and my bosses... You know for a long time I thought about maybe cutting my hair off, going natural, but I can't do that. I can't be natural as a black woman in my natural [hair texture] on TV because that makes people uncomfortable. That is not something that's considered acceptable.

In order to maintain her position and certainly to go forward in her career Wendy must prioritize media industry stereotypes above her own beliefs about black beauty. While she clearly disagrees with popular thoughts about tightly-coiled hair on black women, her career aspirations require that she comply with the status quo. Like other professional black female content creators her performance of black womanhood is restrained by her career goals.

Imbedded within the rhetoric used to describe the bodily presentation of black women in the media landscape—professional, friendly, attractive—are codes that reveal racial and class-based hierarchies in mass media. Just as a business suit carries the connotation of professionalism, straightened hair styles among black women also carry the assumption of professionalism. Braids, twists, dreadlocks, and tightly-coiled curly styles often carry an assumption of unprofessionalism, militancy, and even uncleanliness.³⁵ According to one black female journalist who wrote about perceptions of black beauty in the news industry, “if [they] want to keep their jobs,” then black women in broadcast news must understand that “natural hair [is] a no-no” (Greenwell 2012). Shreveport, Louisiana-based broadcast meteorologist brought this struggle to national attention after she was fired for comments she made in defense of herself when a viewer critiqued her natural hair style on the station’s Facebook page. Former broadcaster Ava Thompson Greenwell argues that the Eurocentric beauty aesthetics that broadcast stations like KTSB-TV comply with are used because “news bosses think viewers want to see” black women with straight hair. Study participants suggest that these prototypes are

³⁵ Black women employed outside of the media industries also confront restrictive hair politics in their professional and academic settings. Notable institutions who enforce racially biased hair policies include the U.S. Army, the Hyatt hotel chain, and public schools. See Byrd and Tharps 2014.

recycled not only because they are palatable to non-black viewers, but because black media citizens tend to embrace them as well.³⁶ The preference for images of black women with light complexions and straight or smooth hair, evident in black- owned and operated media outlets as well, is the result of a complex history of chattel slavery, black female labor, citizenship, and early African American entrepreneurship (Keenan 1996; Rooks 1996; Patton 2006). The complications embedded in those preferences seem mostly unimportant to advertisers and the media outlets that those advertisers support. In fact, study participants revealed that most media executives are ignorant of the histories and ideologies that inform the way many black women interpret and respond to media content.

Black Women as Easily Knowable – Faulty Marketing Practices in Mass Media

When media executives defend their content selections, they reveal an otherwise concealed marketing epistemology whereby black women are situated as easily knowable in ways that white niche audiences are not. In an industry where significant amounts of resources are expended to research the lifestyle practices, interests, and values of niche audiences, study participants report that much less money and energy is spent on attempting to know black female audiences. That is to say that few companies seek to understand the fullness and complexity of black womanhood, opting instead, to rely on *a priori* assumptions that are lousy guesses at best, and racist beliefs at worst. Several participants said that white content producers in particular are quick to assert claims that black women on average are uncritical, irresponsible and unclean. Such executives even make their stereotypical assumptions in the presence of other black women. Hence, corporate media institutions and corporate advertisers tend to see black women

³⁶ For a more in-depth of analysis of the historic development of hair maintenance and beauty politics among black women see Rooks (1996) *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*. Also see Williams and Sobze (2013) “#LuvYourMane”: *Black Female Body Politics and Self-Care in Social Media Spaces*.

as a monolith of gullible consumers with tastes and values that are inferior to the mainstream “white” female consumer.

Kelly says that the ignorance around black female consumers makes it difficult for marketing professionals like her to successfully execute a black female-targeted campaign. In addition to working with only a portion of the budget that a mainstream marketing campaign would receive, she is faced with having to disprove the stereotypes of black women that most of her corporate clients cling to without question.

Kelly: I think the biggest thing that has rubbed me the wrong way with meetings are people thinking that black women are not educated, and that [black female media citizens] don’t do our research or our due diligence. I think a lot of it is: oh just tell them that it’s great and they’ll believe it, that it’s great. And we’re like that’s not how it works. We go into these meetings—and my department is all female African American women—and they’re kind of like looking at us almost like we’re Martians. We’re sitting there saying to them like, *we’re* your target. So if you’re saying that you wanna target someone like *that*—I AM a part of your target. Um, you know, I *am* that person. And you’re saying you’re trying to target that person whose salary is below \$40,000 a year—that *is* me. You’re speaking to me! So don’t give some dumb-it-down campaign and not think that this requires the same level of strategy that your general-market program would.³⁷

Kelly complains that in spite of the research her agency provides to clients, many corporate executives have a fixed mindset regarding black womanhood. It is not enough for black female marketing professionals to state their expertise in outreach to black women, or to offer themselves up as examples that not all black women match the prevailing stereotypes. Black women who work in marketing often carry the burden of educating their corporate clients before they ever begin the creative process of producing a campaign that will appeal to a particular group of black women.

³⁷ One of the pioneering professionals in African American marketing, H.A. Haring, had similar complaints when working with companies that sought to reach black consumers in Harlem. Haring wrote multiple essays and articles in an attempt to correct the view held by many businesses that “they could sell their products with a minimum of advertising expense” (Weems 20). See Weems 1998.

Like Kelly, Yolanda and Bethany have also witnessed corporate stereotyping of black female markets. Yolanda worked at a magazine targeting upwardly mobile black men and women where the sales representatives were constantly struggling to convince corporations that black women were worthy of their attention. “I won’t say who, but you go to certain advertisers, it might be a shampoo advertisement, and they’ll say something like, ‘Well you people don’t wash your hair enough, so why would we want to advertise in your magazine.’...I’ve seen [magazine] advertising and sales people crying when they come back from calls” (Yolanda). Despite consumer data which shows that black women spend more on cosmetics and beauty than any other consumer group, the stereotype of uncleanness abounds (Weems 1998, Muléy 2009).

Bethany found that even when content producers are aware of black women’s spending habits, some corporations continue to distort research findings to make pejorative claims about black women. As a magazine editor Bethany increased coverage of topics like health, finance and careers, politics, and spirituality because research revealed that her black female readership would respond favorably to this type of content, she says that “it surprised a lot of people that African American women were interested in things beyond hair styles and nail polish” (Bethany). Such data indicates that black women tend to be perceived in extremes in mass media—they either spend too much on beauty products, or they fail to spend enough to meet dominant standards of cleanliness. In an ironic cycle of ideology and practice, the same stereotypes reproduced in mass media scripts of black womanhood shape the way some content producers think about their target audiences even in the face of multiple outliers.

Proving Black Female Consumption

Despite the problematic representations of black womanhood that persist in black female-targeted marketing, the general trajectory of this content is moving forward. Black women have evolved from existing in advertisements purely for the entertainment and appeal of the white gaze, to being the center of campaigns that at least attempt to honor their interests and values. Even after ethnic marketing specialists began educating America's brands on how to reach black consumers, many advertisers were convinced that they could reach black women with the same kinds of marketing campaigns that they used to reach white women. Thus, many household brands saw little need to place their content in black media outlets (Weems 2001). Also, they rarely attempted to speak to black women with the voices and faces of women that looked like them. Elsie Archer, a marketing representative with the African American firm D. Parke Gibson Associates, published a trade press article in 1966 warning corporations of the dangers of using "a blue-eyed suburban housewife" to tell urban dwelling black women which products would best clean their homes (Weems 76). Other pioneering black female market specialists, like former *Essence* magazine editor-in-chief Susan Taylor, continued to urge cosmetic companies in particular to reconsider their approach to black female consumers (Weems 94). As one of the first beauty editors of the newly established *Essence* magazine, Taylor confronted a bleak beauty and cosmetics market in the 1970s where black women had few brands to choose from and where few companies could imagine black women using their products. It was clear that corporate America, even those companies already supported by black female dollars, would need to be reoriented in order to relate to black women more effectively.

By the end of the twentieth century, ethnic marketing specialists had convinced some corporations that brand messaging geared toward black consumers was a critical investment. The

kinds of advertisements that were aimed at black audiences, however, revealed lingering theories of black deviance (Weems 1998). Robert E. Weems explains that the 1980s marked a shift in ethnic marketing strategy geared at African American consumers. Rather than create campaigns where black models were portrayed in banal American activities like eating family dinner or shopping at a grocery store, Weems says that corporations favored “more class-specific advertising” (5). “Whereas ‘Buppies’ (black ‘Yuppies,’ or Young, Urban Professionals) were actively courted by the producers of upscale consumer items and financial services companies, the growing black ‘underclass’ attracted the intense attention of tobacco and alcoholic beverage companies” (5). Hence, even once black consumers began to receive more attention from large corporations, they were still marginalized and cast off as being interested in products associated with unscrupulous indulgence. The fact that some black consumers had attained the socioeconomic clout to attract the attention of luxury brands only further demonstrates the twisted logic of ethnic marketing.

Rather than corporations proving that their brands are worthwhile investments for non-white consumers, marketing specialists that represent marginalized populations must prove that their audiences are worth being targeted. As Arlene Dávila explains,

U.S. minorities are all subject to stereotyping as low-income, unskilled, uneducated, crime-ridden, unemployed, and, in some cases, as perpetual foreigners, and, whether more or less family-oriented or brand-loyal than other market segments in the United States, they are always required to prove their worth and compensate for their tainted image. (217)

The growing black middle class offers irrefutable evidence that black consumers do indeed have money to spend, and that they have a demand for many of the same products as mainstream markets. Still, the fact that this burden of proof exists at all indicates that black consumers are rendered non-existent or irrelevant until corporations are convinced otherwise. Given the racial

hierarchy reproduced in corporate advertising, marketing specialists it seems have only been able to prove that their target audiences are worthy consumers by improving their proximity to whiteness.

Proving one's worth as a consumer in a nation that conflates consumption with civility and patriotism is like proving one's worth as a citizen (Dávila 2001). Thus, the context in which contemporary black female-targeted marketing emerges is already tainted with an ideology of consumer-citizenship that historically positions whites as ideal consumers. Ethnic marketing specialists have struggled to demonstrate the value of black female consumers by showing that their tastes are distinct yet not inferior. In other words, black content producers are tasked with proving that black women are different enough to deserve their own campaigns and shows, yet not so different from white women that they should be considered alien and unreachable.

Demonstrating the value of a consumer market already 'othered' and associated with unsavory characteristics, it seems, has left little room for black content producers to further educate commercial media executives on the diversity within black womanhood. Thus, it is no surprise that missteps in black female-targeted campaigns abound today.

The images and prototypes found in commercial media content are "self-referential" in that they are "more revealing of those who produce the representation than of those who are its subjects" (Dávila 218). The unspoken yearnings of society are a salient factor in understanding how representations of black womanhood come to follow certain patterns. Dávila argues that the representations that dominate the media landscape are upheld because they satisfy the need to reinforce a rigid national hierarchy where "good" citizens and "othered" (non)citizens each understand their proper role and expectations. The images of black women that we see in

advertising and other media content are a reflection of hegemonic ideas of what black women are capable of, and the function that they serve in relation to the larger populace.

The calculated images that signify black women in mass media often reduce what is in reality a heterogeneous collective of women of varying ethnicities to a few Americanized renderings of blackness. Since media marketing logics rely on fixed racial categories that assign diverse groups of people to a single identity with an accompanying set of values and habits, mixed race heritage is virtually non-existent in dominant representations of black women (Muléy 2009). Rather than portray public figures in the fullness of their complex identities, mass media will often situate black women within the category that best matches their perceived identity—with perception being largely based on appearance and other obvious signifiers. That is to say that an actress like Zoe Saldana, who is Dominican, and thus, Afro-Latina, will often be cast in African American roles because she registers as more black than Latina in the American imagination.³⁸ The same could be said of Melissa de Sousa, an Afro-Latina of Panamanian heritage, who is often cast as an African American woman in film and television roles.³⁹

Adrianna, an Afro-Latina herself, is frustrated by the fact that celebrities such as a Saldana and de Sousa continue to be cast as either black *or* Latina, and are rarely if ever, portrayed as embodying both ancestries. Just like Saldana and de Sousa, Adrianna was also forced to choose. Growing up, the media professional was assumed to be African American because of the way she looked. People were often confused when they realized that she

³⁸ Saldana has portrayed African American female characters for the majority of her career, including films where race was central to the overall narrative (e.g. *Drumline*, 2002 and *Guess Who*, 2005). When film executives cast her to play the role of Nina Simone in the highly-anticipated film, *Nina*, many critics complained that Saldana lacked the visual markers needed to portray Simone with integrity. Simone's daughter, Lisa Simone Kelly, stated "appearance-wise, this is not the right choice," when asked about the casting of Zoe Saldana to portray her mother. See Fisher 2012.

