

**Quaring YouTube Comments and Creations:
An Analysis of Black Web Series through the Politics of Production, Performance, and
Pleasure**

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my department, my committee, and the many friends and family who have helped me along the way.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a legacy of Black television and film production, Black web series remediate earlier media forms in order to usher in a 21st century revival of indie Black cultural production. Specifically, video sharing and social media platforms operate as a sphere in which content creators and users are afforded unique opportunities to engage with video content and each other on a variety of levels. Focusing on the YouTube media sphere, one can also observe the myriad ways in which the performance of race, gender, region, class, and sexuality influences the types of discourse that circulate within these sites.

In watching and analyzing Black queer web series on YouTube, I examine how the performance of gender and sexuality by Black queer women within and outside of web series are policed and protected by both community insiders and outsiders. Utilizing an ethnographic framework, which includes a critical discourse analysis of the YouTube comments for the series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, *The Peculiar Kind*, *Between Women*, and *If I Was Your Girl* as well as a textual analysis of series content, this project draws conclusions about the role that the politics of production, performance, pleasure, and the public sphere play into the recognition and/or refusal of queer sexuality within and outside of Black communities.

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Theory and Methods

“Within culture, marginality, though it remains peripheral to the broader mainstream, has never been such a productive space as it is now. And that is not simply the opening within the dominant of spaces that those outside it can occupy. It is also the result of the cultural politics of difference, of the struggles around difference, of the production of new identities, [and] of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage”

-Stuart Hall “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture”

Background

When I first came to the world of YouTube the possibility that the burgeoning video sharing site would change the way that we thought about video production and consumption was far from my mind. As a teenager in high school during the early 2000’s, my main interest was interacting with the many communities surrounding my favorite authors and artists with other like-minded individuals. As the years progressed, YouTube went corporate and the site became another Google product, affixed with all of the advertising and money making capabilities that went along with that inclusion. I saw many of the “YouTubers” that I discovered gain the opportunity to make a career out of content creation, moving from YouTube to Television. Entering college, the YouTube scene changed from a space that was heavily populated by a

combination and conjunction of vloggers, comedians, and cover singers to a space where polished and professional original content was being produced.

It was during this time that I first came upon the series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl and Friends* (2011-2013), as well as other Black web series, such as *Between Women* (2011-Present) and *The Unwritten Rules* (2012-2014). These productions, while not traditional television series in their shortened length and indie production value, gave me the opportunity to watch programming that represented everything that I wanted television to be. That is, a medium which mediated my own existence, turning my reality into a universal fiction in less than twenty-one minute episodes. The same could be said, and is said, by many of the individuals who watch these series. In the comments section of each video, viewers gather and express their support of the series' and identification with the characters and stories. It is by analyzing these commenting communities that we can fully begin to understand the importance of viewing a variety of mediated images of Blackness.

Beginning with *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, I argue that YouTube, as an online space, gives Black content creators the opportunity to respond not only to a niche audience of viewers, but also to a legacy of corporate television and the representations of Black identity that are found there. Unique in their representation of Black queer women, Black web series foster discursive commenting communities on YouTube in which both the voices of community insiders and outsiders are represented. At the same time, YouTube is not a queer utopia or a digital democracy, and it is important to understand both the possibilities and limitations of the platform with regards to the of study Black queer women's web series.

Drawing on queer of color critique and Black feminist theory, I utilize an in depth intersectional lens which takes into account the even more limited mainstream media portrayals

of Black queer women. I argue that Black web series have become a popular format for displaying Blackness in a variety of ways in order to foster a shared recognition between the audience and the portrayal of Black identity that the characters represent. Through online interactions and offline relationships, individuals are able to find a space for community that challenges the perceived norms and expectations of the collectively imagined Black American identity, which is mired in a history of stereotypes and representational norms. By focusing on the performance of gender and sexuality as it is articulated and responded to within queer of color web series and commenting communities, I discuss how discourse around gender identity is communicated, which speaks to the decisions that these women make (and the responses to those decisions from community outsiders and insiders) when it comes to the performance and articulation of both gender and sexuality. These performances bring up concerns around visibility and invisibility in public/private spaces (i.e. what does it mean to be “out” online/offline, etc), and I am invested in conceptualizing a politics of recognition which describes the discourse around and the representation of queer identity both on and offline. Overall, this dissertation demonstrates the role that online spaces and digital media play in creating new realities and communication practices for individuals, as well as the way that the production and consumption of Black web series makes space for and queers the norms of these practices.

The Burden of Blackness: On Representation and Stereotypes

Mainstream media portrayals of Blackness present a range of possibilities and limitations when it comes to the representation and performance of Black identity. In thinking about how these mediated representations relate to the formation of identity in everyday life, the production and reception of a Black identity that does not solely rely on stereotypes has been a topic of

significance to a variety of scholars within the field of media studies (Bogle 19-25, 423, Collins 80-90, Smith-Shomade 321). As Herman Gray states in *Watching Race*, “blackness [has] emerged as a site of contested struggle over the very question of identity and difference within America in general and Black America in particular” (Gray 42). For Gray, there are multiple “claims on blackness” within popular culture and there is a struggle between which of these representations will be accepted as authentic or real (43). Within the study of media, and in and of itself, the struggle to define Blackness has played out within discussions of identity and representation, focusing on the extent to which it is possible for the media to portray the world as we know and experience it, especially from the standpoint of individuals within, and coming from, underrepresented communities (i.e. people of color, those from underserved communities and socioeconomic backgrounds, etc).

For some, the struggle to portray a Black identity that resonated with the Black community was seen as a production issue due to the homogeneity of writers rooms and network studios. Gray describes Black representation as entering into cycles in which “white attempts to control the meaning and use of blackness generated constructions and representations of blackness” that were then opposed by “African American filmmakers, writers, musicians . . . and intellectuals” (Gray *Watching Race* 36). Many of these Black producers constructed a counterhegemony of media content that pushed back against mainstream portrayals of Blackness that subscribed to an ideological hegemony dictated by networks housed within corporations. In reference to their communities, Black producers, writers, and directors did the work of infusing Black culture into Black television. However, the creation of a counterhegemony of Black producers and writers within corporate networks did not rectify the problem of portraying

Blackness but instead worked to create a separate but equally monolithic representation of Black identity and experience(s).

As Michael Eric Dyson states in his introduction to the book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* “our efforts to define who ‘we’ are cut against the complexity of our blackness and sacrificed the depth of variety for the breadth of unity” (Dyson xvi). Moving back and forth between opposing views of Black identity, many Black academics since the early 20th century, have embraced structuralist thought when writing about the duality and undecidability of Black American identity and Black popular culture. From W.E.B. DuBois to Rebecca Walker, the duality of Blackness has become a way to interpret the Black experience as both related and delineated. Instead of positioning Black identity as either/or, to be Black has been espoused as an inherently in between position near liminality. This view, that Black identity is multiple, comes out of an African American literary tradition which references W.E.B. Du Bois’ theory of double-consciousness. In the beginning of *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois writes that “double-consciousness, [is] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others . . . One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 9). Therefore, double-consciousness is seen as one’s ability to be Black and to be American (dual) in a society which relies on division i.e. where being American is inherently viewed as being white and being Black is always already in opposition to whiteness.

Even as Black individuals can many times see the multiplicity of identity within themselves and their communities, the societal expectations of Blackness forces a categorization of racial identity in order to support the fiction of racial hierarchy. This is because, for many individuals, the expectations and lived reality of Blackness inhabits the space of the imaginary.

While all individual identities operate within the realm of the imaginary to some extent, due in part to the everyday reliance on the performance of self, in America the Black imaginary has been fabricated by the powers that be in both the white and Black communities (Goffman 20-35). As the opposition to whiteness, the imaginary existence of Blackness is commonly positioned as a deficit narrative, where Blackness is deemed as lacking in all of the attributes of whiteness (Pollack 94-96, Settlege 807). This deficit narrative is composed of low income housing, intellectual inability, and a series of failures to succeed in work or family. While there are individuals who embody many of the sensibilities that are attributed to this narrative of Blackness, many of those characteristics that are seen as race based are actually more indicative of differences in class and environment. However, this inherently class based deficit narrative creates an interpretation of Blackness as only identifiable through the plight and pain of impoverishment and systemic racism. These deficit narratives are especially mobilized to assert the dominance and privilege of a white American identity at the expense of Blackness. Although there are many different types of Black individuals and families, as time goes on these characteristics are continuously thrust upon Black people as a whole, in order to maintain this racial hierarchy. This narrative is then reinforced through the mediated portrayals of Black people on television, in newspapers/magazines, and in popular music and films.

Older forms of media, such as television and print news, have both been studied as conduits for the negative stereotypes of Black Americans which reinforce this deficit narrative and maintaining the racial hierarchy in American society. In her chapter “Effects of racial and ethnic stereotyping”, Dana Mastro analyzes the research on media effects and the portrayal of racial/ethnic groups. Utilizing the theories on priming, associative networks, and cultivation the research shows that stereotypes of particular racial groups in the media do have an effect on how

those groups are seen in real world situations (Mastro 326-330). For example, when looking at the news, Black Americans tend to be portrayed as criminals with prior convictions in contrast to victims and crime enforcers, who tend to be White. T L Dixon's research also demonstrates that through chronic activation and the accessibility of stereotypical images, the over-representation of African Americans as criminals in the news media results in those that regularly watch the news to conflate these images with, and to make judgments of, African Americans as violent or more likely to commit crimes (Dixon 107). These judgments based on the deficit narratives espoused by the mainstream media do not only come from the news, but are also seen in both cable and network television (Bogle 19-25, 423; Collins 80-90, Smith-Shomade 321).

At the same time, rigidly defined expectations of Blackness are not just seen within the deficit narratives espoused by the mainstream media. The fact that the Black middle class does exist and continues to exist places its own additions to this narrow narrative of Blackness. The tenants of Black respectability create their own narrative of Blackness which espouses a rhetoric of responsibility that manifests itself through claims on acceptable representation. While this respectability was at first posited in order to move up in the ranks of society by exhibiting respectability in the eyes of white America, in true Foucauldian fashion surveillance from those in power has turned into the policing of each other and the constant surveillance of self. Black respectability brings with it the idea that these deficit narratives must not only be combatted based on social expectations of Blackness, but through expectations of religion, sexual orientation, class, etc that all fall under the heading of what to be and what not to be - i.e. the contrapositive to the beliefs of double consciousness.

Yet despite the many ways in which various forms of televised media have reinforced specific narratives of Black experience, there has been increased movement towards

complicating those narratives through legacy television networks and indie productions. Series such as *How to Get Away With Murder* and *Being Mary Jane* balance the stereotype of the respectable Black woman through engaging the complexity of gendered identity that is both aspirational and relatable. In concert with this move in legacy television networks, YouTube also serves as a space in which individual content creators broaden these depictions. As Stuart Hall writes, many individuals (and media texts) are made to carry the burden of representation. This is evidenced as either an individual dealing with representing all of the people within a group or by the constant misinterpretation of the individual self based on group constructions. One of the ways that this issue of representation based on group narratives i.e. stereotypes, can be resolved is through increasing the amount of images and representations that are used to portray a particular group or identity. For Hall, this increase in representation “expands the range of racial representations and the complexity of what it means to ‘be black, thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes” (Hall “The Spectacle of the ‘Other”, 272-273). Although the amount and variety of television portrayals of Black people have increased over time in the mainstream media, the Internet is an even larger realm to create and access these more nuanced portrayals. Video sharing sites, such as Vimeo and YouTube, which allow content creators to create characters that represent a variety of identity formations, increase representations that are both readily available and susceptible to immediate feedback.

Moving from the network era of television and the studio model, television in the post-network era attempts to rectify the struggle for Black identity by relinquishing unity in favor of the variety that Dyson recognizes (Lotz 28-29). Many producers in the post-network era are working to tell stories with specificity and diversity at the forefront of their representations. In addition, a variety of Black television productions have been able to flourish outside of legacy

networks due in part to the introduction of cable channels and online television providers. While Christine Acham asserts that television is still a possible site for revolutionary material, I posit that a revolution in the portrayal of Black identity truly occurs outside of corporate media and within online spaces, where Black web content creators can produce series that represent themselves (Acham 192-194). In this sense, Black web content creators engage in what I describe as a form of “quare shared recognition”. By combining E. Patrick Johnson’s conception of quaring and Patricia Hill Collins’ use of shared recognition, this theoretical framework mobilizes Black feminist thought and queer theory to demonstrate how Black viewers, particularly women, work with media texts within affective communities.

Quare Shared Recognition and Black Web Series

For Johnson, Quaring (taken from African-American vernacular) references the ways sexual and gendered identities “always already intersect with racial subjectivity,” while also showing how these identities resist oppression and containment (Johnson 125). This understanding references Kimberle Crenshaw’s definition of intersectionality, in which each individual’s identity is never singular, but is instead constructed with multiple intersecting identity groups which serve to privilege or oppress the individual in myriad ways (Crenshaw 1245). Collins defines “Shared Recognition” as the process by which Black women form a community in order to recognize “the need to value Black womanhood” (Collins 97). While Collins’ terminology references Black women’s identity, in my analysis of Black queer web series, quare shared recognition exposes how we must value queer identity within the Black community and the ways that web producers value the identities and opinions of their viewers/fans.

Theoretically defined, quare shared recognition operates in three ways within my work: as epistemology, hermeneutics, and ontological paradigm. As an Epistemology, quare shared recognition demonstrates the way that the researcher should recognize and value their participant(s) and their constructions/lived reality by bringing a greater consideration of dimension to the construction of subjects. This epistemology draws heavily from feminist standpoint theory, as it centers the views and experiences of Black queer women in the analysis of media texts and societal discourse by using the construction of Black queer female identity to think about how race, gender, class, region, and sexuality are communicated and interpreted overall. As an Ontological Paradigm, quare shared recognition is an interrogation of identity and what it means to be a self in relation to others, specifically addressing the role that freedom and agency play in the construction of being. By analyzing the role that society plays in delineating and policing the self, quare shared recognition can be used to ask the question: Is there a self that can exist outside of time or outside of a group i.e. a formation of self that is constructed and performed outside of discourse, ideology, stereotypes, etc?

In addition, when analyzing texts/media/individuals, quare shared recognition can be used as an Hermeneutics/Reading Practice or means of understanding the self and others. In reference to this project, quare shared recognition is the means by which one decodes the performance and articulation of Black queer female identity within texts as well as the ways in which those formations are utilized by Black queer people to interpret and fashion their own identity i.e. how do we read each other, how do we read ourselves, how does the reading of others influence our reading of ourselves, etc. Quaring and shared recognition also undergird the reading practices viewers bring to performances of Black queer and femme identities when viewing and commenting on web series.

Overall, as a theory and set of methods, quare shared recognition values the use of a combination of critical discourse and visual analysis of phenomena within online and offline setting(s), and is fundamentally an intersectional approach to studying identity and digital media. While quare shared recognition can be used to analyze multiple media texts, in this dissertation quare shared recognition is used to analyze both the production and reception of Black web series on YouTube. Through the production of media texts, Black web producers quare the norms of legacy television production by demonstrating the value of Black queer identity. This is accomplished through producing series that expand the diversity of Black queer performances, as well as bringing viewers into the production process by encouraging recognition and interaction with the media text.

Within Black web series, the diversity of cultural identities that can be absent in Black television are presented in reference to the portrayals of Blackness that have become cultural norms, and sometimes stereotypes. For web series that predominantly portray Black women, the creators behind these shows use their productions to reconstitute, and fill in the absences of, the portrayals of Black women seen on television. Therefore, it is important to examine how Black creators use YouTube as a platform to make space for their own subjectivities and lived realities. Likewise, it is also important to discuss how these series help the perceived/intended audience of young Black women form community around the representation of differing experiences and standpoints of Black women.

While writers and producers of traditional television productions such as Shonda Rhimes and Mara Brock Akil have worked to change the representations of Black women in the media, the representation and the discussion of representing Blackness still tends to leave out a variety of voices and experiences within the imagined Black community. Specifically, the representation of

individuals that identify as Queer People of Color (QPOC) within the media is lacking, and therefore the scholarship on media production and consumption tends to lack in depth analysis of the role that queer people of color play in both of these constructions. So, it is important to engage in research which analyzes Black queer experience via both the production and consumption of Black media texts. Specifically, my project looks to examine the role that Black queer web series play in the lives of Black queer women by analyzing commenting communities on YouTube as spaces which are complex in their ability to support and affirm these women, as well as reflecting the oppositional views of those from outside of Black queer communities. This analysis is carried out by utilizing queer shared recognition as hermeneutic and reading practice to analyze the triangular relationship between web series content, creators, and community. Through utilizing this framework I am able to get at the role that web series play within the media sphere, but also the role that they play within queer communities of color.

Interventions and Significance

This research not only speaks to and forwards the field of communication, but the methods of qualitative Internet research, gender and sexuality studies, theories of identity, performance, intersectionality, and Black feminist thought. As it was previously stated, there is limited research on the representation of Black identity within digital media and television that takes into account the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexual identity. This dissertation seeks to rectify some of these absences by making more space for Black queer women's experience in scholarship on the role that the media plays in constructing Black identity and our understanding of the Black community (Keeling 2-5). Through this inclusion, I anticipate that this research will impact the way that scholars think about diversity in media and the representation of Black women as a community not only identified by a racial and gendered identity, but also sexual

identity (among many other intersections). In using queer shared recognition to examine these web series and the communities that coalesce around them, I plan to broaden the lens of queer media research by taking into account multiple aspects of identity, lived reality, media production and consumption. Specifically, I examine what is queer about technology and new media that allows for certain expressions of Black queer identity and the reasons why Black queer women are attracted to forming community, producing and sharing media and experiences within such spaces.

Within corporate media as a whole, the narratives of Black queer people rarely appear as the focus of television series. However, that does not mean that these representations do not exist within other media spheres. While I acknowledge that YouTube exists as a corporate media structure, as Black queer web series continue to proliferate on YouTube, the site's push to have users "Broadcast Yourself" creates space for a variety of niche groups and identities. Therefore, while the discussion of YouTube in the literature tends to locate the site as a space of infinite and egalitarian potentiality when it comes to the production of content, it is also important to engage in a more moderate discussion of the site as having both limitations and possibilities. YouTube studies must attend to the fact that platforms are not neutral and the corporate control of Google, and the algorithms which govern the site, promote practices that limit the potential of queer people of color to have greater visibility and success within that space.

Turning to the platform itself, my study focuses on the common conception of comments sections as bad objects within the popular imaginary. This is partly due to the fact that comments sections within the online sphere are believed to be a space filled with Internet Trolls and disruptive and/or negative forms of user engagement. However, through this dissertation, I offer a recuperative reading of comments sections by demonstrating that while some YouTube

comments contain discourse like trolling, the site also supports conversations which are uplifting, affirming, and intellectual. In many ways, YouTube offers a unique case study in understanding and studying online comments sections because of the types of communities that form around specific types of video content. While the site itself does some of the work in moderating comments (dislike/like, disable comments, and spam/block features), much of the work of ensuring that comments sections are communal and constructive is taken on by Youtube commenters themselves, who not only demonstrate appropriate commenting but reprimand those who do not engage in commenting that is deemed acceptable within the commenting community.

Turning to the literature on gender and sexuality studies, within the research on female masculinity and the term itself there tends to be a problematic concern with the visible and gendered iterations of masculine performance that leaves out the non-visible and intersectional attributes of the concept i.e. the construction of Black masculinity. Therefore, my dissertation project explores what and how masculinity means within communities of Black queer women by untethering masculinity from “maleness” in order to show how it stands on its own both within, and on the outside, of the women who perform it. Finally, as a project which is deeply tied to and predicated on Black Feminist and Third World Feminist Thought I believe that it is significant to work on expanding our understanding of an intersectional Black identity by discussing it in relation to theories of affect, technology, and sexuality. Overall, this dissertation analyzes various forms of media consumption and production in order to gather an assemblage of perspectives that are then used to analyze the particular mediated sphere(s) of Black queer YouTube web series.

Research Questions

In order to explore these concerns, I created research questions that spoke to the representations of Black womanhood through Black queer web series, on television, and in society as well as the role that shared recognition plays in the construction of Black queer identity and community both online and offline. These questions are as follows:

- *Main:* How does the digital media platform of YouTube foster shared recognition between Black queer women and their own identities and community while quaring larger societal and industrial values?
 - *Questions for Introduction and Chapter 1:* How are Black women viewed on television and within society?
 - How are Black queer women viewing themselves on television?
 - In what ways are societal views communicated to Black queer women both online and offline?
 - What role do Black queer women play in the television industry?
 - *Questions for Chapter 3-4:* How do Black queer women construct their own identities?
 - How do Black queer women communicate with/recognize each other?
 - How is Black queer identity performed in online and offline spaces?
 - How do Black queer women engage in community building and sustainment?
 - *Questions for Chapter 2 and Conclusion: How do Black queer women utilize YouTube?*
 - How do digital media platforms foster new forms/spaces of communication and connection?

- What is quare about YouTube? About New Media? About forming community online?
- What connections can be made to offline regional culture and the online spaces formed within commenting communities on YouTube?

Research Design and Methods

To answer these questions I position my work as a form of ethnographic Internet research, as defined by the researcher Christine Hines. In the book *Ethnography for the Internet*, Hines focuses on the argument that doing internet research complicates the way that ethnography has been done in the past while opening up new possibilities for future ethnographic study. The strength of this book is its argument that the Internet is an embedded part of our everyday life and therefore should be analyzed as a part of our lived reality and not as a separate sphere that we enter into only when using a computer. Therefore, it is important to use a variety of methods in order to get at how people are living within online spaces and communities. Drawing on this conception of Internet Ethnography, I propose its use in order to observe and interpret the relationship between community, content creators, and communication/creative technologies (Hines 63-66). This methodology will include ethnographic examination of the site itself, discourse analysis of YouTube comments, and textual analysis of queer Black web series.

Ethnography of the YouTube Platform

While an ethnography of the internet differs from some of the modes of traditional ethnographic research, as web sites and forums are not traditional sites of study/field sites due to their differentiation from physical space, as Clifford Geertz states in his collection of essays on the field, ethnography is not just a specific set of methods or techniques but the utilization of “thick description”. In performing a visual analysis of the YouTube experience, my observations

of the site will operate as a form of scene-setting by describing what it is like for a user to view web series and interact with the online community that forms around a series. At the same time, thick description is used to not only describe a scene, but also to interpret the meaning of that scene in the context of the culture and/or community in which it takes place (Geertz 6).

Analyzing a commenting community online not only includes reading and organizing the comments, but also situating them within greater conversations about society. Although there are not any internet ethnographies that focus on YouTube comments sections or the media reception studies of Black queer women, there are ethnographies which focus on the lived reality of Black queer people and the role of intersecting identities in online media usage, respectively which this dissertation builds upon.

For example, while Mignon Moore's ethnography *Invisible Families: Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women*, does not focus on the role of the Internet and the media in the lives of her participants, like Moore I am utilizing my own research to bring visibility to the unique challenges that face queer women of color. Through her research Moore demonstrates how the multiple intersecting identities of Black queer women results in the formation of unique community ties and the ways in which solidarity is not always based on gender, race, and sexuality respectively, or even the intersection of the former (Moore 7-23). Similarly, in his book, *Butch Queens Up In Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture In Detroit*, Marlon Bailey builds on the view that queer people of color must form their own communities (many times outside of the already subaltern communities formed by people of color and queer identifying individuals) in order to freely perform specific types of gender and sexual identities (Bailey 11-18). Focusing on drag balls in Detroit, Bailey's categorization of the ballroom gender system and the formation of counterpublics was instructive in identifying the

relationship between offline and online performances of gender in my analysis of the commenting communities that form around Black queer web series (29-45).

Turning to ethnographies of the Internet, Lori Kendall's *Hanging out in the virtual pub: Masculinities and relationships online*, while including a very small and non-representative sample of queer participants, is important in structuring the ways in which men and women of varying sexual identities perform gender and sexuality within an online forum (Kendall 85-108). In thinking about the relationship between community insiders and community outsiders online, this study provides the language to describe the sometimes volatile, but many times positive, social relations between participants in the YouTube comments section. Finally, while this dissertation is more concerned with the representation and lived reality of Black queer adults within urban and online spaces, Mary Gray's *Out in the country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America*, gives a variety of terminology to discuss the role that the Internet plays in the lives of queer individuals who do not feel recognized within their own communities. Specifically, Gray's conceptualization of "queer realness" and remediation is useful when describing the role that social media sites such as YouTube play in the construction of a Black queer identity (Gray 124; 125-147). I also complicate Gray's definition of queer realness in relation to Bailey's discussion of the role of gender and race realness within and outside of the drag ball (Bailey 55-67).

In addition, as a form of media ethnography, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, Robin Means-Coleman's qualitative study of African American viewers' reception of the rise in popular situation comedies during the latter half of the 20th century exhibits an approach which combines participant interaction and knowledge of the media landscape. Similar to this project, I draw on audience reception work in order to understand how

Black queer women think about how their particular intersectional identities are represented within corporate productions and independent web series (Means-Coleman 8-17). Also, by conceptualizing Black web series as remediating earlier Black television genres, I draw connections between the important role that Black queer web series play in the lives of my participants in the same way that Black situation comedies and dramas have, and continue, to play in the lives of many African-Americans.

Discourse Analysis of Commenting Communities

Similar to Andre Brock's use of Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis to examine the many layers of Twitter and other digital media platforms, I use multiple modes of data analysis in order to get at the ideological underpinnings of the YouTube platform and the discourses that occur there (Brock 1087). For each of the videos that I have chosen, I utilize a critical discourse analysis of viewer comments left on the YouTube comments section. While Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) encompasses a variety of theories and methods, as Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodack state:

Defining features of CDA are a concern with power as a central condition in social life and efforts to develop a theory of language which incorporates this as a major premise. Close attention is paid not only to the notion of struggles for power and control, but also to the intertextuality and recontextualization of complete discourses in various public spaces and genres. Power is [therefore] about relations of difference, and particularly about the effects of differences in social structures. (Weiss and Wodack 15)

Analyzing a commenting community not only includes reading and organizing the comments, but also situating them within greater conversations about how power and difference is communicated within the public space of the comments section. With this method in place, my

analysis of comments not only focuses on the homogeneous responses of fans of the series that identify with the marginalization of the main character, but also the comments from users who dislike the series and/or those who attempt to use their power and difference to influence others opinions of the series.

At the same time, it is important to point out that comments are asynchronous and therefore do not require an immediate back and forth. Although there are moments of back and forth discourse, posting a comment does not necessitate a discourse between users. Instead, the structure of the comments tends to encourage users to discuss and give feedback directed towards, and on, the content itself. In order to perform the critical discourse analysis of a YouTube commenting community, comments were first gathered and then coded using grounded theory method, specifically open coding. Open coding is defined as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss 61). By examining the comments as a whole, data are created and then categorized by creating themes and properties that were then grouped into larger categories and given a conceptual significance.

For each of the series under study, I read all of the YouTube Comments for the episodes selected from that particular web series i.e. *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, *Between Women*, *The Peculiar Kind*, and *If I Was Your Girl*. This reading is undertaken by compiling the comments in a separate document to code and sort. There are approximately 10-15 comments per page in each comments section. The amount of comments for each episode ranges from dozens to thousands, and I specifically focus on the first episode of the series in order to gather the most variability in response to the show as the first episode contains an amalgam of comments from first time viewers, as well as fans who have returned to re-watch the series. After pulling these comments and exporting them to a separate document, they are sorted into themes and then these

themes were analyzed in relation to the subject matter of the web series and the narrative of the particular video.

Currently, all of the series under study were created no earlier than 2009 and span into 2015. Therefore, the series and comments themselves will be contextualized based on their date of upload and production. Most of these themes and categories were identified based on the subject matter of the individual comments as well as the conversations that multiple YouTube users had within the community. As a final precaution, user names have either been omitted or changed to a pseudonym in order to maintain the anonymity of the viewers whose comments have been used (Lotz and Ross 505).

For the textual analysis, I draw on Stuart Hall's model of encoding and decoding. Using this form of analysis, I examine the text, the audience for the text, and the technology that surrounds such a text i.e. YouTube. In the essay "Encoding/Decoding", Hall proposes a model in which the dominant ideologies are presented to an audience and the audience makes a decision on how to interpret those views. Using the language of semiotics (i.e. signs, signification, etc), Hall explains the ways in which codes are embedded into television in production and then those texts are decoded by the audience through media consumption (Hall 93-95). While some codes are recognizable by the audience, there are also codes which appear to be natural givens, and it is these codes that Hall marks as examples of ideology (95). Following the analysis of these codes, Hall goes on to state that audience members can enact three distinct readings in reference to the television text: dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. The dominant reading reflects the meaning that the text is trying to convey, the negotiated reading is aware that there is a dominant meaning but the viewer cannot fully ascribe to it for some reason, while the oppositional reading totally opposes the dominant readings and constructs a separate meaning of

the text (100-102). By utilizing the encoding/decoding method, I analyze the audience and the technology that the audience is using in order to stay “focused on the role [that] readers and viewers [play] in the production of meanings” by taking into account the many ways in which technologies encode meanings into the content that they are used to produce (Brennen 162).

Additionally, Hall’s work can be used to identify the ways in which the triangular relationship between the content, the creators, and the community of commenting engages in intertextuality within itself, outside texts, and other ideologies. By comparing each of the series to common depictions of Black women in the media, both textual and discourse analysis shows the ways in which Black women are constituted within the racial imaginary of the United States. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, discourse relates to the ways in which systems of knowledge are reproduced through ideology and the power structures undergirding those ideologies (Rabinow 12-13). For Hall, the discursive aspect of media can be seen through the historically accepted ways in which television is created, produced, and therefore encoded. Although Hall’s encoding/decoding model focuses on television, the incorporation of semiotics and Foucauldian discourse analysis to think about the production and reception of a media text can also be seen in the creation of web series. This is because much of what is seen and produced through platforms such as YouTube are a purposeful challenge to ideologies which enforce white male dominance in opposition to marginalized others. Like the movement in television and cultural studies before it, YouTube has re-asserted, “the politics of recognition” which “asserted the rights of marginalized social groups to be themselves and to be accepted as such by others” not just within society but by audiences and within the study of representation in the media (Scannell 218).

Chapter Outline and Overview

The dissertation has four main chapters and a conclusion which begins with a discussion of the YouTube platform as it began and concludes with the future of content creation on the site and where the platform is going. In addition, each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a different aspect of the theory of Quare Shared Recognition (Production, Performance, Politics, Pleasure, and Platform), and the four main chapters include a specific web series (*The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, *The Peculiar Kind*, *Between Women*, and *If I Was Your Girl*) and their corresponding commenting communities as case studies which reflects said aspect of the theory. Chapter 2 “From Cool to Quare: *Awkward Black Girl* and the Production of YouTube Content”, focuses on the Production of web series and television, with a focus on the YouTube platform and the content that made YouTube a popular site for producing diverse representations of Black womanhood which was not commonly viewed or accepted within the mainstream. Chapter 3 “Get in Queer Formation: The Performance of Intersectional Identity in *The Peculiar Kind*” focuses on specific episodes of *The Peculiar Kind* docu-series which focuses on the performance of race, gender, class, age, sexuality, etc of queer women of color in online and offline spaces. Chapter 4 “Not Just *Between Women*: The Politics of Sexuality within Black Communities” examines the legacy of socio-political and cultural politics within communities of color and other marginalized communities to get at the ways in which politics informs communal identity but also polices who is allowed within particular communities. Chapter 5 “*If I Was Your Girl*: Preaching and Pleasure in Black Queer Commenting Communities” delves into film, affect, and Black Feminist theories of the erotic and the gaze in order to incorporate the role that pleasure plays in looking at representations of Black queer women, as well as being seen as a Black queer woman by others. The dissertation then concludes with a summary of the project and a discussion of the YouTube Platform and its past and current practices in the concluding

chapter titled “Unpacking the Quare Politics of the YouTube Platform”. In this chapter I look to the present and future of digital media platforms to think about the role that YouTube plays in both supporting and inhibiting the spread of diverse representations of Black and queer identity as well as introducing other models of Black queer digital media production online.

CHAPTER II

From Cool to Quare: Awkward Black Girl and the Production of YouTube Content

Quare (Kwar), n.1 meaning queer; also, opp. of straight; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of being; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes “Black” Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan

Behan’s famous play *The Quare Fellow*

- E. Patrick Johnson, *Black Queer Studies*

·Black and awkward is the worst, because black people are stereotyped as being anything but awkward in mainstream media... Black people are always portrayed to be cool or overly dramatic, anything but awkward. - Issa Rae

For many years Black popular culture has been defined not only in opposition to mainstream White culture, but as the culture from which much of modern cool has been extracted. While Black cool was once relegated to a specific mode and way of being, as time has passed the realities of the multitude ways in which Blackness can manifest itself has changed those beliefs. This new wave of Black cultural identity and performance has been discussed using terms such as postmodern blackness or the New Black. Each of these concepts positing the fact that to be Black in America has moved from a period of strict adherence to cultural norms and entered a period in which Black people can do and be anything with less fear of being

characterized as not Black enough. Yet, to state that the normalization of variations of Blackness have created a utopia in which all types of Blackness are readily accepted in the community ignores the continued expectations of an imagined Black experience. In light of the media and the entertainments industries firm grasp on what is believed to be Black cool, online spaces have become a way for many individuals to renegotiate the codes of Blackness for themselves and their imagined audiences.

One example of an online space which supports this type of creative expression is YouTube. As a video sharing site, YouTube opens up a digital space for independent content creators to produce their own web series for niche audiences and specific communities. In reference to entertainment, Black web series have become a popular format for content creators to display Blackness in a variety of ways, including both awkward and cool iterations of Black identity. These representations foster identification between the audience and the portrayal of Black identity that the characters enact. By utilizing the viewer comments for the series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, this chapter analyzes the ways in which the portrayal of an “awkward” Black female identity garners a form of queer shared recognition between the audience, the content creator, and the text. This queer shared recognition becomes the logic of production for not only Black web series, but for viewer comments on those series. These comments demonstrate the ways in which individuals whose awkwardness is defined through differences in race, class, religion, and sexuality enact a queer identity. Through the series, these individuals are also able to find a space for community that challenges the perceived norms and expectations of the collectively imagined Black American experience.

Using YouTube: Social Media and Video Sharing

In 2005, YouTube was formed by three young men, Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim, as a video uploading site where users could post and watch short videos (Cloud). Over the following year, the site moved from being used to post *America's Funniest Home Video* style clips, to being a multibillion dollar enterprise purchased by Google and utilized to secure its revenue through pop up advertisements and commercials (Strangelove 6). In its beginnings, YouTube was primarily used for short videos, as the site only allowed users to upload videos no longer than 10 minutes. The most popular and most viewed videos still tend to last no longer than 700 seconds or a mere 11.67 minutes (125). However, even from its inception, users were interested in utilizing the site to view long form, narrative content. Therefore, many YouTube users pirated shows and films from corporate sources and posted this content online, starting what came to be known as the "Copyright Wars" between Google, Viacom, and other companies (Burgess & Green, 30-35). Despite the barriers to copyright (YouTube retains the right to take down or modify copyrighted content) as well as the 10 minute limit, many users continue to get around these obstacles. Before videos were given longer time spans users would break up longer movies or shows into clips, which were then linked together or compiled in a playlist. In addition, even if videos were taken down by the site, persistent uploaders of pirated content would re-upload the content that had been removed.

YouTube is a site that gives users/content-creators the opportunity to share content while also sharing in a community. The site describes itself as a broadcast medium, given that as a YouTube user you can "Broadcast Yourself" through uploading and sharing your own video content on the site. You can also broadcast the videos of other users, by sharing YouTube content through e-mail, other sites, and social media with individuals who may or may not have a YouTube account. Even outside of uploading and sharing, YouTube users can also create and

post content by subscribing to the “channels” of other users or liking/disliking (identified as a thumbs up or a thumbs down sign) a video and commenting in the comments feed. In this sense, each YouTube user has easy access to the role of content creator.

Now, more than a decade after the start of YouTube, both the Internet and video making technology has improved, which has given users the opportunity to produce longer form content. Due to these changes in technology and access, the site has positioned itself as a successful platform for disseminating web series that more closely resemble the types of shows seen on network and cable television. The popularity of web series can actually be linked to the changes in the production and dissemination of television series online. Since the creation of sites like YouTube, Vimeo, Hulu, and Netflix, both the consumption and production of original content online has garnered popularity as well as commercial and consumer interest. Shows solely produced for the online audience such as Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black* and Hulu’s *Handmaid’s Tale* or shows that have been uploaded from other networks (i.e. Netflix’s *Sherlock* and Hulu’s *Misfits*) are examples of this changing landscape of television. These shows are praised for their original storylines as well as the complex narrative and character development, garnering multiple Emmy wins and nominations. In addition, series such as *Broad City* (Comedy Central 2014-Present), *High Maintenance* (HBO 2016-Present), and *Teachers* (TV Land 2016-Present) show that even web series can make the move to cable television. As online distribution gains traction as a viable means of producing television, the study of television production can no longer solely rest on the study of cable and television networks. Therefore, the study of online production and use of production studies methodologies can serve as the basis for mapping the margins of television production and outlining the means and logic of production of YouTube web series.

Television and the Study of Production

Beginning as a critique of cultural studies limited focus on cultural products and communities, as well as as a way to further ideological critiques of the Culture Industries, the field of production studies is based on the discussion and analysis of what goes on behind the camera of film and television. In the book *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, the editors describe the work of production studies scholars as gathering “empirical data about production: the complexity of routines and rituals, the routines of seemingly complex processes, the economic and political forces that shape roles, technologies and distribution of resources according to cultural and geographic differences” (Mayer 4). Similar to the Marxist and Neo-Marxist analyses of Adorno and Horkheimer, production studies focuses on the labor practices, economics, and politics which undergird the production of film and television.

This focus on labor and politics is exemplified in John Caldwell’s work on television and film. In the book, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practices in Film and Television*, Caldwell describes his methods as textual analysis, ethnographic observation, one on one interviews with film/television producers and a political economy analysis of the media industry under study (Caldwell 4). Throughout the text, Caldwell’s analysis focuses on the artifacts of the industry, such as advertising materials, DVD features, tools of production, etc (112-148; 345-365). The interviews with producers focus on the decision making logic behind the creation of these artifacts, the who, what, and why of production techniques and content, as well as photographs of actors, producers, directors, etc at industry events and interview/discussion spaces (197-230).

Even when taking the producers of television and film into consideration, many production studies scholars leave out the role that intersecting identity categories such as race,

gender and sexuality play in the production of media and the types of producers that exist in the field. Reading through the headings of the *Production Studies* book, the section on “Selves and Others”, “Centers and Peripheries”, and even “Producers: Lived Experience” talk around the reality of which individuals have access to these culture industries and who does not. Who exists in the center, and which groups/individuals are marginalized at the peripheries of media production (Mayer 7-10). Although “there is nothing intrinsically different or ‘special’ about ethnicity in film culture” as Kobena Mercer and Issac Julien state, this consideration of the margins of production is necessary as it “makes fresh demands on existing theories [and] methods” (Julien and Mercer 3). Therefore, they argue that “it would be useful to identify the relations of power/knowledge that determine which cultural issues are intellectually prioritized in the first place. [In order] . . . to examine the force of the binary relation that produces the marginal as a consequence of the authority invested in the centre” (3). Caldwell’s ethnographic observations exemplify the ways in which a focus on the center results in a failure to acknowledge who exists on the margins, as his interviews lack a pointed critique of the overwhelming white maleness of the industry.