³⁹ Portraying an African American woman in the 1999 romantic comedy, *The Best Man*, earned de Sousa an NAACP Image Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress.

understood Spanish and had a last name that sang of Latino heritage. She was forced to amplify one aspect of her racial-ethnic being, and mute the others, in order to engage in social interactions with her peer groups. Adrianna believes that mass media reinforced the intolerance of hybrid identities that her peers demonstrated in her youth. Having worked at multiple ethnic media corporations, she complains that even the media outlets operated by women of color are guilty of producing monolithic images of black womanhood that write people like herself out of existence. Adrianna hopes that there will one day be room for black women to live and thrive in the media landscape without the fear that coloring outside of a singular prototype will render them invisible. Yet, she fears that victory is far in the distance. “I’m hoping that that’ll be the case, but right now people are still struggling with the fact that Latino people don’t *only* consume things in Spanish. Or, you know, that they look a certain way. I think we still have a ways to go for people to even understand those basics” (Adrianna).⁴⁰

Adrianna’s long-range optimism is no small act of faith given what she and other black women understand about the logics of mass media and what has come to be known as ethnic marketing. Mass media rely on stereotypes to do the work of hailing a particular audience, and ultimately to convince that audience to become customers of the supporting corporate advertisers (Dávila 2001). Stereotypes are seen as a smart investment—they pacify media citizens by offering them a simplified view of the world, where everything and everyone fits into a clearly defined box. Still, Arlene Dávila argues that the same thing that makes stereotypes appealing is what makes them troubling—they offer only a very limited frame for viewing a particular group.

⁴⁰ Afro-Latina marketing specialist Miriam Muléy argues that few companies “recognize the buying power generated by men and women of African descent who share a common Hispanic ancestry through origins in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Central America, Latin America, and Mexico” (xxiii). Often, these companies lack the capacity to even imagine the type of media content that would appeal to this growing segment of the American population. See Muléy 2009.

[Stereotypes] work by restricting the range of interpretations and therefore facilitating the evaluations that produce and valorize the social distinctions at play in the greater society. Even when individuals may interpret these images and ideas differently or imbue them with idiosyncratic meaning, these renditions are by necessity framed within dominant social conventions. (89)

Just as the earliest images of blacks and Latinos in mass media drew on extremes and caricatures that pacified white consumers, stereotypical representations continue to function as tools of humor and excitement (hooks 1992; Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). More specifically, many of the scripts and images of black womanhood that pervade mass media today are rooted in an ideology that situates the black female body as a universal symbol of deviance always available to be used in support of the white, patriarchal order (West 2000).⁴¹ Historically, the black female body has been used as a narrative that brings logic to society's irrationalities and that placates collective anxieties. Essentially, the black female body has been the scapegoat of societal ills including economic recessions, high crime rates, and increased poverty rates (Roberts 1999; West 2000). Although the most popular images of black women today are often cloaked in aesthetics that conceal their problematic nature, many of these representations stem from a core ideology that privileges whiteness and disdains blackness.

Yet, many of the representations found in scripts for black womanhood today appeal to at least *some* black women. Study participants revealed in the previous chapter that some media citizens regularly engage the kinds of content that marginalize degenerate black female caricatures. These professional content creators, often invoking their own preferences in their explanations, believe that extreme images of black womanhood often have greater entertainment value than those more mundane images that are considered to be respectable. Some participants

⁴¹ The *singledoom* narrative, which I describe in detail in the introductory chapter, is one such example of black women being used to explain larger structural issues. This particular case is especially alarming because it uses black women's own professional and academic accomplishments against them to suggest that their misplaced energies are the cause of the demise of the black family.

also identified a type of voyeuristic pleasure that black women may access when engaging content that explicitly mocks other black women; this is the pleasure of ‘othering’—marking another group’s deviance in order to substantiate the superiority of your own group. In looking to the interactive processes of mass media production and interpretation, then, it is clear that the scripts of black womanhood most prevalent in the media landscape do more than satisfy the ideologies of large media corporations and advertisers. They also appeal to the complex sensibilities of black female media citizens.

Conclusion – Redeeming Black Female Representation

For Sonya, a black woman who has spent nearly two decades working in the television industry, the re-emergence of black-female oriented content is not encouraging. Her experience behind the scenes has persuaded Sonya of a few key certainties about the power structures that dominate popular culture: 1) they are most motivated by profit, 2) they are reliant on stereotypes and broad generalizations, and 3) they are interested in making black women over into the images that best appeal to advertisers rather than listening to black women’s narratives of self on their own terms. The images that advertisers privilege closely resemble the enduring tropes of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, and they depict black women in roles where “independence and dominance are exaggerated” (Baker 15).

Sonya: You know watching the screeners, the things that are coming down the pipeline for African American women; I’m just like here we go again. It’s the same stuff! And people say, well at least [this particular cast is] not fighting. And it’s like, they’re not fighting as much right now. But as soon as you tell them, look, these ratings are not what they need to be, somebody needs to get into a fight—because those things *actually* happen—now it’s become a whole other show... Can we just have a *regular* story, like does it have to be all the extra stuff?

The pessimistic view that Sonya has developed regarding the treatment of black womanhood is based on the quality of representation. With each new show that is created, she finds that representations of black women remain terrifyingly consistent, especially within the genre of reality TV. “Black representation on reality TV,” argues Robin Boylorn, “has emerged as a quick claim to fame and the more outrageous and memorable the better” (424). Sonya’s request for “regular” narratives of black female life and experience speaks to the binaristic frame through which black womanhood tends to be presented. In the contemporary media landscape, “black women are either extremely educated or a high school dropout, ambitious or listless, sexy or ugly” (Boylorn 418). Researchers posit that the use of black extremes is part of a strategy to attract audiences. On the one hand, companies wonder whether or not “regular” characters can garner high ratings (Boylorn 2008). On the other hand, the use of racialized characters that play to extremes has proven successful for shows like *The Real World* and *Survivor* (Bell-Jordan 2008). Such shows are edited to amplify racial conflict through which audiences are presented with a hero/villain dichotomy (Bell-Jordan 2008).

There is no image of black womanhood in popular culture that circulates uncontested. Each character, personality, and text inhabits tensions between varying interests and motivations. Furthermore, debates suggest that there is no single way of achieving an ideal representation of black women, and that, in fact, no such ideal exists. Some texts may be more satisfying than others, and some characters more multidimensional than others, but even these qualities exist on a broad continuum that is largely subjective. Yet, despite there being no scientific formula for representation which yields universal acceptance and adherence among one’s target audience, media corporations continue to produce and reproduce the same types of images of black womanhood in much the same way that one might follow a formula. Study participants stated

that despite the flawed science used to support editorial and programming choices, media corporations remain fully invested in portraying black women in palatable stereotypes.

Media executives tend to present their decisions as having very little to do with philosophies or abstract theories; rather, they claim to rely on ratings data which suggests they are meeting the demand of the viewing market. However, this chapter has shown that the relationship between black female media citizens and media corporations is particularly complicated. Commercial media have a habit of using audience demand as an apathetic excuse to defend their decisions to produce content with provocative portrayals of black women. Even when audience opposition is prevalent, media executives may often dismiss it. The enterprise of scripting black womanhood, then, is not fully based on hard numbers and undeniable measures. Ignorance of the diversity within black womanhood, and reliance on misguided instincts that often reflect stereotypes make the process of creating content for black women quite slippery. Amid the black female voices that shape representations of black women are professional content creators who feel compelled to comply with the status quo even when it threatens their personal understanding of black womanhood, and black female media citizens who take pleasure in engaging media texts that portray black women in harsh extremes.

Then there are those black women who, relying a lens of respectability, work to dismantle deviant representations of black womanhood. Sabrina Lamb is a black female media citizen who belongs to the latter category. Lamb created an online petition in opposition to Oxygen's reality series *All My Babies' Mamas*—a show entangled in the most virulent stereotypes about deviant black sexuality and familial dysfunction. After the petition received more than 40,000 signatures, Oxygen issued an official statement declaring that they would

cancel the show.⁴² Although the show never made its small screen debut, the fact that it had already gone into production, had been assigned a premier date, and had been advertised suggests that Oxygen believed there was a market for the series (Samuels 2013). The question must be asked, if Oxygen had not cancelled *All My Babies' Mamas*, what story might viewer ratings have told? Even if the show had proven offensive, was there an audience of young black women, Oxygen's key viewing demographic, willing to watch it?

Developing an accurate understanding of black women as media citizens means taking into account the women who would have happily enjoyed *All My Babies' Mamas* and the women who petitioned against it. In spite of all of the horrifying ideologies that inform the way big media sees and relate to black women, it must be acknowledged that there is also a multitude of ways that black women see and relate to media texts. Erasing those women whose media engagement practices fail to align with the politics of respectability is just as restrictive as insisting that a company only needs to advertise in *Essence* magazine in order to reach all black women. The data in this chapter, and the previous chapter, demonstrate that attempts at policing black women's interpretive practices through kinship networks, religion, and advertising are ineffective. Black female media citizens are far too complex and creative to be restricted to a monolith.

The inventiveness of black female audiences is even more pronounced in the digital age where many media citizens have begun creating scripts for black womanhood on their own terms. In the next chapter, I continue to explore the intricate struggle that black female media citizens encounter, through the testimonies of women who have become everyday content

⁴² *All My Babies' Mamas* never made its small screen debut because Oxygen executives cancelled the show before it was set to premier. The show was based on the life of rapper Shawty Lo and the ten different women with whom he has had 11 children. See Samuels' "Sources: Oxygen to Cancel New Show 'All My Babies' Mamas,' Starring Shawty Lo" for a detailed account of the growing trend of black women in reality television.

creators through tools like Blogger, Twitter and YouTube. These women have begun using digital storytelling technologies as a back stage of sorts where they push back against restrictive tropes to write, tweet, and speak their own definitions of black womanhood into existence.

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Chapter 4

Public Gestures, Interior Blessings: Black Womanhood in the Digital Age

In the five years that I have spent studying black women, I have come to understand the broad categories that commercial media use to define this group—gold digger, angry black woman/bitch, strong black woman, welfare queen, fat funny woman, whore, etc... Identifying those categories leads one to the absences, the human realities of black womanhood that always fall somewhere between the extremes. Time and time again throughout the research journey, I have been reminded that my estimation of what is missing from the media landscape of black womanhood depends on what I am looking for in the first place. For example, when I was a single black woman, I spent a lot of time searching for representations of single black women who were also professional, emotionally balanced, and not living in fear of *singledoom*. In other words, I was looking for a woman whose life resembled my own, and it did not take long to see that such women were few and far between in commercial media. With the guidance of study participants, I have come to more fully recognize that the scarcity of diverse black female representations leaves many black women on the same search to find someone whose reality reflects that of their own. The beauty of the present digital age, however, is that many black women have stopped looking for those representations altogether, and instead begun creating and sharing these narratives on their own terms, online.

The content created for and by black women online is phenomenal in breadth. There are dozens of online communities where black women share hair maintenance tips (CurlyNikki.com, BlackGirlWithLongHair.com); discuss strategies for navigating the politics of black culture as someone who identifies as LGBT (MoodieMills.com and Politini on iTunes); and share in the pleasure of seeing the everyday of black life depicted in fictional series (BlackandSexy.TV, ChicRebellion.TV). Each of these spaces offers an experience of media engagement that traditional commercial outlets fail to provide: 1) visions of black womanhood unrestricted by the constraints of profit margins and marketing schemas, 2) a more vast range of representations which enable media citizens to inhabit different facets of the black female self, and 3) an interactive exchange where audiences and content creators co-construct meaning through the sacred process of testifying and witnessing.

At a time when commercial media outlets have turned their attention toward black women more than ever before, online content often created by amateurs continues to expand and evolve. Decades ago, one could have predicted that commercial media outlets, with their money and reach, would only have to compete against each other in the campaign to win the black female market. Yet, the affordances of the digital era have significantly widened the amount of easily accessible black female content—forcing everyday black female media citizens-turned content creators out of obscurity. Amid this shift in the media landscape, the work of multiple actors—from corporate advertisers to amateur content creators—must be re-examined. Chapter three explored the misguided and willfully ignorant attempts made at managing black womanhood in all of its complexity, with a focus on the missteps of white media executives. This chapter focuses on black female media citizens as content creators confronting the same complexities of race, womanhood, sexuality, class, and agency in their own public narratives.

Some of the content creators interviewed for this chapter have experience with the inner workings of large media corporations. Most of the study participants whose voices are found here, however, work outside of commercial media and have committed to publicizing their own scripts for black womanhood in the form of (video) blogs, web series, magazines, lifestyle web sites, and various online social media profiles. Their insights speak to the importance of public gestures and testimonies for black women in their journey to make sense of, or reimagine, the interior black female self.

Throughout the chapter, I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of content creation for black women who rely on this practice as a mode of self-care, or attending to one's wholeness and wellness across multiple dimensions of life (e.g., physical, emotional, spiritual...). Advantages include affirmation and validation of one's own script for black womanhood, while disadvantages include personal critiques and amplified public scrutiny. I was surprised and delighted to find that so many study participants have turned to creating content in order to come to terms with the meaning of living life in a black female body, to work through major life transitions, to connect with other black women, and to validate their thoughts and ideas.