Although scholars such as Herman Gray and Arlene Davila incorporate the analysis of race into their work on production, these analyses still focus on the industry as a space dominated by mostly white men, with moments of inclusion for people of color (Gray, *Watching Race*, 57-92; Davila 1-20). When scholars explore gender, the focus on gender identity leaves out the role that other aspects of identity play into one’s industry access. In this sense, while the field of production studies has worked to include analyses of identity, like many identity analyses, the intersectionality of those categories is left out. The absence of diversity in the realms of writing, directing, and producing is not only seen in film and television industries, but

carries over to the scholars who study these culture industries, as the lack of diversity in the study and production of media has not only influenced the type of media that is produced but the media that has been seen as worthy of scholarly analysis. As a space which lowers the barriers to entry for producers and content, online video sharing sites are changing our understanding of television production as platforms which can be used to gain entry into the industry. By studying the logic of YouTube production, we can also think about the role that identity plays into who decides to utilize the realms of digital media to produce content.

In the work of Stuart Cunningham, the relationship between production studies and digital media lays the foundation for the understanding of how and why YouTube has gained popularity as a site for media production. In the face of changes in distribution online and copyright laws, Cunningham describes the economics of new media in the article “Emergent Innovation through the Co evolution of Informal and Formal Media Economies.” While mainstream media producers had little success in the realm of online distribution, Cunningham points to the creation of “social network markets” as the next frontier in markets of online distribution (Cunningham 418). The term “social network markets”:

describes the nature of consumer choice and producer decision making under conditions where price signals are not prime or sufficient information, and where therefore one’s choice is based on others’ choices because of uncertainties about product quality arising from novelty or complexity, or the cost of acquiring this information oneself. (418).

For Cunningham, these social networks markets are “the crucible of new or emergent markets that, typically, arise from nonmarket dynamics (e.g. digital and Internet affordances) and that often stay at the complex borderland between social networks and established markets” (418). As YouTube has gained popularity the site operates as a type of social network market,

where decisions on what content to watch are recommended based on what other viewers have selected. Now that the site has moved to monetize its content, the incorporation of Google AdSense gives many creators the opportunity to make money from their videos (419-422). In this sense, YouTube opens up a new economy for producers who would not normally have access to disseminating or profiting from their content. This type of market is especially important for producers who are marginalized based on their identity within the film and television industry, as they are able to bring content that reflects their own unique standpoints to a space where audiences can find them.

Fandom and the Production of Black YouTube Web Series

The availability of content which reflects different standpoints that are not commonly seen in network and cable television also demonstrates that YouTube is a space where representations of identity can be reinvented. According to Aymar Jean Christian, web series are able to revolutionize portrayals of identity because they are created by fans that consume mainstream media. These fans then seek to rectify the problems with those mainstream portrayals through their own productions (Christian “Fandom as Industrial Response”). As Henry Jenkins states “rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other” (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 9). From this perspective, viewers no longer have to settle for the programming that they see on television or media that is broadcast to them. This is because the viewer of television can also become a creator of content. This revolution in television is most clearly displayed through the creation of web series by independent web content producers. Christian also writes that, “Internet entrepreneurs . . . imagine themselves creating a more open, diffuse and niche-driven form of television.” (“Web as Television Reimagined” 344). In this

sense, the new medium of the Internet differs from older media while still “relying on television models for programming to facilitate audience engagement and advertiser interest” (344). Web series utilize the conventions of network and cable television in order to provide content for a specific audience.

The specificity of the audience for web series’ is also related to the identity of fans and the role of fandom in the creation of indie production. As Rebecca Wanzo writes in her article “African American acafandom and other strangers: New genealogies of Fan Studies,” much of the research on fans does not take into account the important role that race plays in fan studies and the work of many African American scholars of media and culture. Wanzo poses the question, what would it mean to place African Americans at the center of these studies? instead of positioning race as an “add-on” or an afterthought in the study of fans and fandom (Wanzo 1.5-1.6). One answer to this question is Aymar Jean Christian’s positioning of race, gender, and sexuality in understanding the role that fandom plays in the industrial practice of content production. In the article “Fandom as industrial response: Producing identity in an independent Web series” he writes that:

Independent Web series, therefore, move discussions of fandom from affective, cultural, and moral economies to the industrial economy, where the values of alternative narratives of race, gender, and sexuality are brutally negotiated in a market for stories and viewers. Confronted with this market, producers, as fans, poach from the industry its narrative formulas and some marketing practices, but offer up more loose and flexible means of production along with more open and diverse forms of representation. (Christian 1.6)

From this piece we can see that an understanding of fandom which centers the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality goes beyond an affinity for cultural consumption in order to form the *raison d'être* for the creation of indie web productions.

Using fandom as the basis for an understanding of industrial practice and production, it is apparent that Black web series gain popularity with audiences because much of what is absent in Black television is presented in these series, especially when it comes to the diversity of the Black community. For web series that portray a Black female protagonist, the creators behind these series borrow from television in order to create productions which reconstitute more common portrayals of Black women in the media. As Beretta E. Smith-Shomade writes, the less nuanced images of Black women in television “can be undercut by showing moments of subjectivity achieved within television texts and within the audience’s own subjectivity and identification with the character” (Smith-Shomade 323). This portrayal of nuanced Black subjectivity also assists these creators in relating back to their audience through the audience’s identification with the text and through the content creator’s identification with the audience for that text (as it is mediated through comments and messages). As Julien and Mercer state in “De Margin and De Centre”, “the inscription of ethnic indeterminacy does not take place ‘inside’ the text, as if it were hermetically sealed, but in-between the relations of author, text and reader specific to the construction of different discursive formations” (Julien and Mercer 9). Discourse around *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, and its creator Issa Rae, demonstrates that Black female content creators are fans of Black television who are using YouTube as a platform to make space for their own subjectivity within that larger media sphere.

For the series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, the representation of a Black female identity not only serves as the logic of production for the series, but can be seen as an

important part of its reception and marketing to audiences. As Christian writes in the book *Open TV*:

Open TV representations are most effective when they ring true to the realities or fantasies of a particular community, especially those for whom representations have been scant or inconsistent in the past. This is an innovation in television development which historically sees audiences as markets first and networks of individuals and fan communities second. (Christian 104-105)

By building on a legacy of television in conjunction with its own unique practices, web series do not solely focus on audiences as market niches (which is more common in the study of legacy television networks). By focusing on what Black female fans weren't seeing on legacy television, producers such as Issa Rae were able to tap into the potential of viewing an audience as a community eager to see its self portrayed on a screen.

YouTube Users: From Viewers and Audience to Community and Counterpublic

On the YouTube site, the viewing audience for a particular video can be understood through the number of views and the consequent ad revenue that the video generates as a result of those views. The comment sections of those videos also demonstrate a greater amount of interaction from YouTube users than simply viewing a series. In contrast to network and cable television where content is not initially or primarily streamed online, YouTube users have a direct line to both content and creators. For network, broadcast or cable television, the amount of feedback from the audience tends to be limited and/or mediated through social media sites or survey data. However, when one signs up to create a YouTube account you become a "user" and as a user on the site you can subscribe to channels, post content, and upload videos. With

YouTube, users are not just those who upload videos but also the audience for the videos that are uploaded.

YouTube users can easily post comments that respond to the video that they are watching in a myriad of ways. As Michael Strangelove writes “YouTube is not merely an archive of moving images. It is much more than a fast growing collection of millions of home-made videos. It is an intense emotional experience. YouTube is a social space” (Strangelove 4). In concert with this view of the social importance of YouTube, danah boyd includes the site in her definition of social media as not only a platform to “create and share . . . content” but also as a site “to communicate and engage in meaningful communication” (boyd 6). Within the YouTube comments section viewers of a web series do not merely watch the series and move on. Many of the individual users interact with the web series through individual comments, as well as interacting with each other in order to create online community. By examining what individuals make comments about on the videos that they have watched, we not only learn why people enjoy watching web series, but also the relationship between online community, society and culture.

As Jan Fernback writes in the essay “There is a There There: Notes toward a Definition of Cybercommunity,” online community is defined as “both an object of study (an entity, a manifestation) and the communicative process of negotiation and production of a commonality of meaning, structure, and culture. The terrain of community is mapped through a process of reconciling interpersonal dynamics, collective dynamics, and ideologies” all of which take on a new “significance when they are executed in cyberspace among people whose connectedness to one another is enabled only by a medium of mass communication” (Fernback 205-206). This conception of online community is expounded in Howard Rheingold’s book, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Rheingold uses an ethnographic approach

to analyze the early days of computer mediated communication through his time spent as an observer and participant in chat groups on The Well. In this text, Rheingold defines virtual community as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 6). Rheingold describes the type of communication that occurs in “social clusters in cyberspace as . . . [conversation] that naturally emerges whenever people who use this medium discuss the nature of the medium” (Rheingold 22). Similar to the chat groups, bulletins, and forums of the early internet, comments sections also act as spaces where individuals gather to discuss the content of a particular medium or platform. Specifically, YouTube comments sections act as a space where individuals not only comment on video content, but interact each other. Therefore, the concept of community applies more so to the space than the concept of a traditional television audience.

As Nancy Baym and danah boyd discuss in the introduction to a special journal issue titled, “Socially Mediated Publicness,” social media complicates and blurs the lines between audiences, community, publics and what it means to be a participant within these various spheres (Baym and boyd 320-325). Therefore, I view the comments sections as a discursive commenting community, drawing on Stuart Hall’s understanding of discourse as “the production of knowledge through language” or the construction of meaning through social practices and interactions (Hall, *Formations of Modernity*, 201). Within the comments section, YouTube users communicate with each other, deconstructing and building upon the meanings that they have formed by commenting on each other’s comments or on the videos of other users. The YouTube community is also reflexive, as viewers of videos are able to give feedback to other users who have shared video content.

These discursive commenting communities can be seen as an iteration of how counterpublics work and are constructed in online spaces. Pushing back against the initial gendered and classed conception of the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser introduces the concept of the counterpublic in order to levy a critique of Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In the article "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Fraser explicitly states that despite the argument that Habermas makes about the public and participatory nature of the public sphere he leaves out the fact that "women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from" the public sphere during the time period that Habermas is historicizing (Fraser 118). By characterizing the public sphere as a singular space for political participation which privileges fraternity over accessibility, Habermas ignores the potential of what Fraser calls "interpublic relations" and the idea that there can be multiple publics, and not just one (122-124). Specifically, Fraser describes the importance of what she calls a "subaltern counter-public" (123). This type of public sphere differs from the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas outlines by its composition of marginalized people and the need to have a multiplicity of these publics (123-125). These counter-publics serve as spaces where marginalized groups can "undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups" (123).

Conceptualizing further, Catherine Squires also rejects the singular view of public sphere in favor of the political potential that can be found in multiple resistant publics. Drawing on Fraser's critiques, Squires describes three types of Black public spheres, one of which she terms the "counterpublic" (Squires 460). The counterpublic is fueled by a sense of imagined community as well as the utilization of media sources (Squires 460-462). As Squires states, "when Blacks create their own media vehicles to redress stereotypes or present alternatives to

dominant representations” they are creating media texts that are defined not as “cool” but as “deviant” (463). While the use of the term deviance can be seen as a negative, I would posit that diverting from the norms and embracing queer identities and activities can be a liberating practice for those who do not see themselves as operating within the dominant norms of both White and/or Black cultural expression. Building on this view, Michael Warner also describes the role that counterpublics play within queer communities. Specifically, Warner writes that queer counterpublics are not only marked by their utilization of language and discourse, but through their ability to engage in resistance and discursive acts against the nation-state (Warner 84-89). Black queer individuals are able to utilize digital media and online spaces to create their own counterpublics that challenge a conservative and respectable Black political agenda. Embracing difference and deviance, Black queer individuals exist in their own communities, both online and offline, which speak back to dominant discourses by creating their own spheres of cultural production, consumption, and influence.

This form of resistance through the creation of media is especially evident within YouTube, as Black queer and female writers and producers push back against respectable or heteronormative portrayals of Black women in their work in order to hail a specific queer counterpublic within the larger YouTube sphere. At the same time, YouTube is still a public online space that is open to anyone with the means to online access. Despite the construction of YouTube comment sections as Black queer counterpublics fostering community amongst many of its viewers, YouTube is a heterogeneous space and multiple individuals express their views and opinions of the series which coincide with, and diverge from, the message(s) that are communicated by series producers. Even with this heterogeneity, by presenting itself as an openly accessible space that fosters user generated content creation, video sharing sites such as

YouTube differentiate themselves by embracing many of the tenants of the Internet medium, such as community, over the practices of traditional legacy television networks which focus on audience.

Analyzing the discourse between viewers also demonstrates the role that fandom plays in the performance of identity within counterpublics, as fandom is readily performed and proclaimed through the comments section. Many commenters identify themselves as fans not only through their claims of solidarity and identification with web series content, but also through their willingness to defend the series against commenters who have oppositional readings of the series. Henry Jenkins further explains the affinity that fans have for their fandoms and why they read content in particular ways using the model of poaching in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Specifically, Jenkins writes that:

Fans have chosen those media products from the total range of available texts precisely because they seem to hold special potential as vehicles for expressing the fan's pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests; there is already some degree of compatibility between the ideological construction of the text and the ideological commitments of the fans and therefore, some degree of affinity will exist between the meanings fans produce and those which might be located through a critical analysis of the original story. (Jenkins 34)

In this sense, fans purposely choose texts that they have a connection with and which express values that they believe in.

Consequently, shared recognition is the expected response that fans would have towards Black web series, because there are already similarities between how fans of the series read the text and their own ideological beliefs, as well as how that text is produced and encoded

with certain ideological beliefs by the content creator. Reflecting the shared beliefs of their audience members, Black YouTube web series utilize shared recognition as a logic of production, as YouTube web series are created outside of legacy networks in order to quare traditional forms of television production. In contrast to the studio/pilot model, web series are created from fandom and lack of recognition as they are often created by television fans who do not see themselves represented in mainstream television narratives. In order to foster shared recognition between themselves and a media text, content creators produce web series which seek to create a relationship between the content, the content creator, and the consumers of the content.

From One Awkward Black Girl to Another: Examining the Creator

The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl & Friends (ABG) is one example of a Black web series that became one of the most popular web series on YouTube following its premier in February of 2011 and its conclusion in 2013. Now, only a few years later, the show has gained such notoriety that it has become the basis for the critically acclaimed HBO series *Insecure*. Both series were created by Issa Rae, a young Black woman who wrote, produced, and starred in the show based on her own life and experiences, with the help of her friends. By combining voice-over narration and the typical mores of a situational comedy, *Awkward Black Girl* now has two seasons, millions of views, and Issa Rae has gone on to create a number of other web series that portray the Black American experience. In the first season of *Awkward Black Girl*, the audience is introduced to the character J, a young Black woman working in a mid-level job. Our first portrayal of J is not only coded as awkward in social situations (she is first seen in traffic attempting to avoid interaction with a past fling) but also as a young woman enmeshed in Black culture. In the first scene, and throughout the show, she uses rap music in order to express her

While cultural production acts as a way for Black artists and producers to speak back to legacy networks, the role of cultural content producer can also be seen as an inherent aspect of Black identity and the history of performance that Black people used in order to succeed and gain acceptance within society. Currently, the entertainment industry continues to be one of the key ways in which Black people are not only able to garner significant wealth and notoriety, but also wide-reaching cultural influence. Individuals such as Oprah, Beyonce, Kevin Hart, and Jay-Z use their ability to entertain the public to not only gain success in their own right, but also to promote the success of other individuals in their community. In many ways, performativity becomes a hallmark of Black culture both on and off the stage. As Erving Goffman once wrote, within the realm of performance one can belong to a team of performers i.e. “a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained” (Goffman 104). Based on racial classification, many Black people act (or do not act) as part of a performative team. In this sense, being Black in America is a constant performance which is shaped in response to the understanding and oppression of white people through expectation and stereotype threat. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant state in their essay “Racial Formations”:

Our compass for navigating race relations depends on preconceived notions of what each specific racial group looks like. Comments such as ‘Funny, you don’t look black’ betray an underlying image of what black should be. We also become disoriented when people do not act ‘black’, ‘Latino’ or indeed ‘white’. The content of such stereotypes reveals a series of unsubstantiated beliefs about who these groups are and what ‘they’ are like. (Omi and Winant 12)

At the end of the essay, Omi and Winant call for a wider acceptance of race as a construct that is based in socioeconomic, not biological, factors. With a show like *Awkward Black Girl*, Issa Rae is given the space as a cultural producer to not only create her own unique performance of blackness but also to show the ways that blackness is usually performed within society. In her resetting of this dichotomous stage, YouTube's position as a site that is accessible to diverse audiences allows content creators like Rae to perform blackness not outside the scope of whiteness, but as a racial formation that is shaped by the ways in which blackness is both imagined and performed within society.

In attempting to fill the gap that she saw in mainstream portrayals of blackness, Issa Rae also discusses how important it was for her to create a portrayal that was relatable. She states that she created the show after one day thinking, “[I’m] Awkward and Black . . . I can’t be the only one” (“Issa Rae | Own Your Own Awkward”). In examining the comments for the first episode this assertion becomes even more apparent. Most viewers comment about the character J and how her experiences represent their own lives. In one comment, instead of addressing Issa Rae, the user states “‘J’ I swear you think of everything...I am that awkward Black Girl..LOL!!!!” (“S.1, E.1: The Stop Sign”, comments). By addressing the character J directly, instead of conflating the character with the content creator Issa Rae, this user legitimates the ability to relate to the character. At the same time, it is easy to assume that the character J is Issa Rae and vice versa. As Rosamund Davies writes in her discussion of user generated content, when a “media professional appears to have been eliminated, then the sense of immediacy between audience and event is increased” (Davies 223). That immediacy is combined with a feeling of intimacy between audience member and content creator once “the first-person address that emerges with the ordinary person as author as well as the subject of representation” (223).

Although Issa Rae is careful to separate herself from the character J during interviews, the combination of voice over narration and the seeming authenticity of the production style of web series results in a greater feeling of intimacy. This further explicates the connection that the audience members have with the show creating a triangular relationship between content, content creator, and content viewers i.e. the content, the creator, and the community that constitute YouTube.

This form of intimacy based on the storytelling model also speaks to the role that affect and ideology plays within publics. In Zizi Papacharissi's book *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Papacharissi describes the role that affect and ideology play in the way that individuals engage in social media, movements, and democracy. Papacharissi uses the term affective publics to describe feelings towards an event which result in the creation, identification, or mobilization of a networked public (Papacharissi 3-6). While Papacharissi focuses on the role that technology and media play in individuals feeling towards political and national events, the role of affect in the construction of networked publics and the feeling of connection between individuals based on their interaction with social media is also applicable to YouTube.

As Papacharissi describes it, "affective statements can potentially allow access to fluid or liquid forms of power that are meaningful to publics seeking to break into the ideological mainstream" (Papacharissi 119). In addition "newer media . . . permit meaning making of situations unknown to us by evoking affective reactions . . . [as] we are prompted to interpret situations by feeling like those directly experiencing them" (Papacharissi 4). When viewers claim the identity of *Awkward Black Girl*, they are making an affective statement which has the power to change the norms of how Black women are viewed in society and mainstream production. This understanding of the power of affective publics is another way to think about

how viewers of ABG relate to Issa Rae's characters and the role that YouTube plays as a space for productions that exist outside of the mainstream. Aymar Jean Christian writes that "*Awkward Black Girl's* concept and story resonated with black women, who evangelized for the show. Rae, reading user comments and e-mails sensed the fervor she created and built campaigns to keep viewers engaged, channeled through Rae herself" (Christian, *Open TV* 128). Utilizing multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook and Tumblr, Issa Rae was able to market herself and the series by promoting a message of representational equity in Hollywood. In addition, the popularity of ABG allowed Rae to create her own networks of production online, such as Color Creative and Issa Rae Productions, both spaces where new series, pilots, and short films can gain viewership and a potential network deal. By embracing the alterity of an awkward identity, *Awkward Black Girl* has now morphed into the HBO series *Insecure*, further solidifying the reality and recognition of awkward Black girls within the mainstream. This alterity is also displayed in the genre of the series, as ABG not only makes you feel for the protagonist, but you are able to laugh and relate to her abjection.

The Struggles of an Awkward Black Life: Textual Analysis

In the comments for the first episode of ABG, one viewer states: "another awkward comedy, there should be a sub-genre dedicated to this type of comedy right next to rom-com, slapstick, and parody" ("S.1, E.1: The Stop Sign", comments). While it may not have been known to this particular commenter, theorists and academics, such as Jason Middleton have spent the past few years discussing the ways in which the awkward or "cringe-comedy" genre has evolved in a variety of media forms. Shows such as MTV's *Awkward* and NBC's *The Office* thrive on the awkward moments experienced by both the characters and the audience through a faux documentary format, otherwise known as mockumentary. Jason Middleton theorizes on the

meaning of awkwardness as a “cultural buzzword” in relation to television, and specifically, documentary/mockumentary productions (Middleton 3). He defines the awkward moment as not just “moments [which] occur when an established mode of representation or reception is unexpectedly challenged, stalled, or altered” but as an encounter with “‘the real’ in unexpected and often unruly forms” (3-4). This disjuncture between expectation and reality can also be likened to moments of situational irony, which challenge the real in a way that is uncomfortable to watch and experience.

These cringe-worthy moments of alienation are relatable to an audience of young women, because Issa Rae’s series embodies the tenets of what Rebecca Wanzo describes as a “precarious girl comedy” (Wanzo, “Precarious Girl Comedy”, 27). This type of comedy utilizes the shame and abjection of the female protagonist in order to foster recognition between the protagonist, and the audience members who see themselves in the protagonist. Wanzo states that “*The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* [is] . . . organized around the nexus of identification and alienated shame by depicting a young African American woman struggling with two aspects of identity that many people might think is incongruous - being both Black and awkward” (27). Similar to the HBO series *Girls* or the web series turned Comedy Central show *Broad City*, the precarious girl comedy exists within the trajectory of feminist media and racial uplift narratives which impose happy endings and the expectation of economic security onto media narratives. However, instead of sticking to the narrative of financial and social success, these 21st century incarnations utilize the precarity and insecurity of girlhood in the 2000’s as the basis for the series’ humor (Wanzo 28-30). While this portrayal is seen as new and interesting in *Girls* and *Broad City*, because of the lack of proximity that whiteness has to abjection, Wanzo argues that by linking blackness with abjection *Awkward Black Girl* offers revolutionary potential due to the

historic precedence of blackness as inherently abject. Awkwardness as the signifier of an abject identity is freed from its history of hurt and able to become an identity worthy of proclamation (30-32).

This abjectness is also identified through the signification of Black identity in society, and the reflection of this reality within television, which sets up both cultural and visible differences between those that are Black and other racial groups. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon replays an incident in which he is declared to be a “Negro” which is followed by his heightened awareness of the “Facts of Blackness” or the stereotypes and ideological beliefs that go along with that assessment (Fanon 82-92). Fanon writes that “I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance” (87). The identification with blackness has within it a history of signs, many of which are coded as negative, and most of which are immediately referenced through the visible difference of Black skin. From this perspective, while J’s blackness does not specifically code her as awkward, the ways in which she performs her blackness are still at odds with the other Black (and even White) characters within the show. Although J does not work at a very high paying job, her position at a weight loss company is an office job which gives her the ability to afford both her own place and her own car. J’s middle class awkwardness is not so much set up by how people react towards her but in the ways that she reacts and interacts with others.

Watching *Awkward Black Girl*, the reality of J’s experiences becomes even more real than the commonly televised awkward comedy. As a web series, there is “an emergence of a particular form of realism which seems to assert the subjectivity of the ordinary person caught up in the messy materiality of the moment” (Davies 215). One part of this realism is seen in the actual production quality of the show, which is shot from the character J’s perspective and lived

experiences. For the character J, this messiness is also depicted through the ways in which her awkwardness is enacted and defined. These moments are not only awkward in the departure from the norms of social interactions, but also the cultural norms of other Black people. As Ariane Cruz writes in the article “(Mis)Playing Blackness: Rendering Black Female Sexuality in *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*”:

I read J’s awkwardness, what Rae calls ‘the idea of being a social misfit,’ as being both prompted by her Blackness and instantiating it. If we understand Blackness to be a state of nonbelonging, abjection, and marginalization, then we might read J’s awkwardness as a characteristic of her Blackness and not as a quality that somehow nullifies it. (Cruz 76)

While I would agree that J’s blackness is not nullified by her awkwardness, I would argue that it is not only J’s blackness that makes her different, but the ways in which J’s personality and interactions depart from the norms and expectations of blackness. As Ron Eglash writes in his article “Race, Sex, and Nerds,” ignoring social norms is seen as an addendum to other characteristics with their own racial identifiers, i.e. the White male geek and the Asian male nerd (Eglash 57). J’s awkward identity is different due to her identity position as a Black woman and the way in which an awkward identity challenges the normativity of Black cool.

As Mat Johnson writes in his essay on being a Black Geek in the book *Black Cool*, “Blackness is one of the few identities that comes with its own self enforced expectation of expression” (Johnson 14). This expectation imprints itself as a real, and the reality of that expression deems any other expression a challenge to the truth of that expression, or as awkward. In an interview with the *Harvard Crimson*, Issa Rae communicates her awkwardness as a disjuncture from the expectations of Black expression. She states that:

I think sixth grade defines my awkwardness. We moved from Maryland to LA, and in Maryland I had all these interracial friends and we were all black girls and I was used to that. Then I moved to a predominantly black neighborhood in LA, and they hated me because I wore my hair naturally and I had this weird sense of humor to them . . .

Everything I did was like, "I want to be black, too! I'm black, guys!" (Fielder)

From this quote being Black can be deemed both an inherent truth through the visible difference that it exhibits and as a racial formation which is based on specific social norms as conceived within white heteropatriarchal society. The additional factors of correct local and cultural expression of blackness also play a role in one's acceptance by other Black people. In another interview, Issa Rae identifies this awkwardness in relation to what it means to be Black in the media. After listing a few examples of reality shows, she states "I didn't see myself represented in those shows, I was always a spectator. So the media's definition of Black excluded me, and that's awkward, I was awkward based on that. What they portrayed a Black woman to be" (Valley). While not fitting into the established codes of blackness labeled Issa Rae as awkward, as Wanzo writes, "her character J's inability to inhabit a black 'cool pose,' an identity mostly associated with men, but one that clearly resonates with the everyday performance culture of African American women as well, was embraced by black geeks as a revolutionary media representation" (Wanzo 27-28).

This portrayal is seen as revolutionary because J's awkward identity, while complicating the ideological codes of Black identity, allows her character to be relatable to viewers of the series who may or may not receive that level of recognition in their daily lives. As Ron Eglash states, "the compulsory cool of black culture" makes any Black identity that does not express the social ease and confidence assumed by Blackness seem alien (Eglash 57). While the addition of her

gendered identity is not given the same significance, the combination of these signifiers makes it difficult for J to relate to other characters within the show. As it was stated in the discussion of the awkward mockumentary series, in order for J to be marked as awkward there has to be a sense of normalcy in the ways in which the other characters perform their identities. Within the first episode we see J's interactions with others as so strange in fact, that her lack of knowledge about how to interact in social situations becomes comical.

Quare is to Awkward as Black is to Queer

J's awkwardness is not only seen as strange, but in at least three different ways this awkwardness is set up in queer iterations. In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Siobhan B. Somerville defines Queer as an action, with the action "to queer" being a way for us to estrange ourselves from the "socially and historically constructed identities that have often worked to establish and police the line between the 'normal' and 'abnormal'" (Somerville 187). Continuing in this vein E. Patrick Johnson's description of "quaring" relates to the series as the character J queers the appearance of heterosexuality and the construction of Black culture, while many of ABG's viewers queer the norms of YouTube use in conjunction with listing queer identities. Within the first episode, J chooses to cut off all her hair following a break up with her boyfriend. Little does she know that her boyfriend will later show brief remorse and come back into her life in order to start the relationship anew. However, in true awkward comedic style, he breaks up with her again with the proclamation "I feel gay," likening her new hair cut to a masculine presentation to which he does not want to be intimately attached.

While her boyfriend reads the haircut as a silent proclamation of a lesbian identity, it parallels the act known in the natural hair community both within and outside of YouTube as "big-chopping" in which a woman with chemically manipulated hair, cuts her hair and starts over

the growth process. Big-chopping can sometimes be a political act, in its seeming disregard for the patriarchal standards of eurocentric beauty and femininity. However, big-chopping is generally seen as the first, albeit radical, step on the journey to healthy hair. In addition, queerness is culturally constructed through J's interactions with the other characters on the show. Denotatively queerness is a sense of estrangement, and in all of her interactions with her co-workers J is labeled as weird and as Other (with the second season of the ABG series even being produced through the YouTube channel iAmOther). Therefore, despite the characters heterosexuality, the appearance that she has constructed and the ways in which she interacts with others set up a queer identity which is called into question by the other characters while also being embraced by the show's audience.

Following her break-up with D, and in the second season of the series, this queer recognition is also seen through another character who continuously chooses to hail J as a Black queer woman. After entering into a new relationship with the character White J/Jay, Season 2 of the series opens with the protagonist J rushing from her boyfriend's apartment to head to work. With no time to go home and change clothes she quickly dons White Jay's oversized work shirt, leaving the house without makeup or jewelry. As she rushes into the office to meet her work friend CeCe, a new feminine presenting Latina receptionist greets her with the statement "Hey, Fam," leaving J wondering "Do I know her?" (Rae, Season 2, Episode 1 "The Sleepover"). Later in Season 2 it is revealed to the audience, and J, that "hey fam" was a greeting meant to ascertain whether or not the character J was "family" i.e. lesbian, bisexual, trans, or queer identified. After denying this affiliation with the lesbian community, J states that she has a boyfriend, to the disbelief of the receptionist, who still invites her to an LGBTQ community support group implying that J is just not ready to admit to a queer sexuality. In this moment of queer refusal,

Ariane Cruz writes that while J “resists popular stereotypes of Black female sexuality, she succumbs to sexual hierarchies. Indeed, her fervent denial of lesbianism . . . represents more than just a reassertion of her heterosexuality; it is a reinstatement of institutional heteronormativity” (Cruz 78). Throughout the series, J is adamant about her heterosexual identity, even as her appearance, actions, and awkwardness make room for varying expressions and interpretations of queer identity.

While this reoccurring narrative of queer misrecognition could be attributed to ignorance on behalf of J’s ex-boyfriend in Season 1, the queer recognition by a lesbian woman in Season 2 speaks to the fact that while a queer identity primarily functions through sexual identity, its interpretation and articulation through visual signifiers is just as important in constructing community. Although the character J verbally asserts her sexuality throughout the series, even using her relationships with men as proof of heterosexuality, her androgynous appearance and awkward mannerisms mark her as a Black queer woman to those within and outside of the queer community. This fact is not only important within the context of the series itself, but also within the comments section of the series, where viewers align themselves with the character J. These viewers are then not only aligning themselves with the identity of awkward Black girl, but also aligning themselves with the fact that this particular intersectional identity is marked and read as queer both within and outside of communities of color.

Finally, queerness is constructed in relation to the technological specificity of YouTube and exemplified through the types of people who interact in the YouTube comments for the show. The comments section on YouTube is not particularly formatted for individuals to engage in conversation and deep reflection but is mostly seen as a feedback tool. With this feedback on the show being set as the norm, the interactions within the ABG commenting community are

decidedly queer. Comments for the show range in cultural expressions and focus on identity and connections with the show as a whole and "J" as the main character. Positioning queerness as an awkward identity, it should also be pointed out that the identification that many viewers feel towards the show is a result of the queerness of awkwardness as a stand-alone signifier for Black people, and Black women, in particular. Generally, an awkward identity is conflated with a host of other terms (i.e. geek, nerd, etc) which only partially articulate the meaning of tenuously inhabiting social spaces in which you are visibly and mentally different than other individuals.

Viewing and relating to *Awkward Black Girl* fosters queer shared recognition, not only in terms of identification with the main character but also in terms of the norms of YouTube viewing and commenting. This form of queer shared recognition is not only seen through the production of web series, but through fans and viewers of those series who then produce their own comments. Therefore, the series can be seen as inherently queer by nature of producing narratives and characters that exist outside of societal norms. By proclaiming a recognition of the self in the YouTube text (especially in contrast to mainstream media texts), commenters demonstrate a form of queer shared recognition between themselves, the content, and the series creator through proclaiming and embracing their own difference in relation to the series and society.

Negotiating (Dis)Identification: Analyzing Series Comments

The most common type of feedback seen on Black web series, such as *Awkward Black Girl*, is an expressed stand in solidarity and identification with the series characters. Many of the commenters identify with the struggles that J faces as well as struggles which J does not face. In the end of the first episode, J verbalizes how she identifies herself when she states that "My name is J and I'm Awkward and Black. Someone once told me those were the two worst things

anyone could be. That someone was right” (Rae “[S.1, Ep.1]”). As it relates to the title of the show and as the first explicit introduction that J makes to the audience, a majority of the comments on the show reference this proclamation in some way. This statement not only reflects identification with the text, but it signals to audience members that the text, and the space, is for them. As Ariane Cruz writes:

This articulation of subject position through speaking or vocalization is also a point of interpolation and interpellation: J is interpolated, situated between the two (seemingly irreconcilable) points of Blackness and awkwardness, as well as is simultaneously interpellated or hailed as a subject through discourse. ABG thus becomes a deliberate project about the nature of belonging. (Cruz 76)

At the same time, individuals are not all hailed in the same way. Two comments that speak back to this identification particularly stand out. In the first, the user asks some questions about Issa Rae’s other shows, but then adds the addendum “btw [by the way] I heard it was the worse to be Black Jewish Lesbian.....” This statement ties into the understood expectation that to be Black inherently applies the categories of heterosexual and Christian, and delineates specific boundaries within those contexts. The second comment also expresses the difficulties presented by not fitting into the expectations of sexual orientation, by stating “Try being an awkward gay black girl.” Although these comments do not expound upon the specific struggles that are faced by the additional intersections of not just race and gender, but race, gender, religion, and sexuality; the individuals that left these comments identify the ways that a negotiated reading of the text can also garner significance within the YouTube community.

As a negotiation of the user’s individual identity and the identity of the character J, these comments are able to give visibility to the multiplicity of Black identity while not negating the

importance of J's expression of her own self and the wholly dominant identification that other users may have with her as a character. This type of negotiated reading would be described by Jose Munoz as a form of "disidentification", as:

Identification is not [always] about simple identification . . . [as] identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology religious orientation, and so on means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world. (Munoz 8)

In addition, "subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component have an especially arduous time" as "subjects who are outside the purview of dominant public spheres encounter obstacles in enacting identifications" (8). For the two commenters above, the intersection of their multiple identities resulted in disidentification with the character J, despite their similar positions as queer subjects. Yet, while these commenters do not fully identify with J's heterosexuality and/or lack of religious background they do relate to her identity as an Awkward Black Girl, demonstrating that even in moments of disidentification, subjects that identify with a queer sexuality can still recognize themselves in mediated portrayals of queer identity.

These comments also demonstrate a commonality in the type of statements that were coded under the heading of solidarity and identification. In his essay on being a Black geek, Mat Johnson describes the moment of "Coming out to yourself and to others," which is then followed by "staying out as you walk out the door" which "brings strength in its action. And then strength in the numbers that join you" (Johnson 17). In online spaces, the moment of "coming out" is especially seen in many of the comments as users choose to self-identify as Black, awkward, gay, straight, queer, girl, etc. While there is a general assumption that one can be whoever one

wants to be on the Internet, as Lori Kendall writes, the reality is that “anonymity does not equal an absence of identity [online] but, rather, carries with it a set of assumptions about identity which hold ‘until proven otherwise’” (Kendall 66). She goes on to write that the general assumption online is that individuals are white and male until there is some indication of that not being their actual identity (66).

However, Ariane Cruz argues that the “internet is increasingly becoming an extension of our physical selves, a sphere where we project, present, and represent our material bodies” (Cruz 83). This change is demonstrated within the ABG community as viewers regularly engage in what Lisa Nakamura terms “digital signifying practices,” in which internet users make their embodied selves known within digital space (Nakamura 5). It is in this process of “coming out” to the commenting community that results in a variety of outcomes, depending on the person and the mode in which they choose to come out to their fellow community members. For many of the Black women who choose to identify with Issa Rae and her character J, the strength in numbers that Johnson purports is seen, as there are many users who echo the assertion of an awkward, Black, and inherently queer identity. However, this same support is not always seen in comments from those who do not wholly identify with the show. In those cases, support usually hinges on whether or not those individuals subscribe to the dominant reading of the text, in contrast to those who identify themselves in opposition to the show.

Oppositional Readings of ABG

This phenomenon is especially apparent when analyzing comments that I coded under the heading of negative reading’s and racism. These types of comments generally begin with a non-Black or un-identified individual making a comment which Black identified commentators later refute due to the comments inappropriate or inaccurate reading of the episode/characters. This

negative reading tends to come from a place of privilege, in which an oppositional reading is proposed as a dominant reading by someone who believes that they have the right to critique the identity and meaning making of the other individuals in the comments sections as well as the content creator. These positions can be identified as masculinist, heterosexist, patriarchal or simply judgmental. Other negative readings were rejoinders to previous oppositional responses to the series or commenting community. One such conversation between three YouTube users went back and forth on the validity of the title “Awkward Black Girl” and the protagonist’s alignment with that conception. The user JohnStorm begins with his opinion on self-identifying as “awkward” by stating that:

JohnStorm: awkward because you are so-called black is a self defeatist complex... brought to you by the institution of brainwashing... lol and sponsored by racist factions

In response, PurpleCalm, who is identified as a Black woman through her Google + picture, as well as her YouTube user profile responds with:

PurpleCalm: It's not called "Awkward BECAUSE I'm black girl." She's just an awkward girl who happens to be black. I, for one think it's a welcome relief from the loud, arrogant stereotype of black women the media loves to force feed us. THAT is brainwashing.