This chapter explores the media landscape as both a place where black women perform the self, and a place where the black female self takes shape. Data presented here—derived from interviews and participant observation—are not fixed on a singular theme; rather, participants move across dimensions of the self in their discussion of media and black womanhood to address issues of capitalist media hierarchies, identity negotiation, and the gendered notions of racial uplift ideology. The strategies that black women use to intervene in the media landscape in the digital era are not completely different from those deployed by black women confronting the

same enduring tropes in past decades. A tendency to slide back and forth along a continuum of respectable black femininity is still prevalent (White 1999). In the struggle to negotiate the tensions between performances of self that garner external support and performances of self that meet internal yearnings black female media citizens continue to invoke the womanist principle of making do (Baker-Fletcher 1994). That is to say, they become particularly adept at working outside of the commercial media culture to bring forth more nuanced expressions of the black female self. Given the scarcity of the cultural resources made available to them, they are left to “making something out of nothing” (Baker-Fletcher 1997). Even the mundane practices of content creation become “something” of value in the contemporary media landscape. Black female media citizens may use a 140-character posting about an effective workout or a selfie, for example, as deeply felt expressions of self that push back against dominant representations of black womanhood. Hence, Facebook profiles, Linked-in profiles, Twitter feeds, and the like constitute the data that has sustained my inquiry into how black women understand and define themselves through digital media technologies.

Some of my interlocutors will likely wonder why I have devoted so much of this discussion on content creation to positive benefits, when the limitations of this practice of mediated identity construction are so glaring. After all, public gestures draw black women even further into the realm of public scrutiny where they may be misunderstood and judged according to standards of whiteness and femininity that they may never meet. Indeed, at different points throughout the project, I have pondered whether it would be more valuable to explore the pitfalls of content creation and offer practical solutions. In the end, however, I have come to understand that when black women create content on their own terms, even if that content is ultimately misappropriated, they experience interior blessings. Those blessings include wholeness and

affirmation of one's performance of black womanhood. The capacity to use easily accessible technology to construct an identity, a presentation of the self that can be legible to countless others, affords black women a more flexible domain to experiment with multiple ways of performing black womanhood. Furthermore, digital content creation technologies expand black women's community of witnesses, and therefore, widen the opportunity for black women to achieve validation of voice.

The interactive quality of digital content creation enables black female media citizens to replicate the call-and-response style of dialogue that is sacred to black female experience. The act of testifying at communal gatherings has been a key element of black American cultural traditions for more than a century (Smitherman 1985). Whether enacted during formal religious gatherings or during less formal meetings, testifying is a sacred act that requires participants to "open themselves up to one another, show their scars, speak of their day-to-day life, their hopes and dreams, [and] pray to their God" (Taylor 58). Part of what makes the act of testifying sacred are those who bear witness to the truths that are expressed. In the presence of the witnesses that engage and affirm her, the testifier comes to explore the power of her voice and resists the oppressive structures of society that would otherwise see her silenced (Tarpley 1995).

The digital media landscape is a domain where black female media citizens engage in a deeply affective form of "information play" that replicates the enduring practices of testifying and witnessing (Goffman 1959). In the process of the information play, the audience or witness is just as important as the performer. As Goffman explains, "however passive their role may seem," those who bear witness to some performance of self are critical to affirming the reality that the testifier seeks to construct through their performance (9). When black female media citizens "like" each other's pictures, re-tweet each other's Twitter messages, and endorse each

other's skills on LinkedIn, they affirm and validate the performance or testimonies of black womanhood that are shared in these digital spaces. For example, when engaging Black Twitter—a significant cultural resource through which users perform their blackness within the larger public sphere of the social network Twitter—black women not only validate black thought, but also validate and celebrate the codes and signifying practices used to express black thought (Florini 2014). When black women share their thoughts, ideas, and talents with an interpretive community that understands their codes of communication, the meaning of the content that has been shared is further amplified (Fish 1976). Being misunderstood, or worse, constantly having one's own practices of communication labeled defunct and thus one's content repeatedly misinterpreted is akin to having no voice at all. Thus the confirmation that black women receive from presenting their versions of black womanhood to a community of witnesses is invaluable to their interior sense of self. When their voices are heard and their conceptions of black womanhood are witnessed, black women get the affirmation required to continue performing black womanhood on their own terms.

It is important to note here that there is no single show, or blog post, or magazine article, or song, or film, or video that speaks to the entirety of black womanhood. These representations are sketches of the black female self and are therefore imperfect and can always be altered and redrawn. Creating mediated content is one strategy that black women use to navigate the misrepresentations that mask their complexity, diversity, and humanity. Content creation is a way of pushing back against the marks of stereotypes and caricatures that crowd the canvas of identity—or at least reorganizing the canvas to emphasize the images that fit one's own imagination of the black female self.

Black Women and Participatory Culture: The Power of Voice

Given the historic anxiety about mass media that casts audiences as passive receptors, content creation by media citizens has been welcomed, by some, as the ideal the anti-dupe, a remedy to mindless media consumption (Jenkins 2006).⁴³ Participatory culture describes a shift away from the unidirectional flow of media production, and toward a more fluid, omnidirectional flow of content and ideas favoring empowered media citizens. The growing sophistication and declining price of “do-it-yourself” production technologies have facilitated this redirection of content. Scholars and media conglomerates have therefore been forced to attend to the labor of interpretation and take seriously the meanings that audiences bring to the media landscape (Jenkins 2006). Ultimately, the abundance of published user-generated content where non-professionals create original narratives and re-appropriate pre-made content underscores a shift in power. The media landscape is not simply made up of producers and consumers, but rather media citizens or actors who fall along a continuum of power. More specifically, scholars have found that media citizens who create content online are more likely to be psychologically empowered and more engaged in their communities (Leung 2010). Content creators perceive that they have control over their lives and are confident in their capacity to productively participate in their societies. When black female media citizens create content online, they enact the power of voice and deny the commercial media structures that would otherwise render them silent.

When Brittany, a Southern woman in her 20s, first decided that she would become an actor, she found inspiration in British comedies and variety shows that aired on public television.

⁴³ José van Dijck (2009) argues that scholars have been too quick to apply the label of active media citizen where it may not always fit. He proposes that scholars consider that within the digital media landscape there continue to be various levels of participation whereby those who create content would be considered more active than those who only comment on that content. This argument does not fit the exchange of testifying and witnessing that black female media citizens enact online. The commenter, or witness, is quite active in validating and affirming the testifier. Without this validation, the performance of self is left hanging in the media landscape without justification, and without the interior affirmation for which the testifier yearns.

Black female comedians who delivered cultural critique in their humor with the style that Brittany felt could one day be her own were rare. Thus, instead of focusing on career role models that resembled her identity, she clung to a variety of different actors that appealed to her artistic aesthetics. By the time Brittany had become an adult and started auditioning for roles, the industry had barely improved. In the few years she spent as a professional actor in the film and television industry, Brittany concluded that “as a black woman the more difficult thing is being able to find parts that you want to play, that either say ‘no ethnicity specified’ or that actually specify African-American.” Rather than settle for stereotypical roles that did not appeal to her or be rendered silent by Hollywood, Brittany decided to establish her own web series focused on a comedic retellings of popular black history narratives.

Brittany: Being able to create my own work has been tremendously helpful as a person, because I think we all come to acting, well at least I do, I come to acting because I love the art of theater. I love storytelling. And being able to create my own work means that I can continue to act, and I’m not at the whim of producers and writers writing stuff that excites me, or stuff that I fit, you know, getting the part. I get to create what I want to be a part of.

Brittany is drawn to content creation, in part, because of a direct lack in her profession.

Understanding that commercial media only envision black women in very limited roles, she has embraced the absences as an opportunity to create black female narratives on her own terms (Baker 2005). In this way, Brittany is enacting her power of voice in the womanist tradition.

Karen Baker-Fletcher describes voice as a force through which black women articulate experience and conceptualize the self and the world (191). In her YouTube series, Brittany redefines the black female self and even re-conceptualizes her cultural heritage through a retelling of black womanhood in historic narratives.

Naturally, as Brittany creates alternative roles for herself, she also opens the door for a range of new portrayals for others. The web series that she created online grew to include more

than a dozen other content creators as actors, producers, and editors. Brittany found creative chemistry with another black woman featured in a couple of her webisodes and went on to create another series. Hence, she finds freedom for herself and a community of other black actors through her content creation.

Brittany: One of the things that prohibits black women or black men, or any minority from telling a story is money. With YouTube and other online channels you can do it for such a smaller budget. That means so much. You have a way to share those stories and reach millions of people. It doesn't have to go through producers and people that are counting dollar signs. It's like breaking boundaries.

Digital storytelling technologies—YouTube in this case—have opened the door for many more content producers who would otherwise be restricted by a lack of financial resources. Content creators like Brittany can create an entire film or series that can be distributed immediately and reach millions of people, without managing additional pressures from commercial sponsors.

Autonomy and freedom from commercial constraints are among the most salient advantages of black female content creation. Study participants like Erica, a teacher in her thirties, appreciate digital outlets like blogs because they offer the freedoms of personal journaling and the access of formal publishing. The cathartic quality of content creation emerges from the mutual benefits of these two features, autonomy and broad publishing capability, working in concert.

Erica: I think [blogging is] just the easiest way to just get your thoughts out across to different people and your loved ones. You don't have to go through the bureaucracy of publishing. You write what you want, you put it out there, and it just spreads. I think it's just the easiest way to share your emotions and feelings through writing. I think that's why I chose it.

In addition to the personal benefits that black women experience as media citizens engaged in participatory culture, study participants also revealed a womanist ethic of community service and uplifting dialogue in their motivation to become content creators. Within the

womanist tradition, black women claim a right to voice with the understanding that their platforms demand an attention to community. The responsibility of black female content creators, within the womanist framework, is to create content that ultimately edifies and benefits black women at large, and not just the black female self. Specifically, Katie G. Cannon credits black women with developing a “collection of moral counsel [that] is implicitly passed on and received from one generation of Black women to the next” (4). Cannon further explains,

The moral wisdom does not rescue Black women from the bewildering pressures and perplexities of institutionalized social evils but rather, exposes those assumptions which are inimical to the ongoing survival of Black womanhood... As moral agents struggling to avoid the devastating effects of structural oppression, these Black women create various coping mechanisms that free them from imposed norms and expectations. The moral counsel of their collective stories accentuates the positive attributes of Black life. (4, 14)

Content creation in its highest form is therefore not taken up haphazardly nor with selfish desires in mind. Rather, black women produce content with the intention of encouraging others to embrace a more autonomous and liberated way of being. Although none of the study participants identified themselves as womanist nor spoke the word at all, many of their motivations for creating content aligned with this womanist value.

For example, Patrice, a corporate communications manager, freelance journalist, and blogger based in the Midwest, started a travel blog to encourage black women to overcome their fears of international travel.

Patrice: Another reason I started the web site is because I’m always the girlfriend that plans all the trips. Everybody wants to go, but no one wants to do the planning work. And for me it’s fun because I enjoy pulling it all together. But I thought, you know, I’m not the only one doing this. It’s not [*my*] trip, it’s *our* trip, and I wanted to inspire them to travel the world and to get more involved.

So many people wrote to me and said that they were afraid to travel internationally. And you know a lot of women were writing in and saying that they had been wanting to travel but just didn’t know how, they didn’t know where to start. My blog was educating other black women and encouraging them to get out there.

Given her love of travel and writing, Patrice is happy to combine these two passions in her blog. As an experienced journalist, however, she has been able to make a living writing about her travel experiences. The travel blog is an additional project, motivated just as much by her attention to other black women as it is by her desire to continue to write her black female self into being. The digital era has been described as an “era of the imperative self-promotion”—a line of thinking that would make Patrice’s efforts of informing and encouraging others seem self-centered (Jones 2014; McFarland 2013). It is clear, however, that Patrice pens her blog from a place of sisterhood and a desire to encourage other black women in the same way that an aunt encouraged her.

As an air force nurse from the baby boomer generation, Patrice’s aunt was an anomaly. Her aunt is a black woman who never married or had children, but poured most of her resources into experiencing the world first hand. It was her aunt’s boldness that led Patrice to believe that she could also make her own definition of black womanhood.

Patrice: She was a nurse in the air force, and she traveled ALL over the world. She’s very progressive. And you know she’s one of those quirky people that never got married, but she always... She went to Italy, she lived in Germany, she lived in Moscow, you know, just because she wanted to see the world. That’s probably why she joined the military. You know, hearing her stories later on made me think, wow, that is so cool. Somebody who’s done this sort of thing and is from the South Side of _____ just like I am. But really was determined to live her life on her own terms. And so without knowing it, that became a catalyst.

Traveling and writing about international travel extend far beyond bragging rights for Patrice. Her content creation is about offering black women an alternative way of being, a model of how black women can overcome restrained social positions to achieve their dreams, no matter how grand. The motivation of her blog is quite clearly communicated in her home page: “I spent nearly one year working as a freelance writer in Florence, Italy and in 2012 lived in the charming

French village of Samois-sur-Seine, an hour south of Paris. I don't believe in letting other folks define ME — and you shouldn't, either!"