While JohnStorm’s comment attempts to ironically hint at the social construction of race (“so called black”), the comment also implies that Storm is confused about the premise of the series. The character J is not awkward *because she is* Black, but is Awkward *and* Black. By reframing JohnStorm’s opinion, PurpleCalm brings the conversation back to the purpose of the series. “Awkward Black Girl” was created, in part, to combat the stereotypes of Black women that are

commonly found in the mainstream media. It is those stereotypical depictions that should truly be identified as “sponsored by racist factions”. Yet, JohnStorm continues his argument:

JohnStorm: if the stereotype is about a black women in general then yes that is the focus of her position. nice try though. [sic] It's not like she expressed being just the awkward woman in America, the focus is around her blackness and her awkward experiences from being a (black) woman... not a purple woman, or a pink, but BLACK... watch her films again to see how her perception of being a black female is a big part of the awkward phenomenon... smh

While still responding to PurpleCalm’s reading of the show, JohnStorm continues to argue his point, as someone outside of the assumed audience for the show (i.e. an individual who relates to and understands the main character’s standpoint). From this perspective he sardonically points out that although the show might speak back to the stereotypes of Black women in the media, it does not succeed in making those parallels. Instead, JohnStorm sees the awkwardness that J experiences as attributed to her blackness itself and not the ways in which she is different from a stereotype of blackness. He then frames this awkward blackness as wrong, based on his assumptions about the imagined experiences of Black women. This disagreement is reinforced by the end comment of “smh” or shaking my head.

In response to this, PurpleCalm once again attempts to bring the conversation back to the purpose of the show by stating that:

PurpleCalm: Yes, she is conscious of her blackness, and her awkwardness, but nothing suggests that the former is the cause of the latter. If she's really associating her blackness with being awkward, then why is it that none of the other black characters in the show are awkward?

This point – the ‘normalcy’ of the other cast members – is not entirely correct. However, most of the other characters in the show are characterized as not awkward. This is because the other characters representation as normal serves as the framework in which J can be defined as awkward within specific social and professional settings. At the same time, PurpleCalm also makes it known that while JohnStorm is attempting to make the point that J’s awkwardness is due to her blackness, that opinion is also poorly argued. In the first episode the only characters that J interacts with are a co-worker and an ex-boyfriend (both Black characters). By showing J with other Black characters, blackness cannot be labeled as awkward, queer or strange, in context. That first episode establishes blackness, through the other Black characters, as normal while positioning J as awkward and queer.

Following this comment, JohnStorm admits rhetorical defeat by responding:

JohnStorm: My first comment was rhetorical within context of topic and to how irrelevant it is to always focus on color as some identity measure of specifics. If I called any woman by their skin color and ended it with girl, most women would probably be offended. In one of the later episodes Jay says that her friend says for a female to be black and awkward is pretty much an odd coupling. go figure... =/

This final comment supports my earlier contention about privilege and perspective, as the comments from JohnStorm demonstrate that he had little to no experiential authority to make his claims about ABG. He attempts to save face by claiming that he was making a rhetorical argument. He also admits to making a generalized argument based on his supposed understanding of what most women find to be offensive, and that upon watching more of the series he can see that there is something important to Black women about claiming an awkward

identity (despite the fact that this point had already been explained to him). From this discourse it is apparent that viewers who do not have the same cultural context might find it more difficult to understand the meanings, and meaningfulness, of the show than its intended viewers and fans. Yet, while ABG is meant for a particular audience, if open to it, viewers outside of that intended audience can learn to understand a world different from their own.

In analyzing this disagreement, the most common dominant reading of *Awkward Black Girl* is identified as well as the most common oppositional reading. *Awkward Black Girl*, as expressed by this particular viewer and its creator Issa Rae, is a show about and for women who do not identify with the normative understanding of what it means to be Black or Woman in America. While the show has a positive message about accepting one's self in the face of public scrutiny and in the uncomfortable awkward of not always fitting in, the oppositional readings of the text usually frame it as a negative message. JohnStorm, and many other viewers with this reading, argue that the show's focus on being awkward and Black reinscribes the codes of racism and hegemony. Coming from a color-blind post-racial perspective, these types of comments espouse the need to look past race, questioning as one such user did "umm why are Americans so obsessed with race? like you guys are always pointing out the race lol why the awkward BLACK girl? why not just the awkward girl?" (Rae "S.1, Ep.1: The Stop Sign, comments"). This focus on race and ethnicity is seen as a problem predicated on the US based ideology of racism. I chose to code this common misreading of the text using the heading Racism. As one viewer writes "i'm just tired of it, though. I don't see what's funny about using racial slurs" which comments on the character "J"'s use of the word "N*****" and other such expletives (Rae "S.1, Ep.1: The Stop Sign, comments").

While the series is interpreted by many viewers with either dominant or divergent readings, how users respond to each other shows that the comments section has become a kind of safe space for people of color (POC's) within the greater YouTube community public. When thinking about the Internet as a public space many theorists have likened the online realm to what Jürgen Habermas called the public sphere. The public sphere, as Habermas defined it, was a space separate from the private in which bourgeois European intellectuals gathered to debate rational ideas in order to produce political change (Habermas 14-50). While not exactly what Habermas had in mind when describing this space, it is apparent that the public sphere model could be used to discuss the way that online communities are formed and how they interact. Like the bourgeois public sphere, an online community can be seen as a public space in which private people meet that rests on a certain affiliation with the literary through the written interaction between community members. Just as the public sphere helped to create and bolster certain representations of democracy in particular western societies, interactions in online spaces not only define the rules and regulations of the internet but also, arguably, the freedoms and democracy found there (Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere" 12-20).

However, in likening the Internet to a kind of digital democracy and idealizing the public sphere narrative, we increase the likelihood of re-enacting the type of discourse that was seen between JohnStorm and PurpleCalm. This type of discourse, which relies on systems of privilege and claims to rationality, silence the beliefs and identity of individuals outside of the white hetero-patriarchal perspective (Fraser 64). In this sense comment sections are another virtual sphere:

Dominated by bourgeois computer holders, much like the one traced by Habermas consisting of bourgeois property holders. In this virtual sphere, several special interest

publics coexist and flaunt their collective identities of dissent, thus reflecting the social dynamics of the real world. . . . This vision of the true virtual sphere consists of several spheres of counterpublics that have been excluded from mainstream political discourse, yet employ virtual communication to restructure the mainstream that ousted them” (Papacharissi 21).

Instead of re-creating the traditional public sphere narrative in the commenting community for *Awkward Black Girl*, users enforce Fraser and Squires’ conception of counter-publics and Papacharissi’s virtual sphere.

As a site, YouTube is especially suited to the creation of this type of alternative virtual sphere. Instead of re-creating the “single, comprehensive public sphere” which is seen on many forums and websites, spaces on YouTube are delineated based on content (Fraser 66). Each video serves as the foundation for its own commenting community that is comprised of the individuals who have selected that particular content to view. In addition, Aymar Jean Christian writes that web series tend to be niche driven. So, as a series, *Awkward Black Girl* caters to an assumed audience of women who can relate to the show and its subject matter. Therefore, the commenting community for the show is structured on the beliefs, wants, and needs of the Black women who consume the show. Due to the composition of the commenting space “assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out” amongst the YouTube users (Fraser 67). Taken for granted beliefs, such as JohnStorm’s assumptions about how Black women want to be identified will not be left uncontested.

The Role of Fandom in Counterpublics

In this type of subaltern counterpublic, those who identify as Black in the comments section tend to stand up and reiterate the validity of their own opinions and beliefs about the

show. One such moment also occurred in response to JohnStorm, but did not garner the same back and forth, when SingleStrand writes:

You totally missed the point of the entire series. Sure she talks about it but she addresses it. Whites pretend there is no problem by not talking about it. Talk about all the white tv shows with one black xter, CSI was redone three times with white xters, NCIS, Castle, Bones, Bunheads, Girls etc. Just because you ignore the problem doesnt mean its not there. If America was all embracing, we would see more Black people on screen. No one is really color blind, they just don't think about it. (Rae "S.1, Ep.1: The Stop Sign, comments")

SingleStrand points out that the type of comment that JohnStorm made ascribes to the belief that we not only live in a colorblind or post racial society, but that all individuals in America want to be a part of that type of society. Yet, in reality, the post-racial society has not been achieved and for many individuals (especially POC's who revel in their cultural differences), it is not something that should be achieved if it comes at the expense of addressing, pointing out and celebrating differences.

While it is not readily apparent with which race or nationality JohnStorm identifies, PurpleCalm's identification as a Black woman through her picture and other comments also demonstrates the phenomenon of members of the ABG community responding to usually negative and oppositional readings of the text. This back and forth also demonstrates, as Lori Kendall writes, that "despite arguments that online interactions can flatten hierarchies . . . gender and other identity hierarchies continue to constitute a significant context for on-line interaction" (Kendall 67). Especially with a show like ABG, which makes certain identity claims in the very title of the show, conversations about identity and the offline hierarchies that then become

relevant in the online space are commonplace. Conceptualizing the difference between the asynchronous communication that takes place in the YouTube comments in relation to Face to Face interactions (FtF), individuals online are more readily able to stand up for themselves and what they believe. While it might not seem worth it (or possibly dangerous) to confront an individual like JohnStorm in an offline environment, PurpleCalm was able to assert herself without the conversation being taken to a virulent or abusive place.

Conclusion

Commenting communities, similar to fandoms, are heterogeneous groups which converge around a common text or occurrence. For commenting communities within the larger YouTube community, the YouTube video itself not only serves as the focus of the discourse within comments but also the initial link into the community itself. In order to be a part of the commenting community there is an expectation that the user has watched the video and will comment on the video, content related to the video, and/or about the video in some way. When focusing on Black web series, the video content can also be seen as the means by which counterpublics are created and more homogenous communities are formed. For *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* this formation is indicated by the large chunks of comments that reiterate their identification with the series, the series' protagonist, and many times the series' creator. These interactions, from community members to content and content to content creator all rotate in a triangular relationship that also mirrors the way that YouTube is constructed for technological use. When examining the series, the content creator (Issa Rae) creates the text (*Awkward Black Girl*) which constructs a particular audience (Fellow Awkward Black Girls and Allies) that then make up the commenting community.

This model sets YouTube up as a unique space for studying Black cultural content producers and consumers, because the platform itself is best suited to content that is easy to access and to create for a wide variety of individuals. However, even though YouTube is a large global space, within the site, smaller publics have been constructed around the wants and needs of niche audiences. In examining the counter public of *Awkward Black Girl* fans and viewers it becomes apparent that many individuals are mimetically inclined and when they do not see themselves in one form of the media, they look elsewhere. This is evidenced not only through the comments, but in Issa Rae's own discussions of the series' inception. In many ways, the lack of representation given to this particular group is indicative of the narratives surrounding Blackness that espouse a narrative of Cool. These narratives not only create unfair binaries based on assumptions grounded in an understanding of the relationship between race, sexuality, and culture but also continue to marginalize individuals who are already in marginalized positions.

With the knowledge of these set narratives, those who choose not to accept or ascribe to those narratives can be defined as decidedly queer. Although identifying with the terminology of queer itself can also be seen as marginalizing, it is through coming out and into a counter identity that allows individuals to have solidarity with others like them. Therefore, with a series like *Awkward Black Girl*, users are not only able to see a series that depicts their own reality, but they are also able to interact with others that share specific identity features. In joining together as a commenting community, the strength in numbers and agreement gives the community the ability to engage in a form of shared recognition. Overall, the creation and consumption of this series represents a variety of intersections between queer identities not only brings entertainment and identification but promotes a sense of safety within an open online space.

CHAPTER III

Get in Queer Formation: The Performance of Intersectional Identity in *The Peculiar Kind*

“Performance becomes a vehicle through which the Other is seen and not seen’

- E.Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 7

“An individual’s style of clothing broadcasts to the community how she chooses to represent her race and gender, as well as the type of physical representation she is attracted to. . . . [And] style

is used to represent not only gender but social class, ethnicity, culture, and finer group

memberships” - Mignon Moore, *Invisible Families*, 69

Within day to day interactions, race, gender, sexuality and many other identifiers are generally communicated through visual and verbal signifiers within interpersonal or observational interactions. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant state in their essay “Racial Formations”, an identifier such as race is not so much a biological fact but a social construct which is read and understood through the societal expectations of how that racial identity is performed. In the book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler reiterates a similar understanding of the construction of gender as performative and predicated on societal expectations of two distinct and oppositional gender identities. Queer theorists also take on the language of performance and the formation of identity as the means by which queer community is created and understood by community insiders and outsiders as differing from the norms of heterosexuality. In this sense, performance plays an important role in how identity is constructed and read amongst individuals. While the expectations of performativity can be limiting, it can be useful for certain individuals

who want or need to hail others from their own community through the expression of their identity.

For this chapter, I will discuss the importance of identity performance in Black queer YouTube web series and the role that the commenting communities which form around these series play in the articulation and understanding of specific forms of racial, gendered, class, and sexual expression. Through utilizing visual and critical discourse analysis, this chapter focuses on the queer of color web series *The Peculiar Kind* in order to further the understanding of queere shared recognition as a multi-faceted methodology which includes the performance of queer women of color. Through its unique structure and style, *The Peculiar Kind* demonstrates the relationship between discourse and performativity as seen in the queer community formed through the series' comments and content. In addition, the series explores the intersectionality of Black queer women's identity, while demonstrating the unique construction of queer female identity in both offline and online spaces.

Introduction

Since the inception of the world wide web, the possibility of being anyone that you want online due to the potential anonymity of internet users has been viewed through a positive, as well as a potentially dangerous, lens. This type of internet use has spawned terminology from the "identity tourism" of white internet users who pretend to be individuals of other races and ethnicities, to the popularity of catfishing, in which individuals of any identity background pretend to be someone they are not for reasons as wide ranging as revenge, money, and/or love (Nakamura). Most recently, Andrew Anglin, the founder of the right wing website "The Daily Stormer" instructed his followers to infiltrate Black Twitter through the creation of fake accounts which would mimic the stereotypical behaviors and profiles of Black Twitter users (Walsh).

From these various instances, for good or for bad, it is apparent that internet users have grasped the conception of identity markers as performative social constructs which can be utilized at will in online spaces.

Despite this knowledge, the Web 2.0 era of social media does not tend to encourage this seemingly deceptive style of internet use. Sites such as Facebook and YouTube encourage the use of real names and identities within their sites, mainly to generate accurate usage and user data for advertisers (Van Dijck 199-203). Many scholars of race and digital media have found in their own studies of internet usage that pretending to be someone else online has very specific purposes for certain groups of people. It is much less common for members of online communities to not be themselves online (Kendall 111-118). However, if it is possible for other individuals to don the performative costume of a queer woman online, what does it mean to accurately (or inaccurately) read and perform identity in online space? Especially for this project, what is unique to the performance of queer womanhood in both online and offline spaces? Or, how do individuals recognize each other and themselves in the content and community that they look for in these spaces?

The Presentation of Identity in Everyday Life

As Erving Goffman writes in his seminal text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the term “performance” refers to “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (Goffman 21 -22). The performance of self occurs in all interactions between individuals and can be different based on the situation in which one is performing. In this sense, the performance of the self acts as a “front” which “defines the situation for observers of the performance” (22). Defining the situation not only acts as the means by which we

understand how and why someone is acting a particular way in relation to place and space (for example, dressing up and behaving well at the opera defines the situation as a classy event and the performer as a cultured and well-mannered individual) but can also be understood as related to how one performs their identity to define the self for others. As Goffman goes on to state “when an individual appears before others, he unknowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part” (35). When analyzing identity, the performance of self in everyday life is regulated based on socially constructed expectations and conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, etc.

Referencing Goffman’s theories of performance, Omi and Winant state that:

In US society . . . a kind of ‘racial etiquette’ exists, a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life. Rules shaped by our perception of race in a comprehensively racial society determine the ‘presentation of self’, distinctions of status, and appropriate modes of conduct. ‘Etiquette’ is not mere universal adherence to the dominant group’s rules but a more dynamic combination of these rules with the values and beliefs of subordinated groupings. (12-13)

Therefore, for particular racial groups, there is a specific expectation of behaviour and manner of being within society and daily interactions which are infused with particular values. Due to these expectations, race takes on an ideological stance and Omi and Winant specifically state that “Race becomes ‘common sense’ - a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (13). The ideology of race not only becomes the lens through which we read and define the situation, the ideology of race assumes certain racial identities have more value or privilege than others within society.

Within both online and offline spaces, the performance of racial identity is not only defined interracially, but intraracially. Within racial groups there are specific codes and cultural norms which help to create familiarity within a particular community. Within the Black community, these codes are mainly displayed through the use and understanding of cultural references and language. As E. Patrick Johnson writes in the book *Appropriating Blackness*, “in contemporary society . . . there exists a crisis of blackness involving language use” in which “talking ‘white’ is equivalent to speaking standard English and talking ‘black’ is equivalent to speaking in the black vernacular” or slang (5). In the article “Diction Addiction,” Jonathon Green discusses the genealogy of slang within Black communities as “a hidden, generally secret and even subversive language” which was mostly unknown to community outsiders before the birth and popularity of rap music (Green 99). As Johnson describes it, due to the close relationships between various racial groups, knowledge of the coded language of one group is not always hidden from the other. However, “within racially and politically charged environments in which one’s allegiance to ‘race’ is critical to one’s in-group status, one’s performance of the appropriate ‘essential’ signifiers of one’s race is crucial” (Johnson 6).

Especially within offline spaces, race is also constructed based on visible or phenotypical difference. Therefore, the ability to convincingly perform a racial identity is not only caught up in the norms of racial performance as seen with language, but also with the assumptions of skin tone, eye color, hair texture, and many other genetically produced factors (Johnson 5-7). So, while assumptions based on visible difference can still be incorrect due to genetic diversity within many different racial types and because many individuals throughout history have accomplished the feat of racial passing, passing is comprised of more than just simple changes in behavior or dress. As seen in books such as John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* or Rachel

Dolezal's *In Full Color*, passing is easier and more acceptable when an individual moves from a place of higher privilege (white) to lesser privilege (person of color) than the opposite move. Situations in which a person of color moves into the racial category of whiteness is usually more dangerous and tenuous than the former mainly due to the attainment of privilege and challenge to the biological authenticity of white supremacy that comes with such a move.

This understanding of race is not only based on the common sense nature of ideology, but in the grouping of ideologies which describes Michel Foucault's theory of discursive formation. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault devotes an entire chapter of the text to describing how statements and concepts within discourse (or ideology) come to together as a formation (31-36). He writes that "whenever one can describe between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity . . . we are dealing with a *discursive formation*" (37). He then goes on to state that "the conditions to which the elements of this division . . . are subjected we shall call the *rules of formation*" (37). Within Foucault's work, discursive formations are used to describe disciplines of knowledge and the meanings ascribed to objects within them. When applying the concept of formation to identity, we can see how discourse groups, creates hierarchies, and regulates various forms of identification.

The relationship between performance and the theories of formation that shape race as an ideological/social construct, is also seen in the relationship between performance and the construction of categories of gender and sexuality. In the book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler utilizes the concept of performativity to describe the role that discursive formation plays in the enactment and embodiment of gender and sexuality. Melding the language of semiotics and postmodern philosophy in her description of gender, Butler writes that:

Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative- that is constituting the identity it is purported to be. (32-33)

The view of gender as performative builds on Goffman and Foucault by describing gender as an identity which is also formed based on the common sense beliefs of what that gender looks like or how it is supposed to be enacted before the subject performs it. For Butler, it is also the a priori nature of discursive formations which differentiates performativity from what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhaba would describe as the mere “mimicry” of performance (Bhaba 126).

Gender identity has also been held to the same standard of biological continuity as racial identity through privileging the physical difference of sexual organs as differences in gender i.e. women have female sex organs and men have male sex organs. While not originating in the 21st century, the increased visibility of transgender identity has disrupted the hegemony of a gender binary, moving societal conversations around gender towards Butler’s view of gender performativity. Instead of confusing gender with sex, Butler proposes that we move past the belief that gender and sexuality are assigned at birth based on the biological imperative of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 23-33). For Butler, gender becomes more than a singular fact based on one’s sexual organs, but can be viewed as another discursive act which is based on how an individual views themselves and how they wish to be viewed by the world.

At the same time, the ideology of race and gender cannot and do not stand alone. The performance of self is also predicated on an understanding of intersectionality, in which individuals are understood to be constructing and maintaining multiple identity fronts at any

given time. As Kimberle Crenshaw states in her article “Mapping the Margins,” focusing “on the intersections of race and gender . . . highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). Once adding in the intersections of class, sexuality, as well as context, the ways in which one is expected to define the situation differ greatly and can create contradictions or lack of coherence between held identities.

Assumptions of Difference: Performing Class and Sexuality

The recognition and performance of class can also be seen through the conception of formation. As Mary Pattillo writes in her Chicago based ethnography *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City*, “the fact of racial homogeneity does not preclude the importance of difference, divisions, and distinctions” within a particular racial group (12). Like racial and gender identity, class is one of the major differences identified through assumptions around performance. Pattillo writes:

Because we often cannot know the “hard facts” of class positions, we usually settle for observing and making sense of “soft facts” instead. We express our own class standing and read others’ class positions through signs of language, dress, demeanor, performance, and other objects and behaviors that have social meaning and that can be mapped onto the class hierarchy. (12)

Within the ethnography, Pattillo’s middle and upper middle class participants use the performance of class to signal to individuals within and outside of their racial group that they have privilege. It is also through these markers that they determine who is, or is not, a part of their particular intersection of Black heterosexual respectability without having to directly ask invasive questions about income, family wealth, or employment status.

Pattillo describes this covert way of ascertaining class identity through polite conversation and nonverbal communication by writing that:

Americans talk around class by using the vocabulary of status and lifestyles. Instead of referring to how much money someone makes, we describe their overseas vacations or their fancy cars. Instead of looking at a person's resume to see if she attended college, we dismiss him because he has cornrows or her because she wears long press-on nails. (13)

Within an American context, certain stratifications of class identity are easier to put on and maintain than many of the other identity markers. Consequently, assumptions based on the discursive formation of identity are not always accurate or fair. Yet, these performative acts, and our readings of them, tend to set the stage for how we engage with people, especially those with whom we may not be familiar. Like other identity markers, knowledge of class identity and its proper performance influences a variety of social outcomes, which includes, but is not limited to, our inclusion or seclusion from particular groups, communities, events or positions within the social hierarchy.

Unlike class which has very specific and quantifiable stratifications and groupings, sexual identity cannot always be neatly sorted into homosexual, heterosexual, etc. However, the evolution of urban homosexual subcultures have resulted in a broader understanding of how sexuality is, or is expected to, be performed within certain communities. In the essay, "Studying Sexual Subcultures" Gayle Rubin writes about the history of research on homosexuality within psychology, anthropology, sociology, and other academic disciplines. Spanning multiple time periods, it is only within the last century that the study of sexual identity has moved into the realm of performativity and away from the normative/deviant binary of sexual identity based on psychoanalytic views on mental health (Rubin 325-328). As Rubin states, the latter half of the

twentieth century ushered in an understanding of the social construction of sexuality, in which sexual identity could be understood through the context of society, history, and culture (330-336). Questions of ontology and existentialism focused on what it meant to be of a particular sexual identity and to exist in community with others who were like, or not like, you.

As ethnographers such as Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy, Mary Gray, and Marlon Bailey explore in their books on sexual identity within different queer communities, the performance of sexuality changes within different cultural and community contexts. Especially due to issues of safety for individuals who do not conform to a heteronormative performance of particular gender identities, many individuals who do not identify as heterosexual perform heterosexuality in public spaces. As Marlon Bailey writes of one of his ethnographic participants in the book *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, many of them have to make decisions about how they choose to perform their sexual and/or gendered identity when making their way back to their homes, cars, or public transit. This is because not performing heterosexuality can result in forms of violence which include anything from verbal insults to physical harm and these interviews shed light on the unique circumstances of survival for queer people of color in urban spaces (Bailey 52-53). As public space is always already delineated as hetero-space, outside of the more private spaces of ballrooms and gay bars, queer people are expected to conform to the ideologies of the heteronormative public sphere.

In contrast to many of the other identity markers, which tend to be more constrained to visible markers, sexuality is not always easy to ascertain by looks alone and is many times explained as a private expression of self which is primarily expressed through sexual acts or beliefs. However, as Tillman-Healey writes in *Between Gay and Straight*, there are many assumptions about the performance of sexual identity in public space due to societal views of

how particular individuals speak and behave. Specifically, the performance of heterosexuality usually involves strict adherences to the ideological norms of one's gender identity, while queer sexuality tends to be read as a subversion of the relationship between biological sex and gender expression. Throughout the book, Tillman-Healey describes the ways in which her and her husband's presence within communal spaces for gay men influences her queer participants ability to engage in a performance of sexual identity which may not be deemed as acceptable within the heteronormative public sphere (65, 81). Tillman-Healey's study of gay male culture also resulted in greater awareness of how actions, such as "public display of heterosexuality" or public displays of affection between opposite gender partners serve as a public performance which asserts the private sexuality of two individuals (104). This performance of sexuality is also unique in its privilege as heterosexual displays of affection are much more widely accepted than queer ones, which can garner unwanted and dangerous attention.

This difficulty around being able to safely perform same sex attraction and queer sexual identity is also covered in Mary Gray's book *Out in the Country*. Focusing on rural communities of queer youth, Gray depicts the lives of queer individuals who do not have spaces like ballrooms or baseball teams to convene in shared queer performativity. Due to this fact, queer youth in rural areas make their own spaces where they can express their identities in spite of the intended uses of those spaces, such as dressing up in drag at the local Walmart. Online spaces and digital media also play an important role in the formation of an authentic queer identity for these youths. Gray writes that rural queer youth latch on to online narratives of queer identity because:

They find comfort and familiarity in the narratives of realness circulating online . . . more so than fictional characters situated in urban scenes where a critical mass of LGBT

visibility is taken for granted, these stories resonate with the complex negotiation of visibility and maintaining family ties that consume rural young people's everyday lives. These digitally circulated representations of LGBT identity categories interpellate rural queer youth by laying down a basic narrative for the articulation of identity. (123)

In interviews with her participants, Gray gathers that the representations that they found online are "both resonances of their own experiences and evidence that others like them existed beyond their small communities" (123).

This search for what J. Halberstam calls "queer realness" online is also seen within queer communities of color who are regularly left out of networked narratives of LGBTQ+ lives (Gray 124-125). These individuals look online to find representations of themselves and information about what it means to look, act, and be queer, which Gray describes as "research" (129). Unlike Gray's rural youth participants, many queer of color individuals seek out urban narratives set in big cities as a reflection of their own day to day lives and communities or as a potential place to call home. They also look for fictional representations of themselves in lieu of the mostly white homogeneity of network television. In this sense, online spaces not only become a space for queer performativity, where those who don't see themselves represented offline go to do research on what it means to be queer, but also a space for shared recognition where they can perform and unpack queer identity with the support and acceptance of others who look like them.

Quare Shared Recognition and Intersectional Performativity

As Gil Valentine and Tracey Skelton write in their article "Finding oneself, losing oneself: The lesbian and gay 'scene' as a paradoxical space," "it is not enough for us to perform an identity, these articulations of who we are must be read and accepted by others before an identity can be said to have been truly take on" (854). For many LGBTQ+ individuals, queer

spaces, described by Valentine and Skelton as “the scene,” provide “an alternative framework of identity, social allegiance, and support” (853). These “different types of scene venues [also] serve as important transitional spaces in numerous ways” (853). Through the construction of queer performance and identity making, queer counterpublics online act as new scenes for LGBTQ+ individuals to coalesce and affirm their identities through shared recognition. It is in these scenes that queer individuals learn about themselves and who they want to be, outside of the expectations to conform to a heteronormative performance of self.

By understanding the role that shared recognition plays in the performance of self online, it is also important to stress the intersectional nature of performativity. As I have argued, sexuality is influenced by multiple factors (race, class, gender, etc), as well as the privilege and normativity that comes with those intersections. As Ruth Goldman suggests, queer theory, which can be simply understood as the way that we read and discuss sexual difference, is influenced by various layers of privilege. She writes in her essay that:

The focus on lesbian and gay sexualities, and a constructed silence around race, operate to establish part of the norm within queer theory. Another part of the norm that needs to be addressed involves class. . . Queer theory has consistently failed to make its case outside of a rather narrow academic community – largely because the ‘norm’ in queer theory is also about privilege” (178-179)

Conversations around sexual identity, and the language that is created and used to discuss it, tend to be based within racially homogenous academic cultures. From this perspective, individuals of less privileged intersectional identities are largely left out of conversations about their own identity formation. This exclusion results in a hierarchy within groups, where certain individuals

of particular classed/educational/racial backgrounds have access to identity language that others in the same group might not.

In the book *Female Masculinity*, J. Halberstam discusses these intra-group differences within lesbian communities by stating that “there are different silences and different forms of invisibility in relation to different lesbian bodies, and whereas some lesbians feel shrouded in silence, others feel overexposed and hyper-visible” (115). For white lesbians, there can be a certain silence around their sexuality, as white lesbians tend to “invest exclusively in this construction of lesbian sex as elusive, apparitional, silent, and intangible” (115). In contrast:

Lesbians of color tend to be stereotyped along racial, as well as sexual lines: the black lesbian, for example, is often stereotyped as the butch bulldagger or as sexually voracious, and so it makes no sense to talk about such a construction in terms of invisibility and spectrality. (114)

This difference in visibility is not only tied to race, but an individual’s gender expression and how the intersection of different identity markers work together to determine one’s ability to freely and safely move within the world and through various communities.

In many cases, societal acceptance and understanding around intersectional identity operates as a rule of two i.e. society tends to only understand the intersection of two marginalized identities at the same time without incoherence or impunity. For example, while the performance of Black womanhood may go unquestioned on the street, an outwardly queer Black women may feel that their identity performance is more closely scrutinized. At the same time, inclusion within a higher class stratification changes the reception of both of these identity markers. From this standpoint, individuals who operate within a matrix of intersecting marginalized identities are confined to the margins of the other communities to which they

belong, a phenomenon which Marlon Bailey describes as “intersectional marginalization” (186). Intersectional marginalization is especially seen towards those who chose to perform “gender and sexual nonconformity” within the public sphere (186). Therefore, the performance of identity for queer men and women of color is especially important, due to the risks and rewards of enacting an intersectional identity performance.

In contrast to intersectional marginalization, the rule of two also applies to the intersection of privileged and marginalized identities in what I call intersectional inauthenticity. For those individuals who come from particularly privileged positions or positions that are viewed as different, the authenticity of their role within a marginalized position tends to be questioned and potentially viewed as inauthentic based on the discursive formation of said identity. For example, as seen in Johnson’s discussion of slang, educated and/or upper class (privileged position) Black Americans may have the authenticity of their Black identity (marginalized position) questioned by others within the group if they speak differently. Similar to intersectional marginalization, intersectional inauthenticity also occurs amongst queer people of color, whose sexual or gender nonconformity may result in a heightened policing of their performance of self within the various identity groups that they belong to or a refusal to allow their experiences to representatively speak on their particular intersectional identity.

On Lesbian Identity and Performance

As Arlene Stein writes in her essay “Becoming Lesbian: Identity Work and the Performance of Sexuality”, “when one becomes a lesbian, gendered bodily significations of hairstyle, clothing, and even comportment are problematized. Lesbians tend to be members of, or at least travelers through, both heterosexual and the homosexual worlds” (86). Therefore,:

in order to live, work, and love, they must satisfy the requirements of both worlds. In the straight world they must 'pass' as straight, or at least develop a self-presentation that marks them as female. In the lesbian world they must conform to different norms of membership. (Stein 86)

This ability to pass through both worlds requires a form of queer performance that is both covert and explicit. As Marlon Bailey writes, existing in both worlds requires a "double labor" which includes both "the work of material survival and the work of self-presentation through the performance of gender and sexual disguise" (Bailey 54). This double labor can also be understood as the work that it takes to enact a heteronormative sexual and gendered performance to those outside of the queer community while also being able to communicate one's sexual identity to those within the queer community.

Similar to the coded language of slang within other communities, queer identity also operates using certain types of language, dress, and codes in order to mark certain individuals as insiders or outsiders. Valentine and Skelton describe this performance as "the look" which is put together based on the expression of one's identity on the queer scene (855-857). Within queer women's communities much of this performance is based in gender expression, and Arlene Stein writes that "the codification and eroticization of gendered differences have long been a central part of lesbian subcultures," as the "most visible manifestations of lesbian 'gender' is tied to appearance" (Stein 86). In addition, J. Halberstam states that "in the second-half of the twentieth century, it has been the butch-femme couple that has signified and made visible and articulate an active and complex desire between women" (115). While not all lesbians fall into this dichotomy, and many operate somewhere in between, the performance of masculinity (butch)

and femininity (femme) within the lesbian community becomes incredibly important when thinking about the role of visibility/invisibility in the construction of a sexual identity.

For many femme presenting women, the performance of a feminine sexual identity tends to be less pronounced due to the connection between the gender performance and the gender itself (although this may or may not reflect cisgender identification). For masculine presenting women, the recognition of this presentation is at many times conflated with a queer identity of some sort. For those viewing and interpreting the masculine woman's performance of gender there is something inherently queer or strange about a woman in what is classified as men's clothing or mannerisms, despite one's sexual or gender identity. In this sense, lesbian women who perform a masculine, or butch, gender presentation must negotiate a politics of recognition when deciding to deal with risking their mental and physical safety by performing an identity that is visually recognized as queer. While these issues of safety tend to become salient on the street, these issues also reoccur in online spaces where the performance of gender takes on different forms of visibility.

Pushing back against the view that there are major differences between the performance of self online and offline, Mikhel Proulx writes in his article "Protocol and Performativity: Queer Selfies and the Coding of Online Identity":

For all of us who enter social media networks, we find not the denaturalized, disembodied digital space purported to offer a liberating anonymity. Rather, this hope for invisibility of the body has been replaced by a requirement of its hypervisibility. Being linked in to social media protocols means being always connected, always participating in the unceasing assembly of digital information for which we are constantly performing. (114-115)

This discursive formation, which surrounds the performance of self in the offline world, also influences those same performances online. Lori Kendall writes in her internet ethnography *Hanging out in the Virtual Pub*, that “Online identity practices [also] demonstrate how particular race, gender, and class identities wield greater power and receive more benefits than others” (138).

Tying together these various forms of identity performance and discursive formations, we can understand that while there are myriad ways that one can perform identity, there are still expectations of what that performance will look like in order for a particular identity to be recognized. Through language, dress, mannerisms, knowledge, and many other markers, the self puts on a front which communicates its identity matrix to other individuals. This front could be used to confer authenticity and group belonging or it can be used as a mask to blend in or infiltrate another group or situation. In any case, it is through the understanding of socially constructed performances offline that we can come to understand how those same identities are read and performed online.

On *The Peculiar Kind*: Racial Formation and Performativity Offline/Online

Through analyzing the conversations within and around the series *The Peculiar Kind*, we can begin to think about the relationship between the performance of identity for queer women of color in offline and online space. As a queer of color web series set in New York City, *The Peculiar Kind* (2012-2014) presents a way of understanding how queer women of color think about their own gender performativity by representing and discussing the continuum of female expressions of gender identity. Forming a coterie of one on one semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and activist news segments, *The Peculiar Kind* was initially created as YouTube docu-

series by Alexis Casson and has recently been transformed into a documentary that investigates the lives of queer women of color through their own eyes and perspectives.

In Episode No.2 titled “The Abstract”, the episode begins with a statement from a Black woman named Ema Lu, who is talking directly to the camera. She states that as someone from “the South” she has noticed that within queer communities there are a lot of “heteronormative relationships” i.e. relationships that reflect the ideologies and appearance of a gender binary despite their same sex status. Therefore, she wants to hear the women of *The Peculiar Kind* discuss “femininity” and “masculinity” in order to push forward the idea that “there is no specific qualification for what that means”. The episode then cuts to a black screen with white letters stating “Ema Lu: This One’s For You” (Casson “The Abstract”).

What follows is an almost 20 minute long episode comprised of semi-structured interviews and focus groups between the women on how the gender binary seeps into same sex relationships and the ways in which the performance of gender is constructed based on intersectional identities and in relation to one’s environment. Within this episode the women not only communicate with the interviewer behind the camera, but with each other, deconstructing and building upon the meanings that they have formed around the issues of gender roles, performance, language, and the construction of masculinity and femininity.

Gender Roles versus Gender Performance

One of the major issues within this episode, within queer web series, and within the encompassing queer community is the muddled differentiation between gender roles and gender performance. In the interview portion of *The Peculiar Kind*, Jag, a Black woman with a low fade haircut, explicitly states that she has a “problem with gender roles” because “gender roles . . . tells a woman what a woman is supposed to be or what a man is supposed to be” and “as soon as

a woman steps out of the norm of what a woman is supposed to be, then she's a butch, she's a bitch" (Casson "The Abstract"). For Jag, gender roles are predicated on a gender binary which is oppressive to women by assigning them to not only a specific gender, but a script that coincides with that gender. If a woman chooses to operate outside of the gender binary then she is labeled as deviant, a butch or a bitch. For Jag, and Ema Lu, there is a need to transcend gender roles in order to have the freedom to be one's self. However, Crystal, a masculine presenting Latina, responds with the fact that we are all shaped by gender roles in "really fundamental ways" and while we can "think critically" about those roles we are still shaped by them. For Crystal, gender roles are not inherently oppressive but are simply one framework for interpreting and constructing gender within society (Casson).

Even from these two perspectives, there is still some confusion around what constitutes gender roles and gender expression or performance. Are they the same thing? Is one problematic while the other is laden with potential? In order to think through these two ways of envisioning the interpellation of gender, one stating that gender roles are always oppressive so we must transcend them and the other stating that there is no way to get out of the bind of the gender binary, we can use an understanding of performance and performativity to work through the potential of complicating sexual and gender identity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler problematizes the idea of gender expression by stating that:

The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the

postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. (Butler 180)

From this quote, we can see how gender as performative is constitutive of policing gender, the performance of gender, and the gender binary from which we understand how we want to perform. In the essay “Critically Queer”, Butler also writes that “there is no subject who is ‘free’ to stand outside these norms or to negotiate them at a distance” (Butler 22). The performative nature of gender does not allow one’s subjective gender performance to stand alone, as an expression of one’s true self. Instead, gender performativity is already based on the repetitive norms of performance, or discursive formation, which serve to fix the gender binary. Yet, within these norms there is still the possibility of transgressing and subverting them. Even with this potential, those who wish to subvert gender norms must still be conscious of the ways that a subversion of normative gender identity can also re-inscribe the very binary they are attempting to subvert.

From this perspective, the difference between gender roles and gender performance can be seen through the lens of discourse and normativity. There is a common sense belief within society that the gender binary is a real thing that maps onto subjects based on differences in biological sex i.e. heteronormativity or “gender reality” (Butler “Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” 13-15). While it is easy to state that the performance of non-normative gender identity or forming a gender queer identity would subvert those norms, that same subversion also has the capability of reinforcing a gender binary. This can be seen when the binary is simply reversed (privileging one gender over the other) or by privileging masculinity in a different form (not problematizing the ways in which masculine women perform their gender identity). These concepts also exist within intersectional concerns as well, and as the interviews in *The Peculiar*

Kind continue the performance of masculinity and queer identity is called into question (Cohen 35-38).