What makes international travel a specific act of courage and radical self-care for black women? Patrice finds that the American-born stereotypes about black women that circulate the globe in an unforgiving, lightening-speed media environment shape public perception. "You know, a lot of women are concerned about how they are going to be perceived as a black American woman. And I think it's important that we experience the world, and I think it's important that the world experience *us*. And if we don't go, all they're going to see is rumpshakers on videos, and all this crazy stuff." When black women travel outside of familiar territory they are daring to trade the homebred prejudice that they are accustomed to navigating with an alien bias that they often feel unprepared to confront.

Patrice: You know these women on all of these reality shows, that stuff is broadcast around the world. And I wanted to communicate to women, No! They need to see people like you, and you, and you, and you. So I think it's two-fold. I think we need to get out there and experience life outside of the United States. And I think that people around the world need to not just see Michelle Obama as the prototypical black woman. You know, everybody didn't grow up like that. People are shocked when you tell them that and I'm like *really?!!*

Patrice's blog is therefore a space in the media landscape where her internal ideas of black womanhood, and her lived performance, coalesce. Her blog, much like her physical international travel, disrupts stereotypical scripts of black womanhood and offers a more nuanced understanding of black women's identities and capabilities.

Collectively, the experiences of Brittany, Erica, and Patrice depict the ways that black women draw on digital technologies to come to voice and testify. Women sketch and re-sketch their strengths, weaknesses, anxieties, and desires in web series and blogs. Importantly, their stories also indicate that these sketches are intended as testimonies and that women yearn for the

recognition of witnesses. Study participants embrace content creation, even sharing very intimate details about the self, as a public gesture that is most fulfilling when shared with others.

The Power of Witnessing and Interpretive Validation

One of Erica's most validating moments as a content creator occurred when she edited a collection of blog posts and journal entries into an article that was then published by a national health magazine for women of color. The article discussed Erica's struggle with the physical ramifications of stress and anxiety.

Interviewer: Can you describe for me a particular time where you wrote something, and in getting it out in writing, it was specifically therapeutic and effective for you?

Erica: Well definitely my first publication in _____ magazine, which was about fighting off anxiety attacks. It was extremely personal. A lot of things that I delved into in the article, you know, some of my closest friends didn't even know. So that was the first time I really came to terms with certain things, and it was such an incredible feeling once it was released and people were reading it. SO many people related to that story in a way that I could NEVER imagine.

Erica was initially hesitant to publicly discuss her experience with panic attacks. Nevertheless, she used the article to confront the physical and psychological turmoil that she had silently endured. Erica typed the words that she could not bring herself to speak. She desired for her troubles to be brought into the light of public witness. Publishing the article required Erica to publicly admit to her struggles and forced others to recognize a kind of humanity that she was hesitant to perform in other ways.

For many participants, the experience of content creation is enriched by community. Within a community of witnesses, black female media citizens find an assembly of interpreters with the capacity to receive their work and render it meaningful by responding to the performer in kind. Study participants are deeply invested in how members of their interpretive communities

respond to their content. For these participants the response of the interpretive community is not only a reaction to the content; it is a statement about the performer herself.

In the ways that they think about their work and anticipate its implications, black female content creators tend to situate themselves as intimate strangers among a collective of black women in the media landscape. Intimate, because they are at once rendered a group, a market segment, a spec in relation to the larger monolith when someone recognizes them as a black female; strangers, because as individual beings, they lead unique yet interconnected lives. Indeed, when content creators are black and female, they are not distinct from the audience. Collectively, these content creators and cultural producers disrupt the common definition of an audience altogether, and instead, form an interpretive community (Fish 1976; Bobo 1995). In accordance with Fish's definition of interpretive communities, black women share access to "ways of interpreting" media texts (Fish 484). At the most universal level, these interpretive strategies are accessible to all black women by virtue of their lived identity as black females (Bobo 1995). Black women are all linked by the stereotypes and cultural baggage that surface when one encounters a black female. Access to this repertoire of experience and imagination grants black women a distinct point of connection should they choose to activate it. As Jo-Anne Banks-Wallace writes:

African American women's ability to aggregate and articulate individual expressions of everyday consciousness as a self-defined, collective standpoint is key to their survival. Each woman's theoretical database for decision making is broadened by having access to both her personal experiences and the collective experiences of a population of women living with similar issues. (35)

The potential for meaningful reciprocity, then, seems limitless when black women collectively engage each other's testimonies. Validation of the voice, and of the self, can result from communal witnessing and interpretation.

Multiple study participants have spoken about the importance of using content creation to find co-laborers in performing black womanhood. They draw strength from the knowledge that someone else can identify with their own trials and triumphs. The response that Erica received from sharing the testimony about managing an anxiety disorder, for instance, encouraged her because other women of color could relate. Sharing her testimony enabled her to re-imagine her struggle as one that she fought with the support of others, instead of an impossible monster that she had to confront alone. Other participants acknowledge that there is a value in simply being recognized. They look to other black female witnesses to acknowledge their existence at the most basic level. When predominant ideologies restrict black womanhood to a predetermined set of codes, all black women end up deviating from that schema in one way or another. Those black women whose lived performances of womanhood are the most deviant struggle to simply exist on the societal register. The community of witnesses does something for many content creators that nothing else ever has: it acknowledges that they are alive.

The value of recognition was particularly pronounced in the narratives of Adrianna, a multimedia specialist who identifies as Afro-Latina; Kara, a journalist and lesbian; and Arlene, a middle-aged professional practicing celibacy. Although Adrianna grew up with affirmations of her claim to a plural ethno-cultural heritage in the home, extended family members and peers constantly rejected her claim to an Afro-Latina identity. Further, Adrianna found that mass media had not made room for girls like her, who could be phenotypically categorized as black, but whose linguistic, culinary, and religious sensibilities indicated Latino roots. Adrianna experienced the impact of her absence from the larger narrative of American womanhood in multiple layers after becoming employed at what she describes as “supposedly progressive” media outlets that focused on black and Latina women. The negligence that Adrianna felt

growing up in a black-and-white media environment was amplified at these media organizations that demanded that she not only sift herself into parts, but also that she normalize this style of identity management for other women who would read the content she produced. The pressure from living and working under this restrained regime of race and identity eventually became too much for Adrianna to bear. She eventually left both companies as an employee and as a doting audience member.

Channeling her efforts toward her own online magazine of sorts, Adrianna's most basic objective in producing content that highlights celebrities and everyday women who also identify as Afro-Latina is to construct a body of evidence. She is determined to create a space that writes Afro-Latina women into the public record and encourages them to interact with and see one another in the full complexity of their womanhood. Her site is a mix of current events, celebrity news, and narratives of everyday women that put Afro-Latinas at the center. From coverage of celebrities like LaLa Anthony (an actress and TV personality) and Mariah Carey (a Grammy-award winning artist) to profiles of Afro-Latina millennials making a difference in their communities, the overarching narrative of the blog focuses on the experience of “navigating two worlds” and the drive for a more diverse media landscape that reflects that experience.

Adrianna: The media, they are very comfortable with showing the same characters—whether fictional or not—over and over again. In the news, in sitcoms, in all of those things they're very comfortable you know feeding us the same information, feeding us the same identities over and over again. And for me it's problematic because young women who are looking for themselves or representations of themselves in mainstream media are not seeing themselves... So kind of, the whole idea of not seeing myself represented, and also that being a larger issue for Afro-Latino women, that was really the fuel for me to launch something like this. And I really should have done it much earlier, but um, it got to a point where it was just like, I just need to launch this now.

Similar to Adrianna, Kara is another professional content creator that looks to mass media in order to facilitate a deeper knowledge of her interior self. Once she began to know

herself as a black lesbian woman, Kara yearned for affirmations of what she was feeling and models for how she would manifest her queerness as a black woman.

Kara: When I was coming into my own as a black lesbian woman, like embracing my own identity, I really turned to the media to make sense of you know what it was I was experiencing and to find reflections of myself... So in embracing my new identity I turned to the media because I didn't really have access to um women who were black lesbians and it was really a way for me to kind of make sense of what it was I was feeling. And it was a safe place for me to do that without necessarily putting myself out there.

Kara felt malnourished by the limited offerings of mass mediated female subjects that were queer and black. Starting a magazine (with print and online channels) was Kara's response to a lack in her own life, but also an intervention into the larger narrative which suggests that women like her are non-existent.

Kara: So I left my last job at a woman's publication and I made the transition to work in media advocacy, which was an LGBT organization that basically encouraged media to be more inclusive around LGBT content. And that was really when I felt like, you know I was out and I was proud, and you know I still didn't see a lot of multidimensional representations of black lesbian-bisexual-transgender women. A lot of times when our stories were told in the media it was just kind of hypersexualized and you know we were just objects of desire. You know we were in threesomes for men; it was just all from the male gaze. Or we were either portrayed in this way where we were like hypermasculine, butch. And as a feminine-presenting woman who had all these different layers to who I was—like I love fashion; I like make-up; I love news and politics; I also like gossip blogs and reality TV—I didn't find an outlet that captured all of those elements. So that's when I was like you know what, I don't see this out there and I'm going to create it.

The very public gesture of pronouncing her existence as a black lesbian woman who is not confused about her sexuality, who takes pleasure in adorning herself according to common standards of femininity, and who also enjoys romantic relationships with other feminine-presenting women, gives Kara's performance of self a sense of credibility and irrefutability. In the light of publication her identity and her performance of black womanhood have to be acknowledged. Furthermore, among a community of witnesses that acknowledge and validate Kara's declaration of self, it is harder for Kara to be cast off as an unimportant outlier. Using

mediated content creation, Kara is able to facilitate a coming to terms with the fraught dimension of self that is black female sexuality.

In talks, essays, music, and poems black women have spoken against the sexual order of white patriarchy that pits black women as promiscuous jezebels always available for the amusement of others. When black women have voiced their sexuality in public, it has often been to broadcast all the sex that they were *not* having as evidence of their purity.⁴⁴ Purity was not preached for purity's sake; rather, black women viewed sexual morality as a pathway to being recognized as human. Since black women's sexuality and their humanity were fruit from the same tree, one concept relied on the other for validity. The explanation for black women's perceived sexual deviance was a general inclination toward animalistic behaviors, which undermined their humanity (Hammonds 1997). For black women, arguing for one's sexual conservatism has often been the same as petitioning for one's personhood. Thus, Kara's content creation is all the more politically weighted. When black women sketch the sexual dimensions of the self, they are working through multilayered tensions that tug at the very foundations of what it means to be a black woman.

Arlene, although using her Facebook profile to make a sexual declaration quite different from Kara's, also risked public scrutiny to experience the full realization of her sexual identity. After her divorce, and growing deeper into her relationship with God, Arlene decided to rethink the terms of her sexuality. As a Christian, she came to believe that sexual intercourse was best when expressed within the confines of marriage. After fifteen plus years of abstaining from sexual intercourse, Arlene publicized her journey using her Facebook profile. Although

⁴⁴ Of course this statement does not speak to the entirety of public narratives around black female sexuality in any given era. Black female blues singers of the early 20th century offer one notable exception to the silencing around sexual pleasure. See Harrison's *Black Pearls* (2000) for a more detailed account. Also, See Carol Batker's "*Love Me Like I Like to Be*": *The Sexual Politics of Hurston's Their Eyes were Watching God, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women's Club Movement* (1998).

abstinence for unmarried adults is the general standard upheld in Arlene's faith community, the larger sociocultural community to which she belongs assumes that adults who abstain only do so because of an anatomical or psychological lack or flaw. Thus, Arlene's proclamation, and the responses it garnered, were an affirmation to herself and others that there are multiple models of sexual well-being. Abstinence was one of them.

Arlene: It was just an overwhelming response and at that moment I knew that people needed to know that it was possible...It was like a coming out of the closet. And that was my Facebook reference. It was like we gotta come out of the closet. Everybody is coming out of the closet about their live-in boos and they everything. Everybody's coming out of the closet about everything! So as Christians we gotta come out of the closet. And as I began writing this book and talking more about it I find that there are so many people who ARE celibate and have been for years and they're thought of as old maids, um if you're a woman. Or punks if you're a man. You know and that's not, from a Christian perspective, that's not godly. We're to be triumphing; it's to be celebrated. Celibacy is, you know sexy. It's sexy, you know!

The data confirm that black women also share what has been described as a basic human craving for accurate "recognition of one's special, inexchangeable uniqueness" (Harris-Perry 38). The dominant misrepresentations that enshroud black womanhood make this type of precise discerning of an individual's true being particularly difficult when black women are the subject of study. As Harris-Perry further explains:

An individual who is seen primarily as a part of a despised group loses the opportunity to experience the public recognition for which the human self strives. Further, if the group itself is misunderstood, then to the extent that one is seen as a part of this group, that 'seeing' is inaccurate. (38)

The American imagination has long regarded black women as most deviant from white American femininity. Therefore, in order to recognize a black woman's humanity, one must first think through the baseline of degeneracy. Some fundamental truths must be realized: (1) black women are not a monolith, (2) black women are human and thus susceptible to human tendencies and yearnings like contradiction, imperfection, and a desire for love and acceptance. With this

knowledge of cultural baggage in mind, Arlene, Kara, and Adrianna all create content that offers a corrective vision of themselves and other black women who share their experiences.

Creating a public record of their own image(s) of black womanhood through Facebook, magazines, and blogs is as much a practice of intimacy for women as it is a practice of dissemination. The higher the stakes of a given topic of discussion, the more deeply study participants yearn for the recognition of their interpretive community. When participants find themselves threatening the social mores of their families, communities, and social institutions, they gain strength from the affirmation that other black female media citizens can offer. Black female witnesses grant each other credibility when they seek to imagine new ways of being that challenge the status quo. Such standards of community, worthiness, and right to voice are decidedly womanist. Janice Hamlet writes that “the black feminist or womanist challenges the public discourse about African American women by presenting themselves as they know themselves to be and not as others choose to see them” (422). Thus, these practices of content creation reflect womanist values of asserting a public voice so that one may assert one’s own vision of black womanhood.

In addition to offering validation through their acknowledgement of and response to creative works, witnesses also play a role in meaning making. That is to say, the meaning of the black female selves that study participants present online is co-determined through exchanges between the content creator and the collective of witnesses. Black women’s digital identity construction is therefore a dialogic process. Russell Belk describes the type of identity play and self-curation taking place online as the “co-construction of the self” (487). When study participants invite others to comment on pictures and blog posts, to “like” a Facebook update, they are inviting those others “to help in constructing [their] individual and joint extended sense

of self” (487). Although the “online disinhibition effect makes it easier to try out new selves online...[and] for others—both friends and anonymous readers—to provide feedback for the co-construction of self”, the same type of identity co-construction occurs in face-to-face social interaction (Belk 487). The journey to making sense of the self, in general, is not something done in isolation, but a practice enriched through leveraging the knowledge about the self through others in one’s social network. Even when they were sketching very personal stories, black female content creators are always consciously engaging a community narrative of black womanhood in plurality.

Black Women Back Stage: Performances of the Black Female Self Online

Religion by definition is fixed and rigid. The rules are pre-established and followers are required to adhere to them in order to prove their devotion. In much of the digital content created by black women, however, religion is unrecognizable by these traits. What one finds, instead, are blogs, video diaries, and captioned images that depict multiple expressions of faith without the yoke of tradition. In an effort to construct the black female self on their own terms, several study participants have also had to re-construct God and the ways in which they express their faith and relate to other Christians. While these black women may blend into the crowd of congregants at worship services, their online expressions of self enable them to fully inhabit the parts of themselves that go muted on Sundays—the parts that want to feel sexy, go to night clubs, and engage in pre-marital sex. They use the Internet as a “backstage” where they are free to perform the black female self in all of its contradictions (Goffman 1959).

Study participants generally understand and define the black female self as an unfinished “reflexive project”—something which each individual must perpetually manage and construct

using digital channels (Giddens 75). The ways in which study participants use media technologies to give meaning to their understandings of black womanhood support Anthony Giddens's proposal that "we are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (75). Giddens argues that the work of coming to know oneself is less about "self-understanding" and more about the "inclusive and fundamental aim of building/rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity" (75). Online blogs and social media profiles are sites where this construction of self takes place.

Within ten minutes of talking to an interviewee named Jade, I thought about how disappointed my parents, leaders of a Christian church, would be at my affirmative responses to her re-mixed interpretations of scripture. Her comments about doctrine, sexuality, and predominantly black churches are full of generalizations that can easily be critiqued. In fact, I disagree with several of Jade's ideas. However, the way in which she dares to speak them, and live them, is frankly inspiring. She is accustomed to people questioning her faith and attacking her views, yet, she believes them so deeply that she continues to blog, tweet, and post them online. Jade identifies herself as a church girl, and yet, she believes that "half of what the church taught us was some bull." Hence, her blog and podcast function as corrective theology with everyday applications. One day, she might be discussing megastar Beyoncé as a role model for "the sexually captive church girl," and in another entry, she might be critiquing how the church teaches believers to manage their sexuality. At times Jade can sound like a renegade on a grand mission, but at the core of her public gestures of critique is a desire for interior blessings of wholeness and affirmation of self. Jade uses the cultural resources available to her via digital technologies to create a virtual domain where she can perform black womanhood in a way that might otherwise be rejected.

Jade, who says that she “never considered herself a writer” developed the courage to publish her thoughts in a blog after two years of writing essays that she only sent to an e-mail group consisting of close family and friends. The essays were a way for her to think through the radical ideas she had as she “struggled with the idea of how do I make my place in this world” (Jade). The journey of self-reflection compelled her to question much of what she had learned growing up in predominantly black churches, and she ultimately came to the conclusion that she would have to redefine the terms of her womanhood. The content she creates is intended as a self-affirmation, just as much as it is intended to edify Jade’s audience.

Jade: I wanna write in a way that these moments where we’re hanging with our friends and you know we might dance to a song and we might have a glass of wine, I want us to get to a place where we aren’t hanging with people who love us feeling convicted, because that used to be me for a long time. Friends would invite me out places and I would be like I can’t go there because I don’t want them to think that, you know, that’s where church folks are supposed to go. I don’t want them to think church folks are supposed to drink. Instead of just feeling like this is an amazing night with people who love me and in my darkest moments have been there for me, I begin to think about what everybody else would think if they saw me in those spaces.

Self-policing is inherent in the religious tradition in which Jade was raised. The “conviction” that she once felt engaging in activities that brought her pleasure and that fell outside the realm of respectable behavior speaks to an enduring racial uplift ideology that is ingrained in the very consciousness of so many black women. Jade’s testimony reveals that in some social contexts, little has been done to alleviate the burden that black women carry to represent the best of the race with their behavior. The principle of perfection that black women confronted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries remains intact (Rooks 2004). Jade finds herself having to represent both her race and her community of faith at all times. “You have ways that you are supposed to conduct yourself because of your religious beliefs,” she says. “But because you’re a black

woman you're also forced to confront a world of stereotypes of what women like you do, and who women like you are.”

Even as Jade finds herself wanting to become disentangled from the traditions that would sully her pleasure during a night out with friends, she continues to value the benefits attached to her church girl identity. The church girl moniker does important identity work for her. First, it signals to others that Jade understands herself as descending from a heritage of black women who love God, who uphold the highest moral virtues, and who play a critical role in racial uplift. Jade therefore retains enough status in her social network to be considered credible, a woman writing and speaking about intimate experiences that she knows firsthand. Second, the church girl moniker functions as a symbol of Jade's radical nature. Identifying as a church girl while rejecting key church doctrines and disqualifying the validity of those doctrines makes Jade a living example of the form of liberated self she is attempting to write into existence.

In addition, Jade's narrative moves back and forth between what “church folks are supposed” to do and the desire to feel comfortable in spaces that would be deemed holy and unholy. Like the women before her, she struggles with the risk of playing into any number of stereotypes if she throws off the weight of respectability. Resisting the traditions of her faith community also means potentially losing status and acceptance. Thus, Jade's performance of womanhood through her physical and digital presence is always stretching between various versions of the self. It is the flexibility to build and re-build the self in the digital environment that facilitates the process by which Jade stretches her understanding of God to fit her shifting understanding of self.

Jade: You can find me on Facebook discussing my work on black girls, and for two hours I may have a rant about that. Later that day I may post a gospel song that has been

like in my spirit. And then I may go to twerk⁴⁵ Zumba and love it...I love the fact that I can be on social media live-tweeting about a *Love and Hip Hop* episode, and people are like *wasn't she just talking about the state of the union*.

Rather than rendering a performance of self online that is false or insincere, Jade's online performance is very much an authentic rendering of the parts of herself that she cannot fully express when she is in religious spaces. Jade's online profiles, specifically on Facebook and Twitter, become the "backstage" where the background and context of her understanding of black womanhood comes into full view (Goffman 112).

Importantly, the difference between the front stage or church performance that Jade exhibits and her back stage performance is not a matter of sincerity. As Goffman explains, the performance of self that one displays in front of particular audiences may be no closer to reality than the back stage performance. Rather, in the case of Jade and other study participants, the difference in performance between these differing regions is a matter of wholeness. As Jade explains, the Internet is a space where she offers a "fully integrated" performance of self—bringing her church girl identity alongside her scholarly self, her hip hop self, and her sexual self. The internet is a media domain where the ratchet and the religious meet.

Locating a sense of self and identity—answering the questions of who I am and why I am—is a continual process that Jade facilitates through her online content creation. Importantly, Jade's testimony indicates neither a clean break from the social environments and institutions that disagree with her terms of black womanhood nor a desire to be completely disassociated with what she has identified as her heritage and the basis for her current social location. She is

⁴⁵ Twerking is a hip hop dance most often performed by women that includes rapid movement of the butt. The dance move was made infamous by pop artist Miley Cyrus who misappropriated twerking during her 2013-14 performances that relied heavily on a hip hop aesthetic. Cyrus' performances of hip hop minstrelsy were an attempt to exchange her child star persona for that of a mature sex symbol.

both church girl and church critic, living and mediating a kind of womanhood that inhabits tension.

Miracle, a social worker in her twenties, must also work against the traditional black girl image in order to fully embrace the complexity of her black womanhood. Miracle's understanding of the black female self is expressed through the summation of her social media accounts. The mundane performances of self that one finds through Miracle's pages are a demonstration of Potter and Banaji's concept of self-curation. Miracle defines and performs black womanhood online through the process of self-curation—"the collection, distribution, and exhibition management of the self across social media" (Potter and Banaji 89). At times, she posts scriptures on her Facebook page or invites friends to submit prayer requests via her inbox. Yet, her Instagram pictures feature a smiling Miracle in a bra only, as she exhibits her fitness evolution. Online technologies enable Miracle to show parts of herself that would be deemed inappropriate in the front stage domain of a worship service, and to digitally link herself to distant role models like Heather Lindsey.

Heather Lindsey's organization, Pinky Promise, was established in 2012. Since its inception, Lindsey reports that Pink Promise has reached more than 10,000 women who have pledged to adhere to the Christian principle of sexual purity by abstaining from sex until marriage to a man. Furthermore, members of the organization, who can opt to join or establish local chapters in their region of the country, pledge to "honor God" by remaining faithful to their marriage vows once they are wed (The Pinky Promise).

Lindsey's message is conservative by contemporary standards, so it became clear to me that it was not just the content that was so appealing to the women who have made Pinky Promise so popular. Rather, it was the aesthetics. Scanning Lindsey's various web pages feels a

lot like being transported into an episode of “Barbie Reads the Bible,” if such a thing existed. Lindsey’s words of wisdom are painted in pink and bedazzled. Each page is decorated with images of Lindsey in her typical uniform of couture clothing and stilettos with long flowing hair, her large home, and her picture-perfect family; Lindsey and her husband, a black pastor in Atlanta, have one child and another one on the way. She uses the low-cost publishing tools available online to create a virtual world where black women are dainty, devoted to Christ, and patiently awaiting their divinely-inspired mates. Creating an online experience that is free to access and appeals to multiple senses enabled this relatively unknown black woman to galvanize a group of (mostly black) female millennials around a message of sexual purity and abstinence.

Although Lindsey often talks about a sinful and unfulfilling past in New York City, where she worked for MTV, she identifies her current life, and all of its trimmings, as an example of the prize one gains by adhering to the lifestyle guidance that she broadcasts. Part of that guidance is scriptural and the kind of advice one might receive in a Christian church. The other parts of her message, like the tips in her healthy eating cookbook, are the kind of content one would find in a commercial women’s magazine. Ultimately, Lindsey’s brand rests on an underlying appeal of being a sexy, youthful, 21st century black woman who is upper middle class, respectable, and committed to a Christian lifestyle.

“She talks about where she was in her walk when she wasn’t living for Christ,” said Miracle. “And then where she is now, how she met her husband, the different guys she dated, and all that kind of stuff. It’s an encouragement to other women to know that they can make it. There is nothing separating her from one of us.”

“Making it” in Miracle’s eyes is not just about living a Christian lifestyle and becoming a wife and mother, but also about maintaining a type of sex appeal and style typically not

associated with a Christian female identity. Miracle loves God but does not want that aspect of her identity to clash with her desire to “want to look sexy every now and then.” Thus, she embraces Lindsey as the type of model of black womanhood not found elsewhere in the media landscape, the type of black woman who can be sexy and Christ-like. Lindsey is not like the graying and often overweight black women that one finds on the front row of worship services in Tyler Perry movies, which is what drives Miracle to emulate her.