The Butch/Femme Binary

For many of the women, the relationship between gender roles and gender performance also brought up questions of sexuality and queer relationships. As Ivette, a femme Latina who is in a relationship with Crystal states, “There’s a difference between gender expression and your sexual orientation” so we must be aware “when we are making judgments about a person’s behavior and sexual orientation based on the way they dress [because] that’s where the problem begins” (Casson). For Ivette, the question of gender performance is not just about whether or not one’s gender performance can be separated from the power structures that reinforce gender normativity, but also pertains to the ways that individuals read or recognize queer identity. In speaking about her relationship with Crystal, Ivette states that while people might look at them as just “another butch/femme” couple within the private sphere their relationship has more nuance than that (Casson). For Ivette, her performance of a femme gender identity is subversive despite the fact that it builds upon the normative conventions of femininity because she is not the stereotypical passive, weak, and vulnerable woman (especially in relation to how she expresses her sexuality). Ivette’s performance of femininity disrupts the belief in a gender reality where what we see is what we know, by embracing what Roderick Ferguson might call a radical politics of invisibility (Ferguson 127). Operating as a femme woman of color, Ivette’s queer identity is hidden in plain sight, dismissing the need for visibility. In fact, Ivette describes the legibility of her femme performance when determined as queer by outsiders being conditioned on whether or not she is read in relation to Crystal i.e. “another butch/femme” couple or if the

interpreter personally knows her from the private sphere of queer counter-publics and community (Casson).

This notion of radical invisibility also speaks to the ways in which the intersections of identity can work together to conceal one's identity from one group of people, while making it widely known to another group. Marlon Bailey writes about how his participants are able to leverage their racial identity in order to conceal their sexual identity when commuting on the streets of Detroit. As Bailey states:

Because the black body is read through and within a visual epistemology in which race, gender, and sexual hierarchies are corporeal, Ballroom members refashion themselves by manipulating their embodiments and performances in ways that render them visible and remarkable within the Ballroom scene . . . while being invisible and unmarked in the world outside of it. (Bailey 57)

Specifically, one of Bailey's participants relays that he uses stereotypes of Black masculinity and his inhabitation of a large Black male body to conceal his gay identity on the street (57-59). In the same way, when Ivette walks down the street her appearance as a feminine Latina conceals her identity as a queer woman, as a queer sexuality is less expected from a woman of color.

Within the series, Crystal is able to leverage that same identity to fashion herself in a performance which allows more of her identity intersections to come to light through a shared recognition between herself and the other cast members. As Mignon Moore writes in her ethnography of Black lesbian community in New York, *Invisible Families*, "context is essential to the way in which gender presentation is received" (68). For example:

A woman walking down 125th street in Harlem or Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn wearing an athletic jersey and baggy jeans will not be immediately identified as gay just because

of the way that she is dressed, but when she steps into a convention center or nightclub filled with other lesbians, those same clothes will reveal her membership in a distinct gender display category. (Moore 68)

This is because, the various forms of sexual and gendered performance “have the most meaning when they are presented in a context” in which other queer women of color are present to read one’s position within the continuum of masculine to feminine gender performance (68).

While Ivette considers her butch/femme relationship with Crystal as doing more than reinforcing a gender binary, Kristin, a feminine presenting woman who also describes her queer identity as operating under the surface of her appearance, questions the presentation of a butch/femme relationship. In her interview, she states that growing up in New Orleans, “being gay was very heteronormative and the idea of femme women paired back with masculine women” was expected. She goes on to state that “I think growing up in that environment that had a lot to do with the fact that I’m ridiculously attracted to masculine women” (Casson). For Kristin, the butch/femme relationship pairing influences how she sees her own sexuality as a lesbian, because she has learned to only imagine herself romantically involved with a masculine woman. In thinking about blackness, Kristin goes on to talk about an exhibit she went to where black male masculinity was being discussed through the lens of “regulatory blackness” or the idea that when you operate outside of the norms of blackness “you are considered to be no longer Black” (Casson). Kristin immediately applies this concept to queerness, in which “regulatory queerness [becomes] a controlled or directed expectation of queer identity or expression according to rule, principle, or law”. In other words, if you transgress the codes of queer you cannot be seen as queer (Casson).

This regulatory queerness is essentially limiting, and as Sara, another interview participant states:

We try to step away from heterosexual society, white middle class society defining us as queers but then you go into queer society and we're sitting here pointing fingers like 'oh, she's not gay enough', 'oh, they're in a heterosexual relationship' . . . like no, everyone in their relationship they're going to define things the way they want to define things"

(Casson).

Kristin reiterates this claim by stating that she feels that some of her relationships would not be recognized as "queer enough" within queer society (Casson). From this perspective, while queer as a term seems to represent so many possibilities, the term can also limit and police the individuals that it is attempting to liberate through assumptions around the proper performance of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Taking Cathy Cohen's suggestions for improving queer politics, it is only through "complicating our understanding of both heteronormativity and queerness" which allows us to "move one step closer to building the progressive coalition politics that many of us desire" (Cohen 37). While this complication has been embraced by many of the women in this docu-series, their queer politics and practices are still in the process of being negotiated with each statement that they make about queer/lesbian identity.

Generational Differences

Milla (aka Hubba), a masculine presenting woman, presents her progressive queer politics by discussing her role in relationships as different than the types of roles inhabited by other masculine-presenting Black women (Casson). Describing herself as "co-dominant", instead of dominant, she discusses the generational differences between Black lesbians and the

presentation of the self. Milla specifically states that one can differentiate younger Black lesbians from older lesbians because:

They [older Black lesbians] really were at a time where they didn't have the privilege to have the progression and queer culture that we have . . . the community and the unity, especially with women of color you can see it because they look like these men . . . and they're not trans, they're women but you can tell from like their age, even the stuff that they wear" that they are a part of this older generation. (Casson)

This difference in generation as informing one's gender performance is also seen with the women of *The Peculiar Kind's* impetus in promoting freedom of expression and in Audre Lorde's discussion of Black lesbians in her book *Zami*. As Lorde states "Most Black lesbians were closeted" therefore operating under the cloak of invisibility because they recognized "the Black community's lack of interest in our position, as well as the many more immediate threats to our survival as Black people in a racist society" (Lorde 224). She goes on to write that "if you were fool enough to" walk around the streets or into gay bars as a queer Black woman then "you'd better come on so tough that nobody messed with you" (224). For Lorde, in particular, not fitting neatly into the butch or femme side of the lesbian binary was difficult, especially within a world where Black women were always already identified as masculine. In addition, Lorde describes the butch Black lesbian women as tough in a way that she never could be, but we can also think about how for the women in *The Peculiar Kind* this older generation of Black lesbians are tough in a way that the new generation doesn't necessarily have to be. While Black women still have to navigate a mostly white LGBT community, as Milla states, her generation has also had the privilege of being able to form identity within a queer of color community in which difference is not necessarily read as oppositional or as threat.

Yet the intersections of racism and sexism still come into play within the queer community because, as Lorde states, “By white America’s racist distortions of beauty, Black women playing ‘femme’ had very little chance. . . There [was] constant competition among butches to have the most ‘gorgeous femme’ on their arm. And ‘gorgeous’ was defined by a white male world’s standards” (Lorde 224). Black lesbian women in the mid 20th century were immediately put into the box of masculinity due to their racial identity despite how they might have seen themselves. Therefore, Black lesbian women were marginalized by not being seen as feminine or beautiful. These views persist and we can see how a gender binary might be complicated by queer women of color who now identify as femme, because they are inhabiting a role that has been systematically denied to them throughout history i.e. the appearance of and recognition as a beautiful feminine woman. In *The Peculiar Kind*, Milla acknowledges that the association between Black women and masculinity puts Black women in a box, “Masculinity is [still] associated with power” (Casson). Especially as women of color have been disempowered throughout history (when adding intersections of class, ability, and sexuality), there is a sense that inhabiting a masculine position also brings a sense of empowerment similar to that which was expressed by Ivette in exhibiting a feminine presentation.

Complicating Power Dynamics

However, being empowered by inhabiting the masculine role or being the more dominant partner in the relationship should not go unquestioned. Even within queer communities of color issues around power and privilege are still present. As Crystal states in discussing her choice to present herself as a masculine woman within the world, it is important to think about the role of “privilege in the examples of masculinity that you have to build off of, as a masculine identified woman you look to your community, your community usually of men in order to build your

masculinity and I think for people of color that means you have a lot of bad examples” (Casson).

Crystal goes on to state that:

I learned how to be masculine from my father . . . and while we can talk about gender roles being really insidious or like doing a lot of bad things, it’s also for me about how I feel powerful moving in the world, and it’s not femininely, its masculine-ly and um there’s no clear way to define what masculine is but you know it when you see it and that’s the way that I like to be perceived and I think for a lot of masculine people of color the way to be perceived as masculine is to act the way the men that they see around them act. (Casson)

From this statement, we can understand that masculine presentation is visibly queer i.e. “you know it when you see it” and it is predicated on a conscious self presentation that is meant to give the women presenting this identity the power to move freely within the world. At the same time, Crystal later states that this performance “can be destructive” and brings up issues of race and class in relation to the problematic images of Black and Brown men that queer women of color are using to construct their own identities. These concerns bring up the questions: What does it mean to desire and enact power within a world in which you are disempowered? How do Black women (especially Masculine identified women of color) deal with the visualization of themselves as similar to Black and Brown men who operate within a stigmatized and criminalized masculinity? Especially in a situation in which you only have access to male role models, how do we safeguard the performance of masculinity within queer communities from the possible misogyny and oppression that may be exhibited by men within communities of color? While this is not to say that all men of color exhibit these characteristics, I am using these

questions to think through how power dynamics play out and are articulated within the discursive communities of study.

This view of masculine identity as a performance learned from the father or similar patriarchal role models and enmeshed in power dynamics, also maps onto Homi Bhaba's understanding of mimicry and the learned performance of identity by the colonial subject from the colonizer. As Bhaba writes in the essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse":

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*, in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (126)

While the mimicry of patriarchal masculinity by masculine queer women can be seen as a recreation of that gender performance, the fact that the performance is enacted by a queer woman creates a slippage which positions the butch/femme binary outside of the heteropatriarchal gender binary. Through this slippage, viewing the performance of masculinity by women as a form of mimicry demonstrates the potential for a masculine performance to subvert the norms of patriarchal dominance, by exposing the extent to which a gender performance is learned and enacted. Ivette (Crystals partner) also believes that "within communities of color we tend to emulate a certain form of masculinity" and "the way we emulate masculinity and the way it is created is a result of us being systematically marginalized in our community" (Casson). This intersectional marginalization results in part with many lesbian women inhabiting a masculine role not just for reasons related to self presentation, but also in order to feel power within a world where these women are constantly disempowered. While this could be potentially empowering

for masculine presenting women, we can also see how power can be abused in butch/femme relationships, as dominance over one's partner can result in issues of financial and emotional control, domestic violence, etc.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Comments

Many of the topics of discussion seen in the second episode of *The Peculiar Kind* are taken up by the viewers, in addition to their own responses to specific statements within the series. Of the 54 comments for this episode, the following four major themes are discussed: a continuation of “gender roles/gender expression”, “education/class privilege”, “cultural differences” between queer people of color from different countries and states, and the topic of the series offering a “learning space” for viewers who do not usually have access to discussions on sexual identity. Through analyzing these comments, it also becomes evident that the role that performance/performativity plays in the lives of the series participants are also relevant in the online realm, as users make similar statements around the formation of queer identity. By offering an understanding of Queer Shared Recognition as performative, the viewers engage in actively making of their own queer selves through their readings of intersectional identity performance in the show's series and assign values to the important work that the show is doing to offer a platform for queer women of color.

Gender Roles/Gender Expression

Continuing the conversation on gender roles versus gender expression outside of the series content, viewers of the series also point out the nuances between the two terms which many of the series participants were unable to reconcile. As the commenter Nina pointed out “It's important to distinguish gender ROLE from gender EXPRESSION - a couple of the speakers got it confused.” In response to this statement, another commenter echoed the

statements made by some of the series participants by stating “And Gender performance. It's all slavery. Lol”. Building on her own experience with gender roles in the lesbian community, Nina responds to this comment by writing:

Gender roles are so difficult to get away from and I hate it cause sometimes I'll judge a gay/lesbian couple a bit on it and I don't like that I do that. BUT the femme and butch thing I know for lesbian couples (some) is like kind of something that's expected and most studs/butch/doms I know only conform to that masculine gender role and I think it hinders them from a lot of new experiences.

Like many of the series participants, Nina understands that it is difficult to move away from gender roles, not only within heteronormative society, but within queer relationships. Similar to the regulatory queerness explained by Sara, Nina writes that she doesn't like that she judges the performance of gender roles within queer communities as regressive but she also believes that engaging in gender roles tends to limit one's ability to express yourself fully. Reminiscent of the popular internet hashtag “Masculinity so fragile,” Nina points out how limiting it can be to constantly play the masculine role.

Complicating the readings of masculinity and femininity within different societal contexts, another commenter writes that:

I've often had issues with the ideas of butch/femme/masculine/feminine because *what constitutes* gender and gender roles seems to be very region-specific; in larger queer society it seems to be very Western-dominant. For example, what people tend to define as "queer femme" is pretty much every woman in my family tree - and a prevailing quality is *dominance*, which (as this video shows) tends to be "masculine" elsewhere. Whereas the men were often vain - "feminine" in the West, normal at home.

From this comment, as well as comments made within the series, gender roles and the expression of one's gender are different both within and outside of a western context. Coming from a non-Western perspective, this commenter states that in her family and culture, to be feminine is to be dominant and to be masculine is to be more concerned with one's looks. In contrast, a western understanding of the feminine/masculine binary would flip those performances. Within the series this is also understood through participants who come from the Southern United States in comparison to those from other areas. For these participants, strict adherence to a butch/femme performance of sexual and gendered identity is more so expected in the South in comparison to the North, demonstrating the important role that regionality plays in the performance of identity.

Education/Class Privilege

The second theme that was seen throughout the comments section, was a conversation on the performance of education and class within the series, as well as the role that privilege plays in the articulation of queer identity and performance. Initially, the commenter Hoya writes about the series:

I liked it but I was disappointed that there was not a wider range of people used -- obviously most of the speakers are educated and/or have a middle/upper middle class background. Poor, uneducated queer people of color have something to say that is of value as well.

Due to the use of somewhat academic and theoretical language from many of the women in the series, the commenter Hoya assumes that the series participants are obviously educated or from a privileged class background. Expressing a valid point, she calls out the series for not reflecting a more diverse segment of the queer of color population, which should include individuals who are

not as articulate or well-read when it comes to the language of feminism and the politics of race, gender, and sexual performance.

Pushing back against this view, another commenter writes in response “I think it was very important for them to present educated queer people of color. Seeing as we are so often thought to be uneducated and inarticulate by most of society.” Although it is important to include a wide breadth of voices and standpoints when discussing queer women of color, there is also something to be said about representing individuals who are able to clearly articulate their lived experiences as queer women of color. Although it may seem as if the creators are privileging individuals from a particular educational background, this commenter explains the importance of having role models who do not fit the mold of what society expects when thinking about young, queer women of color living in Brooklyn, New York.

In response to this comment, Hoya initially agrees with the commenter’s statement by writing that “It is important to present educated QPOC -- I’m not disputing that.” But goes on to write that:

My point was use queer people of color from a lower socioeconomic status as well as educated, middle/upper middle class queer people of color. Queer people of color from a higher socioeconomic status are being valued more, implicitly, in this vid via only them being able to express their viewpoints.

While Hoya can see the importance of representing good role models, by seemingly leaving out individuals from a lower socioeconomic class, or those who are less educated, *The Peculiar Kind* is falling prey to the same privileging of education and class seen in academic writings about queer women which leave out the perspective and voices of different race, class, and ability backgrounds.

Following this exchange, the channel “The Peculiar Kind” begins to engage in the conversation in response to the viewer Hoya, by stating “+Hoya We find it very interesting that you're assuming the socioeconomic status, education and class of the folks in this series... you'd be surprised. You should give all folks (not just this cast) more credit.” After being called out for their assumptions, Hoya maintains their previous position by stating “You say I'd be surprised. I would be, I suppose, if I actually knew their backgrounds. What are their backgrounds, if you don't mind me asking? As of right now I will stick to my assumptions until proven otherwise. I mean no harm.”

The Peculiar Kind channel responds by directing Hoya to more detailed information about the series and cast members by writing:

+Hoya There are brief descriptions of our cast members on our website and in a few episodes you learn more about each casts members upbringing (for instance you'll learn in S2 EP. 3 that Ivette and her family were homeless for a time, Ivette went to school by applying to gov't programs). Class and education don't always reflect how or why someone is articulate or aware of the language used to help them understand their personal identity. I, Alexis (speaking for myself here), feel as one of the creators of the show that there is room for all kinds of queer outlets. I can't imagine anyone asking another youtube show to feature more educated and articulate folks on their show, you just can't please everyone.

From this response, it is revealed that the individual commenting on behalf of the channel is the director of the series Alexis Casson. Seemingly referencing Mary Pattillo’s commentary on the performance of class, Casson responds to Hoya’s assumptions about the cast’s class and educational backgrounds by stating that they are just that, assumptions. Speaking to the old

adage that not everything is always as it seems, Casson writes that despite what Hoya may believe about certain types of language, people from different class and educational backgrounds can also use what some may call academic language in their discussion of identity and its performance.

Strangely, there is no immediate response from Hoya after this correction, but what appears to be a year later Hoya responds by stating “+The Peculiar Kind You responded to me nearly a year ago, and I am just now seeing it. My goodness that is odd. I realize I can't have a well-informed opinion until I visit this website and watch more episodes.” This response from Hoya reads as an attempt to save face and perhaps points out issues with the YouTube platform if there was never a notification of Casson's response. While Hoya states that the lesson learned is that it is better to simply gather more information on the series before calling out the creators, it can also be stated that it is best not to make assumptions about an individual's identity based solely on aspects of their performance. Especially in the era of the internet SJW (social justice warrior), the language of feminism, queer studies, and critical race theory have moved into the lexicon of day to day social media interaction. For those within queer communities, the utilization of this language not only displays knowledge, it gives many people the necessary words to articulate their own experiences and understanding of self. In this sense, knowledge is power, giving queer subjects the power to proclaim their identity in definitive and mutually understood terms. In addition, as a form of performance, the ability to use and understand the language of queer identity can be seen as another way for viewers to engage in quare shared recognition, as it acknowledges the value of this type of language while hailing a specific group of individuals.

Hoya's statements also speak to the way(s) that intersectional inauthenticity works within queer communities of color. While the women of *The Peculiar Kind* are a part of the queer community, their use of language results in a commenter calling into question their ability to speak on the issues and experiences of queer people. In this sense, the women's performance of a perceived upper class identity calls into question their authenticity as queer women of color. In terms of representation, Hoya's expectation for the series would be the inclusion of a particular type of woman, demonstrating the role that assumptions based on intersectional identity performance play in who is, and who is not, included in the imagined community of a particular group. Although these expectations of performance do the work of creating identifiable insiders and outsiders to a group, through Hoya's comment we can also see how these expectations can limit the potential of identity performance and acceptance.

Learning Space

Similar to Mary Gray's understanding that rural queer youth use the internet to do research on the performance of queer identity and the articulation of sexuality, Queer YouTube also acts as a learning space for community members of color. Through the construction of the series itself, and by focusing on issues that affect community members, *The Peculiar Kind* models a productive way to have discussions about topics that are important to queer communities of color. Despite the assumption that only those with formal education have access to the language of feminism and queer theory, the following comments show how the YouTube commenting community for *The Peculiar Kind* acts as a space where many individuals can also pick up on and learn the language of queer and feminist theory. Even simple questions such as "What is QPOC?", are promptly answered by other viewers and commenters ("Queer People of Color").