Miracle is the kind of woman that most people would describe as feminine, or prissy—and she would happily receive such a description as a compliment. She consistently adorns her manicured nails in colors to match the season; she wears her dark hair with blond highlights in a straight style that falls just below the shoulder; and her social media profiles are full of smiling selfies that put her fashion sense on display. In fact, her social media persona looks a lot like that of Heather Lindsey, sans husband and child. Miracle uses the Internet to connect with Lindsey and fellow fans, and also to perform the type of hyper-feminine black female self that she ultimately finds fulfilling. What is problematic about Miracle’s journey to fulfillment is that it hinges upon dreams that may not ever become reality, particularly marriage. The post-workout pictures she exhibits on Twitter bear the hashtag “#preparingformyhusband,” which falls short of being an act of care for the self. Still, Miracle derives pleasure from molding her body into what she deems a more desirable physical state and displaying her progress to others. Heather Lindsey may not be an ideal social media role model, but her performance of black womanhood resonates with Miracle and thousands of others. When Miracle posts pictures of Heather Lindsey and Lindsey’s books on her Facebook profile, she is linking herself to a very specific kind of modern and religious black womanhood. Thus, the structure of the digital interface allows Miracle to build the black female self through hyperlinks (Walker 2000). Furthermore, the backstage

domain of the Internet allows her to build and perform a self were her multiple desires—for sex appeal, a husband, and peace with God—can coexist.

Conclusion

This chapter is a collection of testimonies that confirm the urgency of reinvestigating black women's media landscape and the ways that they engage it. Study participants assert agency as media citizens to create content that is therapeutic, disruptive to dominant ideologies, and encouraging for other black women. Although none of the study participants interviewed for this chapter identified themselves as womanists or spoke of womanist theories, their practices of content creation were indicative of womanist ethics. Black women in this study think about their content, and themselves, in relation to other black women. Their presentations of self in blogs, social media profiles, and other creations reflect a race-gender consciousness that is often complicated by religious culture and class dynamics. Black women, therefore, are not engaging in public testimonials for the sake of flattery and guiltless self-promotion. Rather, they write narratives of black womanhood in the hopes of creating alternative scripts to correct the shortcomings they see in commercial media—even when the task seems too restrictive or challenging to attempt. Online content creation has become another way of making do.

The pleasures of digital identity management are not unique to black female media citizens; however, the contingencies placed on black women's self-presentations make digital content creation and identity formation a critical site of study. Postmodern identity technologies of the digital era invite, and even encourage, a type of identity play where one can try on different ways of being, or experiment with different strategies for managing public perceptions of the self (Turkle 1997; Belk 2013). Yet, for black women in particular, the liberatory promises

of online identity formation and management are always constrained. Even something as easily modified as a social media profile, for example, is subject to public scrutiny, which measures black women by the same hegemonic ideas of black womanhood that inform repressive images.

Hence, the question looms of whether content creation offers direct personal benefits, or if psychologically empowered people are naturally compelled to create content, or worse yet, if the presumed personal benefits are artificial. Correlational data that describes the relationship between content creation and self-empowerment has not led scholars to determine that the practice and process of content creation is itself beneficial. Rather, the story that researchers tell based on correlational data is that of a definite connection between activities like blogging, tweeting, and participating in online forums, and, attitudes like high self-esteem and a healthy self-concept. Yet, the women with whom I spoke report that creating mediated content offers validation and a sense of wholeness that is otherwise lacking in their lives. The technology that many participants use to curate themselves is not so much the cause of their constructive outcomes; rather, various digital interfaces facilitate their acts of self-affirmation.

Researchers recognize that it is commonplace in the digital media landscape for media citizens to seek out online spaces for their unique, although imperfect, publishing features. Specifically, Trammell et al. (2004) argue that content creators who blog expect to achieve six aims: “self-expression, social interaction, entertainment, passing the time, information, and professional advancement” (Trammell et al.). Technology that allows black women with minimal technical training to draw and repeatedly manipulate expressions of themselves using words, sound, still and moving images, and hyperlinks, at little to no cost, facilitates new formats of mediated self-creation. Certainly, the instinct for autonomous self-curation is not new.

However, the digital medium is unprecedented. This channel allows for immediacy and a digital mapping of the self that was once impossible.

Media citizens who produce their own content are rewarded with cultural and social capital, but they do not experience the wholesale rescue from corporate domination that some critical theorists glorify. Media citizens are still beholden to the capitalist interests and technological algorithms of corporations, even as they desire to unsettle common presentations of the self by inserting disruptive content into the media landscape (van Dijck 2009). In addition to capitalist misappropriation of user-generated content, it is necessary to understand that the technological tools designed to encourage content creation only allow for contingent autonomy (Light 2011).⁴⁶ Indeed, Søren Mørk Petersen (2008) warns that even in the age of participatory culture, corporations continue to steer user generated content through an “architecture of exploitation.”

If the ideal of participatory culture is absolute freedom from corporate and state interference, then certainly, all user generated content comes up short (Jenkins 2006). It seems that the redemptive qualities of content creation will always be minimized in the face of grand objectives like democratization or Marxism. Removing the burden of revolutionary outcomes, however, reveals the complicated personal victories that take place at the individual level. As Henry Jenkins plainly states:

It would be naive to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests...but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than ‘semiotic democracy.’ (136)

⁴⁶ Ann Light also critiques scholars in the human-computer interaction (HCI) field, for settling to define their subject of study as an apolitical reflection and reproduction of “existing relations between groups of people, whatever they happen to be” (Light 431). She challenges scholars and designers to re-evaluate the potential of the 21st century socio-techno structure to queer identity by making room for presentations of self that do not fit the status quo.

Everyday content creation positions media citizens somewhere between completely unrestricted actors and passive consumers of content. Yet, Jenkins suggests that there is far more to be learned from exploring the benefits of user-generated content from an audience perspective, than there is to be learned from attempting to fit into all amateur content created online to a frame of complete liberation.

Although I have focused on the benefits of user-generated content in this chapter, I have acknowledged the restrictions placed on black female media citizens throughout the manuscript. I speculate that for every story about the benefits of autonomous content creation that study participants shared with me, there is a more troubling story about the ways in which their content wounded others and even hurt the women themselves. Adrianna talked about the risks that black female media citizens take when they dare to think, talk, and exist out loud, online. Digital spaces like (video) blogs and privatized social networks typically have a built-in comments section where black women tend to be policed and scrutinized.

Adrianna: In the digital space the comments can be a blessing and a curse. If you read some of the comments, sometimes I'll read an article by a prominent black woman who is voicing her opinion, and it's not like she's doing it in a crazy way...she's just keepin' it real, sayin' it how it is. And someone in the comments section will say, *here we go again with the mad black woman*. Or, *you know she gotta say something, she gotta have a attitude*. And it's like WHY!?! Why is there that concept that black women are always angry?

Adrianna's understanding of the interactive features of online spaces speaks to the risks of public gestures for black female media citizens. The categories of extremes referenced in the very beginning of this chapter—angry black woman, gold digger, whore, etc.—continue to permeate commercial media and are always lurking in the American imagination. As much as black women carve out spaces of expression and self-affirmation online, they cannot escape the digital predators that prey on black women in these spaces. Given that black female media citizens bare

themselves by “keepin’ it real” in these online spaces, they are left all the more vulnerable to the racist and sexist assaults that are ever present in the virtual world (Nakamura 2002).

Content creators usually have limited control over comments in free publishing interfaces such as WordPress, Facebook, Blogger, and Instagram. While users can delete unsavory comments and report and sometimes block repeat offenders, they cannot remove the commenting feature altogether. Once the comments have been written into existence, or in the case of live performance, spoken into existence, they are never actually eliminated, simply hidden from public view. Given that public witness offers validation for their testimonies, the study participants generally appreciate the comments section. Nevertheless, they still risk public punishment when their gestures toward their own versions of humanity deviate from external expectations. The risk of public humiliation is not unique to black female content creators. However, I agree with Adrianna’s assessment that the implications of black women’s surveillance are more indelible.

In light of the risks of public scrutiny, it may seem counter-intuitive for black female media citizens to use public means to achieve intimate ends. Given the external pressures that haunt black women in their media landscape, however, it is logical that their journey to womanhood manifests in a mediated dance in relation to the world around them. As Kevin Everod Quashie explains, “the concept of the interior...gestures away from the caricatures of racial subjectivity that are either racist or intended to counter racism, and suggests what is essentially and indescribably human” (21). These “gestures” toward humanity manifest in public through black women’s content creation and facilitate an internal understanding of the black female self. Content creation gives black women alternative means to create a script for their own humanity.

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Conclusion

“I don’t want us to have this conversation today and then one of our daughters is coming along doing her dissertation saying: what happened to the black female voice in media? You know what I’m saying, because there weren’t those women around that supported and affirmed these little girls growing up, telling them that what they had to say matters.” – Jade

I approached this project as a qualitative, womanist inquiry into the ways that black women engage the media landscape as interpreters and as content creators. The black women who participated in this study have, by offering up data via individual interviews, aided me in co-constructing a narrative about black womanhood, mediated representation, and the myriad ways in which media citizens may navigate and impact their media landscape.

In many ways this project has revealed the complex strategies that black women have developed in order to make do—to reconcile their own desires and beliefs about what it means to be a black woman with the images that circulate throughout popular culture. Some black female media citizens make do by activating a psychosocial dexterity that enables them to create a mental bridge between their religious beliefs and their affinity for a character as tainted as Olivia Pope. Others make do by creating the change that they want to see in the media landscape. The internet has become a backstage of sorts, a place where black women can post images of themselves in sports bras and leggings one moment, and post a scripture and invite their Facebook friends to send them prayer requests in the next moment. Hence, the media that black women choose to engage as audiences and the narratives that black women create themselves are cultural resources used to perform the black female self.

Taken together the data clearly show that the resistance/accommodation and villain/victim dichotomies that are often used to frame black women's media engagement practices, and black women's relationship to media corporations are no longer adequate. The testimonies shared here suggest that some black women are yearning for the right to be ratchet and respectable, twerk divas and church mothers. Furthermore, as more black women become decision makers at large commercial media organizations the separation between big media and black female audiences is shrinking. Although some professional black female content creators struggle to align their work with their personal understandings of black womanhood, others are happy to document and portray black women in extreme, messy, and provocative images.

The voices of black women represented here also stand together as a testament to the reflexive quality of many black women's media engagement practices. Indeed, even when study participants admitted to engaging media texts that they describe as "guilty pleasure[s]" that help them "relax," they are keenly aware of how and why they integrate media into various life processes and practices. Even when practicing what can be considered leisure media engagement, study participants read profound meanings into media texts. A viewing of *Scandal*, for example, functions as fodder for intergenerational discussions between black women, but it also serves as a fictional model of how one might navigate the terrain of power, labor, and romance as a black woman. Similarly, a Facebook post on one's personal profile is a mundane act of self-promotion but also a significant testimonial intended to solicit communal validation of one's internal sense of self—one's own definition of black womanhood. Collectively, the black female media citizens who participated in this study have demonstrated that the range of possibilities for media engagement cannot be accommodated by frameworks that narrowly consider audiences as either acting or being acted upon. Hence, there is much to be learned from

these voices and still much more to be explored from voices not included in this study. Although I sometimes wish that black women were not forced to make do, I believe that the labor of aspirational imagining strengthens black women so that they are prepared to meet the challenges that accompany life in general and life in a black woman's body more specifically. It is this strength of making do that assures me that Jade's fear of the disappearance of black female voices in media, captured in the opening quote, will never become a reality.

So much has changed in the ever-evolving media landscape, specifically in terms of representations of black womanhood, since I first began studying the topic in 2010. At the top of that list of significant happenings is the emergence and growth of two online networks devoted to modern depictions of black experiences. Black & Sexy TV began as a YouTube channel in 2011 featuring web series of the comedic and drama variety that focus on romance, sex, and relationships among black characters. Since its inception, the network has developed a loyal fan base of 79,000 subscribers and brokered a deal to bring one of its first series, "The Couple," to HBO.⁴⁷ Two black women, Numa Perrier (co-founder, director of programming and development) and Jeanine Daniels (producer partner) are on the executive team managing Black & Sexy TV, which is also known for casting black women of all body types and professions as desirable. As one *Washington Post* writer wrote, "In its universe, black women's desirability isn't exceptional. It's not demanding a reward. It's just normal" (McDonald 2014).

In addition, in 2012 Chic Rebellion TV became the first online network with its own host site, exclusively featuring video content focused on black women through a diasporic lens. Elayne Fluker, founder and CEO of the network, produces original series and curates content from other networks that shows black women of various nationalities performing, hosting, and creating in multiple modalities. In one day viewers could scan a collection of videos, including

⁴⁷ See McDonald (2014) "Poised for a Takeover: The Rise of Black & Sexy TV."

the original series *Brand: Mom*, a talk-show style platform for mothers hosted by an African American woman who became a mother in her forties. *Dine Out*, another original series, is a travel and food show hosted by an Afro-Latina chef and executive produced by Fluker. Curated content typically includes snippets of black poets and musicians, and interviews featuring black women, such as Oprah Winfrey's interview with actress Vivica A. Fox on her show, *Oprah: Where Are They Now?*.

Indeed, today's black female media citizens are immersed in a media landscape rich with images, characters, and scripts that make claims about the gender roles, desires, and public and private behaviors appropriate for black womanhood. There are multiple scripts and a great number of actors creating them. Media and popular culture have long functioned as key domains for the dissemination of hegemonic ideologies about the organization of society and the roles that various individuals and groups are expected to play within it. Thus, the fact that the media landscape also functions as a site and mechanism for identity formation is not at all new (Hermes 1999). One of the differences between the contemporary media landscape and that of previous years, however, is the growing number of black women occupying executive power positions at commercial media conglomerates (i.e., Oprah Winfrey of the Oprah Winfrey Network, Debra Lee of Black Entertainment Television, Kathy Hughes of TV One and Radio One), and the expanded influence of non-professional content creators who, through web-based technologies, have been able to insert their own scripts into the larger flow of ideas engineered by media conglomerates.

Efforts to commercialize scripts for black womanhood require that content creators confront marketing schemas that have emerged in a prism of stereotypes and race/gender hierarchies. One of the significant burdens of impacting one's media landscape through

collaboration with commercial media institutions is proving the profitability of the effort and pluralizing black female markets to allow for human complexity (Weems 1998; Dávila 2001). Study participants who have worked as professional content creators complain that the most difficult part of their job is educating media executives who have internalized enduring tropes of black womanhood as undeniable truths. The most common ideas of black women as a media market is that they are mostly homogeneous in lifestyle, brand-loyal, and gullible—and therefore not as critical for profitability as “mainstream” female markets (Muléy 2009). In their frustration, some black, professional content creators unintentionally shackle black women’s media engagement practices with the burden of political efficacy. If black female media citizens voted with their viewership and consumption practices, they suggest, media executives would be forced to disrupt the monotony of classic black female stereotypes with more varied and “authentic” portrayals. Such an argument situates pleasure as an inaccessible luxury for black female media citizens—too restricted by the politics of representation and the burden of being othered to enjoy all different kinds of content, simply for the sake of enjoyment. The study participants demonstrated that black women push back against this narrow purposing of media engagement. Through their online commentary, media activism, and the creation of their own narratives of black womanhood, study participants continue to claim their rights to autonomy as media citizens. More black women are successful in publicizing their voices now than was ever possible in previous times. The beauty of this nuanced chorus of black womanhood, is that no two voices sound alike. While they share some common identity traits and experiences, black women maintain the richness of intra-group diversity.

The thirty black women who participated in this study fell along a continuum of black womanhood based on their values, lifestyles, interpretive communities, and personal histories.

Some study participants tended to adopt what I have labeled respectability readings regarding mediated representations of black womanhood. In this case, fictional characters like Clair Huxtable (*The Cosby Show*) were read as more idealistic than contemporary characters like Mary Jane Paul (*Being Mary Jane*). In this study, respectability represents a metrics of citizenship whereby black women are evaluated as worthy or unworthy members of the populace based on standards that align with (white) American standards of womanhood. To resist these externally derived standards is to risk being excluded from the hegemonic register of citizenship and humanity. It could be argued that one's humanity hinges more on being able to display flaws than to perform a charade of perfection. Consequently, some study participants cling to texts that glamorize deviant black female characters and normalize the messiness of life.

In every case, the study participants maintained nimble interpretive practices that were socially constructed and historically situated. Drawing on conversations with female friends and family members, blogs written by trusted professional content creators, or critical thinking strategies developed in feminist-oriented college courses, black women consistently brought the whole self to bear on media texts. They engaged the media landscape, as individuals, but also as members of pre-formed interpretive communities where the meanings of texts are decided through ongoing dialogue. Furthermore, study participants demonstrated a black female consciousness that requires them to navigate the media landscape with an awareness that landmines such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, embedded long ago, continue to make the media landscape a toxic domain for black women. The safety routes that study participants create for themselves are largely shaped by their own understandings of black womanhood—of the kind of black women they have come of age with, and the kind of black women they are and/or aspire to be in the future.

My motivation for pursuing this study is due in large part to my own identity as a Christian, black woman—troubled by the missing voices in discourses focused around themes such as audience reception, and the interplay between mediated scripts and individual identity formation. It is providential, then, that a great number of the women who chose to participate in this study were eager for their voices to be heard by key audiences including media industry professionals and scholars. Indeed, their recommendations for media institutions demonstrate that study participants are deeply invested in the media landscape. Study participants share an optimistic belief that the project of black womanhood is yet unfinished; it is their right and their choice to re-construct that project by negotiating their own definitions and performances of the black female self. They challenge media institutions to “wipe the slate clean of any preconceived notions...of black women” and to “listen to what [black women’s] stories are” (Adrianna; Yolanda). Study participants have also advocated for “a variety of images” that portray black women of different appearances, ethnic backgrounds, lifestyles, and professions so that those black women who were once marginalized can be written into contemporary narratives of black womanhood (Rose).

In the end, study participants, professional content creators, and others envision themselves as empowered actors whose voices, ideas, and practices ultimately have an impact on the narratives of black womanhood that predominate in our society. This project has drawn out one strand of a much larger set of questions around the shifting processes of meaning making and identity formation as more and more of human life is captured and shared through media channels. The media landscape is one domain in particular that study participants make their presence as citizens known. When they imagine alternative scripts of black womanhood, when they actualize those dreams with their own content creation, and when they negotiate popular

representations of black womanhood on their own terms, black women are leading the dance that is media engagement. As future researchers take up the subject of *the black woman that media built*—which I hope is a byproduct of this study—they must begin with the understanding that this process of constructing the black female self is not singular. Rather, it is shared among black female audiences and the various media actors who seek to reach them.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Definition of Key Terms

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Appendix E: Participant Information Form

Appendix F: Participant Summaries

Appendix G: Media Glossary

Appendix A

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms constitute the guiding framework of this study, and are thus worth defining in greater detail.

Media Citizen: This term speaks to the active role that audiences or non-professional content creators assume in participatory culture, and acknowledges that even in asserting their agency they are constrained by the complex hierarchies that organize the roles of various actors in the media landscape.

Religion and Spirituality: While the academy makes various distinctions between religion and spirituality, this project is more interested in how black women define these terms in their own lives. Jacqueline Mattis (2000) analyzes black women's written narratives and individual interviews to determine this population's definitions of religion and spirituality. While some study participants saw the terms as antithetical, others noted overlap between the two. Mattis found that black women defined spirituality as "a connection to and/or belief in a higher external power...self-knowledge...and a force that directly influences or affects relationships with others" (109). Religion was defined as a "conduit for achieving spirituality" which consisted of "church life, formal devotional rituals...and doctrines" (115).

Womanism: Of the many black women writers that have sought to craft a definition of black women's struggle for liberation, Alice Walker (1983), Mary Eibun Modupe Kolawole (1997), and Clenora Hudson-Weems (2006) are likely the most widely recognized. In this study, womanism refers to the collective musings of black women's desire to craft a terminology beyond feminism that speaks to black women's liberation struggles. Womanism, while similar to feminism, recognizes the unique struggles of black women, the desire for black women to work

in partnership with (and not behind) black men, and the importance of being led by the Spirit in all matters.

Womanist Ethics: I use Katie G. Cannon's definition of womanist ethics as described in her text of the same name. That is, womanist ethics describes "Black women's analysis and appraisal of what is right or wrong and good or bad" which is based on "the conditions of their own cultural circumstances" (4).

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter



Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board • 540 East Liberty Street, Suite 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210 • phone (734) 936-0933 • fax (734) 998-9171 • irbhsbs@umich.edu

To: Timeka Williams

From:

Richard Redman

Cc:

Timeka Williams

Robin Means Coleman

Subject:Initial Study Approval for [HUM00073053]

SUBMISSION INFORMATION:

Study Title: Identity, Self-Care, and Transnational Coalitions in Black Women's Magazines

Full Study Title (if applicable): Between Sister-Friends: Identity, Self-Care, and Transnational Coalitions in Black Women's Magazines

Study eResearch ID: [HUM00073053](#)

Date of this Notification from IRB: 3/13/2013

Review: Expedited

Initial IRB Approval Date: 3/11/2013

Current IRB Approval Period: 3/11/2013 - 3/10/2014

Expiration Date: Approval for this expires at **11:59 p.m. on 3/10/2014**

UM Federalwide Assurance (FWA): FWA00004969 expiring on 6/13/2014

OHRP IRB Registration Number(s): IRB00000246

Approved Risk Level(s):

Name	Risk Level
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HUM00073053 No more than minimal
risk

NOTICE OF IRB APPROVAL AND CONDITIONS:

The **IRB HSBS** has reviewed and approved the study referenced above. The IRB determined that the proposed research conforms with applicable guidelines, State and federal regulations, and the University of Michigan's Federalwide Assurance (FWA) with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). You must conduct this study in accordance with the description and information provided in the approved application and associated documents.

APPROVAL PERIOD AND EXPIRATION:

The approval period for this study is listed above. Please note the expiration date. If the approval lapses, you may not conduct work on this study until appropriate approval has been re-established, except as necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to research subjects. Should the latter occur, you must notify the IRB Office as soon as possible.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR INVESTIGATORS

APPROVED STUDY DOCUMENTS:

You must use any date-stamped versions of recruitment materials and informed consent documents available in the eResearch workspace (referenced above). Date-stamped materials are available in the "Currently Approved Documents" section on the "Documents" tab.

RENEWAL/TERMINATION:

At least two months prior to the expiration date, you should submit a continuing review application either to renew or terminate the study. Failure to allow sufficient time for IRB review may result in a lapse of approval that may also affect any funding associated with the study.

AMENDMENTS:

All proposed changes to the study (e.g., personnel, procedures, or documents), must be approved in advance by the IRB through the amendment process, except as necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to research subjects. Should the latter occur, you must notify the IRB Office as soon as possible.

AEs/ORIOs:

You must inform the IRB of all unanticipated events, adverse events (AEs), and other reportable information and occurrences (ORIOs). These include

but are not limited to events and/or information that may have physical, psychological, social, legal, or economic impact on the research subjects or other.

Investigators and research staff are responsible for reporting information concerning the approved research to the IRB in a timely fashion, understanding and adhering to the reporting guidance (http://www.med.umich.edu/irbmed/ae_orio/index.htm), and not implementing any changes to the research without IRB approval of the change via an amendment submission. When changes are necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject, implement the change and report via an ORIO and/or amendment submission within 7 days after the action is taken. This includes all information with the potential to impact the risk or benefit assessments of the research.

SUBMITTING VIA eRESEARCH:

You can access the online forms for continuing review, amendments, and AEs/ORIOs in the eResearch workspace for this approved study (referenced above).

MORE INFORMATION:

You can find additional information about UM's Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) in the Operations Manual and other documents available at: www.research.umich.edu/hrpp.



Richard Redman
Chair, IRB HSBS

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

BLACK WOMANHOOD AND MEDIA CONSENT FORM

- ✓ I understand that I am being asked to take part in the study, “Black Womanhood and Media,” to be conducted by Timeka N. Tounsel, a doctoral student at the University of Michigan in the Department of Communication Studies.
- ✓ I understand that this study involves research and that the purpose of this study is to find out what I think about ideas of womanhood as illustrated in the media, for example, *Essence* magazine or Tyler Perry movies.
- ✓ I understand that the purpose of this study is to also find out what I think about themes like relationships, health/wellness, spirituality, beauty, careers, and family life.
- ✓ I understand that up to 30 participants may be involved in this study.
- ✓ Public Benefits: I understand that the main public benefit of this study is that I will shed light on the impact of mass media. My insights will help scholars and other interested parties gain deeper understanding of mass media audiences.
- ✓ Personal Benefits: I understand that I may gain information from this study about representations of womanhood which may empower me to take action in shaping my media environment. I may gain a deeper understanding about the media I consume.
- ✓ I understand that what we talk about—the interview/focus group—will take about one hour. I also understand that Timeka Tounsel may contact me after the interview in case she has a few other questions for me.
- ✓ I understand the interview may be audio taped. I can still participate in the study even if I do not want to have my interview/focus group audio taped. If I am audio taped, Timeka Tounsel will type up what we talk about (transcribe) so that she can analyze what we have said.
- ✓ I will not be identified in the final study report. Any references to my identity will be altered and/or deleted to protect me. I will be given a fake name (pseudonym) to hide my identity (to be anonymous).
- ✓ I have the right to ask questions about this study at any time—at the beginning, throughout the study, and even after it is over.
- ✓ I have the right to see any materials associated with my interview/focus group.
- ✓ I know that participation in this study is voluntary.
- ✓ I have the right to quit or withdraw from this study at any time—before the interview starts, at the beginning of the interview/focus group, during the interview/focus group, and even after we finish talking today I can say I do not want to participate.
- ✓ If I start to feel uneasy for any reason, I can quit the interview/focus group. This study should not harm me in any way.
- ✓ When the study is completely over, Timeka Tounsel will destroy all materials associated with my contribution.

- ✓ If I have any questions or concerns about this study, I can contact:

Timeka N. Tounsel
Dept. of Communication Studies
5345 North Quad
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285
313-410-6569
timekani@umich.edu

Professor Robin R. Means-Coleman, Ph.D.
Dept. of Communication Studies
North Quad
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285
734-615-7410
rrmc@umich.edu

- ✓ I understand that this study is being conducted with the approval of the Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Michigan. The primary goal of the IRB is to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research activities conducted under the auspices of the University of Michigan. I can contact the IRB-HSBS at:

540 East Liberty
Suite 202
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
(734) 936-0933
irbhsbs@umich.edu
Fax: (734) 998-9171

I understand the purpose of this study. I agree to the terms and conditions of this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I agree to be audiotaped for the purposes of the study. I understand that only the principle investigator, Timeka N. Tounsel, will have access to the audiotapes and will destroy them after using them to keep track of my quotes/gestures during an interview/focus group.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I, Timeka Tounsel, agree to conduct this study according to the terms outlined above.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D

Interview Guide

For the Audience

Warm Up Questions

1. What media do you usually consume on an average day? (e.g., radio, TV, film, internet...)
2. What role do media serve in your life? (i.e., entertainment, information...)
3. Do you ever engage media in groups with other women (e.g., a Scandal watching party, or reading a magazine with someone else at a hair salon)?
4. What are some of your favorite female characters on TV (e.g., Max from 'Living Single')? What do you like about them?
Probe: Favorite movie character, web series character.
5. What are some of your least favorite female characters? Why don't you like them?
6. How do you decide which media to consume and what to avoid?

Media Interpretation Questions

7. When you think about representations of black women in media, which people stick out to you? Why do these representations stick out?
Probe: What traits about these characters stand out to you?
Probe: Do these representations have a spiritual or religious tone?
Probe: Are there any specific representations based on class?
8. What messages do these representations send to audiences about black women?
9. What do these messages say to you? What do these messages say about you?
Probe: Do you take away any spiritual or religious themes from this content?
10. How do these representations compare to those of other groups of women?
11. Is it possible for someone to control the impact that media has on them?
Probe: Can a black woman engage media (e.g., Tyler Perry movies, Fox News, Basketball Wives, Essence magazine, Steve Harvey Morning Show) without it having any lasting impacts?
Probe: Can someone learn to control the impact of media?

Black Womanhood Questions

12. Transition: We've talked about black women in the media, and we'll get back to this a little later on. Now I'd like to learn more about what being a black woman means to you.
13. How would you define womanhood differently for women of other races? How do you define black womanhood?
Probe: What type of influences (community, cultural, media) contributed to that definition?

14. What cues or guidance about black womanhood have you received from your community?
Probe: What models of black womanhood have you witnessed in this community? Are there any expectations of sexual orientation?
15. When you think about how you'd like to present yourself to others as a black woman, what characteristics/traits are part of that presentation? What non/media role models come to mind?
Probe: For example, some participants have referenced actress Jennifer Beals as a media role model, while others have pointed to Juanita Bynum. There is a wide range of possibilities here.
Probe: Do you have different role models for different contexts (i.e., at home, with family, with friends, at work, etc.)?
16. How do you emulate that model(s) in your everyday life?
17. Do you ever feel pressured to behave in a particular way because you are a black woman?
Probe: For example, other participants have said they are less likely to raise valid complaints at work, for fear of being labeled as an angry black woman. Still others have reported feeling pressured to exclusively date black men.

Cool Down Questions

Transition: We're nearing the end of the interview now, and I have just a few wrap up questions.

18. Imagine that you're a media producer (e.g., writer, reporter, broadcaster, executive etc.).
What kind of pieces would you create to represent and speak to black women?
19. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add?
20. How do you feel about the study?
21. Would you recommend any changes for future interviews?

For Media Professionals

1. What is your current position?
2. How long have you been in that position?
3. Who is your specific target audience?
4. How do you imagine your audience interacting with your content?
5. How would you describe the black female audience? What sets them apart from other audiences?
6. What motivates you as a _____ (fill in the blank with the proper career title)?
7. Have you ever considered your work a form of worship, or as part of a higher spiritual calling?
8. What beliefs, experiences, or values shape your work?
9. What are some of the things that stand in the way of your creative vision?

10. In your experience, to what extent does the commercial nature of media, influence or shape media content?
11. What should be the top priority of media that cater to black women?
12. What are the characteristics of an ideal black woman?
 - a. *Probe: What societal, professional, and gender roles is she expected to fulfill?*
13. If you could re-do any show/film/article/webisode, what would it be? How would you revise it?

Appendix E

Participant Information Form

Age: _____ Date of Birth: _____

Employment Status:

Employed: _____ Yes _____ No Position/Title: _____

Highest Level of Education Completed:

Career Aspirations:

Religious Affiliation:

Children:

Do you have children: _____ Yes _____ No

Ages: _____

Sex: _____ Females _____ Males

Relationship Status:

In a relationship: _____ Yes _____ No

Number of Siblings:

_____ Sisters _____ Brothers

Geographic Experience/Residency (e.g. Detroit and Atlanta):

Appendix F

Participant Summaries

Note: Professional content creators are denoted by shaded boxes.

NAME	AGE RANGE	SEXUAL ORIENTATION	HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	RELATIONSHIP STATUS	CHILDREN
Adrianna	20s		Bachelor's	Self-employed	Dating	No
Arlene	40s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Single	Yes
Ashley	20s		Master's	Student	Single	No
Bethany	40s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Married	Yes
Brianna	30s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's		In a relationship	No
Brittany	30s		Bachelor's	Self-employed		No
Carol	20s	Heterosexual	Master's			No
Cocoa	20s	Heterosexual				No
Diane	50s	Heterosexual		Employed	Married	Yes
Erica	20s	Heterosexual	Master's	Employed	Single	No
Jade	20s	Heterosexual	PhD in progress	Student		No
Kara	20s	Lesbian	Bachelor's	Self-employed	Dating	No
Kelly	20s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Single	No
Kyle	50s	Heterosexual	High School	Employed	Married	Yes
Lena	50s	Heterosexual	High School	Employed	Widowed, Dating	Yes
Lisa	20s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Dating	No
Mary	40s	Heterosexual		Employed	Married	Yes
Melanie	20s	Heterosexual	Master's	Employed	Single	No
Miracle	20s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Single	No
Patrice	40s	Heterosexual	Master's	Employed		Yes
Queenie	50s	Heterosexual	High School	Employed	Married	Yes
Rose	50s	Heterosexual		Self-employed		No
Sammy Jo	60s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Retired	Divorced	Yes
Sara	20s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed		No
Sasha	20s		Bachelor's	Employed		No
Skylar	20s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Single	No
Sonya	30s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed		No
Tracy	50s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Married	No
Wendy	20s	Heterosexual	Bachelor's	Employed	Single	No
Yolanda	30s		Bachelor's	Employed		No

Appendix G

Media Glossary

All My Babies' Mamas – Originally set to premier on the Oxygen network, this reality show was cancelled before its 2013 debut. The series was set to follow the life of Shawty Lo, a black male rapper from Atlanta, and his interactions with the 10 women who are the mothers of his 11 children.

Bad Girls Club – A reality show that first premiered in December 2006, *Bad Girls Club* covers the interaction of seven everyday women under the age of 40. Cast members are typically in their twenties and are generally portrayed as combative. Most show footage consists of quarrels and schemes between the cast members, who all reside in the same home for the duration of the show, both in the house and out at bars and nightclubs. The show is broadcast on the Oxygen network.

Basketball Wives – This reality series, broadcast on Vh1, has two editions, one set in Los Angeles and the other set in Miami, Florida. The casts consist of black and Latina women who are the current or former romantic interests of men who are current or former basketball players. The show is mostly known for its violent squabbles between cast members, and indulgent cast trips to international destinations such as Milan and Paris.

Being Mary Jane – *Being Mary Jane* is a primetime drama about the life of Mary Jane Paul, as well as her closest family, friends, and co-workers. At the premier, Mary Jane is a well-educated black woman in her late thirties who has just been cast to host her own daily cable news show. She is also involved in what began as an accidental affair with a married father of two. Mary Jane is a source of calm and security for family and friends, but consistently fails to maintain stability in her love life.

Beyoncé – A record-breaking pop artist and icon, Beyoncé had her first taste of fame in 1998 with the success of the girl group, Destiny's Child. Beyoncé was the lead singer of the group which went on to release three albums before terminating the group in 2006. Beyoncé continued to focus on matters of love, sex, body image and “girl power,” themes for which Destiny's Child had become famous for, in her solo work. Her self-titled album release in 2013 included sexually explicit lyrics that fans were not accustomed to, and therefore, incited criticism. During the promotion of the album and the subsequent concert tour, Beyoncé identified herself a feminist.

Daddy's Little Girls – Written and produced by Tyler Perry, this film tells the story of Monty and Julia, two African Americans living in Atlanta who hail from two very different class backgrounds. Monty is a struggling mechanic and father of three saving money to gain custody of his daughters. Julia is a partner at her law firm, and the daughter of one of the firm's founders. The two meet when Monty becomes Julia's new driver, and they begin dating against the advice of Julia's friends. Monty is ultimately able to help Julia relax and break a string of bad luck with men.

Guess Who – *Guess Who* features comedians Burnie Mac and Ashton Kutcher in lead roles alongside actress Zoe Saldana. Mac, an African American banker, portrays the over-bearing

father of Saldana who is suspicious when he finds out that his daughters fiancé is white. The film is a modern spin on the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* which featured Sidney Poitier.

Iyanla, Fix My Life – This reality series features life coach and spiritual psychologist Iyanla Vanzant. On each 60-minute episode, Vanzant travels to the hometown of an individual or group who has requested her help in addressing some major life tragedy or obstacle. Past shows have featured married couples on the brink of divorce, feuding relatives, and individuals struggling with drug addiction. The show is broadcast on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN).

Love and Hip-Hop – This reality series is broadcast on Vh1 and follows the day-to-day lives of individuals involved in the music industry, or romantically linked to music industry insiders. Cast members are typically black men and women in their twenties, thirties, and forties. Celebrity cast members have included R&B singer K. Michelle, rapper Lil' Scrappy, and hip-hop entrepreneur Benzino. The show has three editions to date: one located in New York, one in Atlanta, and another in L.A.

Melissa Harris Perry – Melissa Harris-Perry, a political science professor at Wake Forest University, is the first tenured professor to host her own cable news show. The show, which carries her name, is broadcast on the cable news network MSNBC. Topics include current events with a focus on race relations, gender, public policy, and electoral politics.

Nina – *Nina* is a film biopic which explores the life of music legend Nina Simone. Simone was known for fusing poignant messages about race, power, and politics into her music to reflect the tensions of the day. Although Simone performed for more than three decades, she is most remembered for her music and fierce activism produced during the late 1950s through the 1970s. The film, *Nina*, which was set to be released in 2014 incited harsh criticism from those who believed that, Zoe Saldana, the actress cast as Nina Simone, lacked the phenotypical traits needed to portray the role with integrity.

Preachers of L.A. – This reality series, which debuted in October 2013, follows the day to day lives of six ministry leaders and their wives or romantic partners. The preachers include: Bishop Noel Jones, Pastor Jay Haizlip, Bishop Ron Gibson, Pastor Wayne Chaney, Bishop Clarence McClendon, and Minister Deitrick Haddon. The congregation sizes of the pastors on the show range from 1,000 to 20,000.

Scandal – *Scandal* is a primetime drama focused on an African American female crisis communications consultant, Olivia Pope, and her overlapping professional and romantic obligations and interests. Olivia Pope is the owner of the consulting firm, Pope and Associates, and is the daughter of an international terrorist (mother) and the head of a secret network of assassins within the CIA, known as B613 (father). The show is the creation of Shonda Rhimes, and is set in modern day Washington, D.C. *Scandal* first-aired on ABC in April of 2012.

Something New – Released in 2006, this romantic comedy explores the relationship dilemmas facing professional African American women. The film begins as four single friends spend Valentine's Day with one another and identify their singleness as a symptom of unrealistic partner expectations. Following the advice of a magazine article written specifically to address

the “42 percent of black women who have never been married,” the friends pledge to relax their standards in the hopes of finding love. The main female protagonist, Kenya McQueen, is perhaps the most unyielding of her group of friends and unintentionally falls in love with a landscape architect. In the final scenes of the film when Kenya must choose between a black man who fulfills her checklist on paper, and the white man who makes her forget about the list altogether, she opts for the latter.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta—The most watched series in Bravo’s Real Housewives franchise, this Atlanta-based show follows the lives of seven women as they experience the peaks and valleys of an upper class lifestyle, fame, and friendship. Although producers of the series have developed a zero tolerance policy for physical violence since the show’s inception in 2008, the show continues to stand out for explosive feuds between cast members and their husbands and loved ones who are also recurring features on the show. *Real Housewives of Atlanta* entered its seventh season in November 2014. NeNe Leakes, now a widely recognizable media personality, is the only original cast member who has starred in all seven seasons.

Tia & Tamera—A departure from the typical reality show ilk, *Tia & Tamara* mostly focused on sisterhood and the joys and burdens of working mothers. The non-fiction series also discussed parenting practices, weight loss regimens, and the various professional projects its stars. Tia Mowry-Hardrict and Tamara Mowry-Housley, the stars of the show, are identical twins best known for their nineties sitcom, *Sister Sister*.