In talking about the series, many commenters also state that the topics discussed on the show have sparked their own interest in having discussions about those same topics with other queer people. As the commenter BerryJewel writes:

. . . the discussion about privilege and race and why the butch/femme dynamic is more popular amongst queer people of color is something that i now want to discuss with my friends and get their opinions on. very thought provoking. in fact, i want to be a part of these discussions! how do you get on the show? Lol [laugh out loud]

In addition, many of the commenters not only think about the series as a discussion starter, but also as the means through which they can reflect on their own queer identity. FinnyValentine writes:

"Dominance doesn't have a sex to it" YES YES YES!! I am often told that I "look" like a femme but I act like a stud, whatever that means. I really enjoyed this video. I wish I had some cool queer and/or lesbian friends with whom I could discuss these things. I love these sorts of conversations.

From these statements, it is apparent that the focus group/interview style of the series allows its viewers to think through what queer performance means and looks like within their own lives and the lives of their friends. As one commenter writes "I Love that this gives us topics to discuss and reflect on ourselves! Just love the show!".

For those who don't have many queer friends, the show also gives viewers a space to comment and discuss issues and ideas that they don't have ready access to in the offline world. As one commenter describes it, watching the series "feels as if I am sitting around talking, listening and watching, some of my close friends talk about issues that I have/am thinking about and things of that nature." In this sense, the series creates the communal and familial ties that are

formed within many queer spaces offline. While many viewers wished they could take part in the discussions somehow, the model has also encouraged other viewers to create their own discussion groups. As one commenter replied “I am going to have a discussion group similar to this, but with a younger group. I hope you guys dont mind me piggy-backing off your idea :-). It just really inspired me”.

Cultural Differences

Differences in viewer reception to the series discussions of privilege and place are also discussed through concerns around cultural differences. Within the first few minutes of Season 1, Episode No.2 of the series, the cast member Jade is asked by the interviewer if she believes that certain queer women have more or less privilege based on their ability to perform a queer identity in their day to day lives. Pushing back against the term “privilege”, Jade states that she doesn’t agree that certain individuals have more or less privilege than her because it seemed like that would be “giving” her “power away” to state that someone had greater social capital or was worth more socially than she was. In response, the interviewer reminds her of another cast member’s statement about living outside of America, who stated that “There’s definitely privilege in it [queer performance], because if I was in South Africa right now I couldn’t say that I would be presenting myself in the same way . . . Cause it’s a safety issue, life and death.” In response, Jade goes on to state that Americans “have it easy” because other countries don’t have basic necessities like “running water” (Casson).

From this statement Jade privileges America and creates a West and the Rest dichotomy in which queer performance in modern New York is liberated while the ability to perform one’s queer identity in Middle Eastern or African countries is restricted and virtually impossible. Upon watching this segment of the series many of the viewers, especially those who identified as South

African, were deeply offended by the statement. One commenter agrees with the statements made by the cast members, but not the delivery, by writing that:

I am South african and it's weird when you hear such negative comments about [your] country. It is hard to even consider coming out in south africa as a black women, especially when you are bi-sexual. Americans do not have an idea how blessed they are to live in a country were you are free to be who you are.

Taking into account the difficulty of acknowledging bisexuality, this commenter does not take issue with the assumption that Americans are more privileged based on her own difficulties in her country of origin.

In contrast to the cast members and the previous comment, another South African viewer enthusiastically states that:

I LOVE this show! All these women are beautiful and intelligent. I'd just like to say how interesting it was for me, a South African, to hear people's views and their perception that they would be unable to present themselves in a 'certain way' here. I understand where they're coming from, but I see little difference between the queer community here as I see on this show. The diversity here is amazing and I am saddened that we've been painted in a negative light. Well done on an excellent show!

Disagreeing with the view that South Africans do not have freedom in the performance of queer identity, this commenter is also upset by the way that her country is depicted in the series. Based on these differing viewpoints, it is more likely that the statement from the commenter JessLee is the most accurate, as she writes "I'm South African too and I think it really depends whereabouts you live."

Despite the view from some South African viewers that it is easier in America, many Americans disagreed with the sentiment and the way in which it created a binary between the states and other countries. One commenter stated “‘being American is easy...we've got running water'...i found that extremely disrespectful. great conversation though”. Another commenter maintained that the standpoints of the women living in Brooklyn made their understanding of freedom in performing a queer identity one-sided. As another commenter wrote “Love this ladies! But remember: Life isn't easy in "America". Its a bit easier in NEW YORK.” While this statement could be seen as promoting a metronormativity, where urban and rural spaces are set up in a similar dichotomy as the West and the Rest i.e. the urban as modern and free where the rural is depicted as backwards and restrictive, it is likely that in a large city like New York queer performance might not stand out in the same ways as it would in smaller towns. From this theme it is apparent our perceptions of other cultures are not always accurate or productive. In addition, it points out the fact that within queer communities of color regionality seems to play an important role in one’s ability to freely perform a queer identity across states, countries, and continents.

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I have analyzed the ways in which the performance of intersecting identities is articulated and responded to within queer of color web series and commenting communities. In both of these spaces, discourse around sexual, racial, class, and gender identity is presented in a variety of ways, which speaks to the decisions that these women make (and the responses to those decisions from community insiders) when it comes to the performance of their individual identities. Through these conversations and comments, queer shared recognition can be understood as a performative act which allows queer women of color to engage in

performances and discussions of identity that can be supported and acknowledged by other women who understand their identity. As an internet resource, the YouTube comments section for a series like *The Peculiar Kind* becomes a space where these women reflect on the intersectional nature of queer performativity while recognizing the role that assumptions and stereotypes around particular performances play in our understanding of them.

CHAPTER IV

Not Just *Between Women*: The Politics of Sexual Identity within Black Communities

“As black nationalist movements often intersected with sociological discourses and state aims by demanding the gendered and sexual regulation of African American nonheteronormative formations, Black lesbian feminists gravitated toward culture as a means of formulating a political alternative to heteropatriarchal and nationalist constructions of nonheteronormative difference as deviance” - Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 111

“Female masculinity is a particularly fruitful site of investigation because it has been vilified by heterosexist and feminist/womanist programs alike; unlike male femininity, which fulfills a kind of ritual function in male homosocial cultures, female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment” - J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 9

Through the creation of web series, Black queer producers engage in political labor by exposing the issues that come with the performances of sexual and gendered identity within Black and queer communities. In this context, political labor can be viewed as the work that individuals do in order to engage in or propel specific political views, or an overarching ideology, forward. Pushing back against the belief that engaging with identity politics is a divisive strategy, Black queer viewers and producers use the platform of YouTube to propel forth discourse and depictions that present the Black community as both racially unified and

differentiated. Utilizing quare shared recognition, Black queer web series depict individuals from all parts of the sexual, gender, and class continuum in order to expand mediated representations of Blackness and the performance of specific identity categories. In this sense, the power in identity politics rests on the ability of individuals to freely express their identity as they see fit, without fear of reprisal and lack of recognition from others. By analyzing the comments and content for the YouTube series *Between Women*, the discourse around the performance of self and others speak to the politics of identity and representation within Black and queer communities, as well as the role that group insiders and outsiders play in policing the performance of identity within those groups.

Introduction

In the book *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall writes about the significance of the concept of identity arguing that an understanding of both “agency and politics” is essential to understanding why discussions of identity and identity politics are relevant to the study of culture and the media (Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 2). For Hall, identities “ pivotal relationship to a politics of location . . . have characteristically affected all contemporary forms of ‘identity politics’” (Hall 2). By viewing identity positions as locational, as well as political and in need of agency, Hall expresses the view that the politics of identity can be seen through the subject’s ability to inhabit a particular identity based on the freedom to choose how that identity is represented or enacted.

In concert with this view, Craig Calhoun asserts that the political power of identity and self making not only rests in one’s ability to choose how one wants to be seen in the world, but also characterizes how other people see an individual. For Calhoun: ·

Recognition is at the heart of the matter. No matter when and where one looks, subjectivity is perhaps best understood as a project, as something always under construction, never perfect. In varying degrees for different people and in different circumstances it may be more or less challenging, but it is never automatic. A crucial aspect of the project of subjectivity is identity. Identity turns on the interrelated problems of self-recognition and recognition by others. (Calhoun 20)

From this perspective, the fight for identity does not just end with the ability to obtain knowledge about different types of identity in order to embark on a journey of self discovery. The fight for identity also does not end at a proliferation of different types of individuals being represented on screens. The politics of identity hinges on the individual's construction of identity and the expectation that others will recognize said identity as valid and authentic, a reality which is demonstrated through the movement for transgender rights in the United States, for example. From this view, Calhoun writes that:

The pursuits labeled 'identity politics' are collective, not merely individual, and public, not only private. They are struggles, not merely gropings; . . . They involve seeking recognition, legitimacy (and sometimes power) not only expression or autonomy; other people, groups and organizations (including states) are called upon to respond. (Calhoun 21)

In this sense, there is power in the recognition of one's identity, on a variety of levels from communal to institutional. Especially as the nation-state seeks to assert a politics of normativity which does not leave room for much fluidity or complexity in the construction of identity, "identity politics movements are political because they involve refusing, diminishing or

displacing identities others wish to recognize in individuals” (Calhoun 21). For Hall and Calhoun, the politics of identity are existentially the politics of being and one’s right to be in the public, not just the private, sphere.

Despite the importance of being, within society, being is a heavily policed and surveilled construction. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, the values and beliefs that are associated with identity construct the rules of normativity or what it means to be normal in relation to the hierarchy of what is considered normal within society (discourse). This normalizing judgment ingrains the right and wrong ways of acting in particular institutions or social situations and, if you’re caught doing the wrong thing or performing in the wrong way, it also pertains to the levels of punishment for those transgressions. These punishments, which can be penal, social, corporeal, etc, are described as the microphysics of power, or all of the small ways in which power is used to police the society and the body within society (194-195). On a national level, Foucault also writes that the government has “the right of death and power over life” which describes the sovereignty of the state over the body and the fact that the state is allowed to say who literally and figuratively lives and who dies in the prison and in society. This concept is also described as biopower, or biopolitics, as the nation has power over bodies and particular groups or populations. Many times, the sovereignty of the nation also has the power to supercede the sovereignty of individual rights.

In many ways, the biopolitical power of the nation draws attention to the complexity of the politics of recognition and identity formation, as well as the importance of this recognition. In the book *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar utilizes the work of Foucault to describe the role that US imperialism and the racialization of sexual others plays in the post 9/11 political sphere.

Focusing on the recent inclusion of homosexual subjects into the national imaginary in comparison to the last century, Puar states that: ·

There is a transition under way in how queer subjects are relating to nation-states, particularly the United States, from being figures of death (i.e. the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e. gay marriage and families). The politics of recognition and incorporation entail that certain – but certainly not most – homosexual, gay, and queer bodies may be the temporary recipients of the ‘measures of benevolence’ that are afforded by liberal discourses of multicultural tolerance and diversity. (Puar xiii)

These measures of benevolence include, but are not limited to, the social acceptance of queer individuals (such as greater inclusion in mainstream media narratives) and the changes in lawmaking that seek to give them the same rights as heterosexual citizens (such as marriage equality).

Speaking to the complexity of the politics of recognition, Puar also writes that “the contemporary emergence of homosexual, gay, and queer subjects – normativized through their deviance (as it becomes surveilled, managed, studied) rather than despite it – is integral to the interplay of perversion and normativity necessary to sustain in full gear the management of life” (xiii). Pointing out the catch-22 of embracing identity politics, Puar describes the fact that this greater acceptance into society also results in another form of surveillance, where queer citizens are accepted as subjects, but as deviant subjects. It is through their difference that they become normal, “thus one could argue that homosexual desires, and their redirection, are foundational to the project of nationalism, as is the strict policing of the homo-hetero binary, and nations are

heteronormative because of rather than despite homosexuality” (49). Fundamentally, subjects are marked as queer so that they can be read within the context of the public sphere and used to establish heterosexuality as supremely normative. In this sense, a politics of recognition is used to expose identity for the purposes of regulating and exploiting it for communal, national, or capitalist gain.

Within media, this politics of recognition can also be understood as a diversity model of representation that is utilized to create the image of inclusion and heterogeneity in order to garner greater viewership and audience interest which translates into greater profit. For example, Herman Gray writes in the book *Cultural Moves*:

I view the institutional recognition and legitimation of black cultural production (and the media celebrations which have accompanied it) in political terms. That is, I see this recognition and legitimation as an instance in which black cultural production functions as a site of political disputes over representation, meaning, and the valuation of blackness as a cultural expression. This recognition and incorporation of black cultural production by dominant cultural institutions, in other words, might be taken as a strategic move by these institutions. (Gray 15)

Therefore, when operating through a politics of recognition, representation is not solely utilized for the benefit of Black producers or consumers; rather it is deployed to serve the diversity quota for a specific network or cultural production to capitalize on the popularity of Black cultural expression without much concern for Black creators or audiences.

In the book *Open TV* Aymar Jean Christian describes this politics of recognition through

the use of niche marketing by legacy television and the open distribution of independent productions. Christian states that for legacy television networks “Niche marketing ‘targets’ identities for product sales or branding, diluting representations because the marginalized are treated only as potential consumers as opposed to active community members” (Christian 108-109). In contrast to this model, “indie producers release stories on an open distribution system where, with little to no marketing budget, they have to directly reach fans who will connect with and ideally share narratives” (108-109). Independent producers are sincere in their efforts to marginalized communities, while many legacy networks are only using those representations to gain audience interest and market share.

Pushing back against a politics of recognition which hinges on diversity for diversity’s sake, the politics of square shared recognition does not seek out the exposure of a queer identity in favor of a politics of normativity or control. Instead of solely positioning LGBTQ+ individuals as potential market niches or eyeballs to be sold to advertisers, Black queer web series take the stance of giving back to the community that they serve through representation. This political move encourages recognition within counterpublics and between community members, with little regard as to whether recognition is fostered between community insiders and outsiders who do not want to learn about or support queer community members. Despite this fact, identity politics still plays out under the normative politics of recognition within Black communities. Even as individuals form their own relationship to blackness, Black identity is still constructed in relation to culturally constructed notions of an imagined Black community. This relationship between group and individual conceptions of Blackness is even more tenuous when thinking about a legacy of Black Nationalist thought which has sought socio-political and economic liberation for the Black community through a strict adherence to the standards of group identity.

This need for unity is not only based in Black Nationalist thought, but in the struggle over defining Black identity in the media and society. As Herman Gray writes in the book *Watching Race*:

African Americans cultural struggles over the sign of blackness centered on tensions between unity and difference. Could African Americans, especially critical intellectuals and cultural workers, represent the complex and wide-ranging differences of class, color-coding, sexuality, gender, region, and political ideology without compromising the necessity for a public stance of unity? (Gray 46)

This view also begs the question “Does the desire – indeed necessity- for a unified antiracist position based solely on a racial identity and identification with “blackness” come at the cost of repression and containment of deep and growing internal differences?” (46). These questions continue to arise within the movement for Black Nationalism and liberation, as the concerns of women and queer individuals are pushed aside in order to unify the community and dismiss potentially divisive identity politics. Yet, many media producers and thinkers have demonstrated the importance of taking into account our identity differences when practicing a politics of liberation for the Black community.

Black Nationalist Thought and the Politics of Liberation

From its inception, Black nationalist rhetoric centers the normativity of Black masculinity while classifying other identity intersections as inauthentic or queer. By examining the work of multiple Black feminist and postcolonial thinkers, we can reconfigure this Black politics of liberation and representation in order to include all members of the Black community. In the

book *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, Patricia Hill Collins maps out the history and ideology of Black Nationalist thought, as well as arguing the importance of utilizing Black Nationalist thought even in light of its limitations. In defining the beliefs of the movement, Hill-Collins writes that Black nationalist ideology has “three orienting strategies . . . namely, self-definition (cultural), self-determination (political), and self reliance (economic)” of which the “projects for self-definition, the portion of Black nationalist projects devoted to values, culture, and new Black identities” have been the most successful within popular discourse and academic thought (10). Similar to the project of identity politics and recognition, self-definition relates the individual’s struggle to define the self in relation to the larger struggle for recognition of the group within society. In this sense, self-definition works to position Black Americans as individuals who are not only defined in opposition to White Americans. As bell hooks describes in the book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, self-definition is “fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity” as it “is the insistence that we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy” (hooks 22). Instead of “looking to that Other for recognition,” hooks pushes for self-definition to work outside of a binary understanding of identity which simply creates the self in opposition to others. For hooks, self-definition has the possibility to be “recognizing ourselves and willingly making contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner” through building a community of support (22).

In contrast to hooks’ view, Black Nationalist theory tended to reverse the hierarchy of White/Black citizens in order to define itself in ideological opposition to White supremacy in America. Yet overall, the view that to be Black means to be a part of a cohesive group conceived as a small nation within the nation of the US with a shared culture and values is widely embraced

by many Black Americans. Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd writes in her book *Gender, Race And Nationalism In Contemporary Black Politics*, that while not all people believed in the complete ideology of Black nationalism, the movement was successful in its creation of an “imagined community” which “generally suppresses certain aspects of identity in the name of forging a national community” (Alexander-Floyd 22). In *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, And Afrocentrism In the Twentieth Century*, Algernon Austin states that the aspects of Black identity that were included in this imagined community focused primarily on a Black heterosexual masculinity. Specifically, Austin writes that “in the construction of Black Power activists . . . Black men were more likely to be truly ‘Black’ than Black women” (Austin 58). Bringing in the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, Austin goes on to write that “not only was the most authentic blackness male, but the most authentic maleness was ‘Black’ . In the ideological struggle with whiteness, white men were defined as effeminate”, with Black nationalist advocates such as Amiri Baraka being known to use derogatory language for homosexuals in order to describe these types of men (58).

Drawing on other Black cultural theorists, Patricia Hill Collins also describes the reasoning behind the homophobia of specific leaders within the Black Nationalist Movement by writing that:

The homophobia in Black cultural nationalism seems linked to the belief that maintaining a conservative gender ideology is essential for Black families, communities and the Black nation as family. As Henry Louis Gates points out, while the ideology of Black nationalism does not have any unique claim on homophobia, ‘it is an almost obsessive motif that runs through the major authors of the black aesthetic and the Black power movements. (111)

The homophobic views that were expressed by specific Black Nationalists are based in a belief and strict adherence to the important role that a Black nuclear family would play in the ascendancy of the Black community within society. However by positioning Black heteromascularity as the epitome of Black national identity, we can see how many individuals are left out of the imagined community of authentic blackness.

As Frances E. White writes in her illuminating Black feminist text *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, Black nationalists have utilized Afrocentrism in order to invent an “African past to suit their conservative agenda on gender and sexuality” (White 121). Building on the respectability politics that police the construction and performance of race, gender, class, and sexuality within the Black community, the discourses of religion, Black nationalism, etc have resulted in the exclusion of certain types of Black men and women within the Black community (14-30). As bell hooks writes in the book *Yearning*, this “insistence on patriarchal values, on equating black liberation with black men gaining access to male privilege that would enable them to assert power over black women, was [and still is] one of the most significant forces undermining radical struggle” (hooks 16). hooks proposes that Black liberation will only occur through an investment in a variety of perspectives and standpoints instead of positioning Black heteromascularity as the only authentic voice within the Black community.

In addition, the assumption that the success of the Black community is tied to the sustainment of the Black nuclear family also speaks to what Jasbir Puar describes as “complicit[y] with heterosexual nationalist formations” (Puar 4). Building on the notion that the nation expects productivity of its citizens, complicity with heterosexual nationalist formations would view bearing children, garnering political power within the current political system, and earning economic wealth as the primary functions of the good citizen. While the revolutionary

nature of Black love is well documented, Black Nationalist ideology, with its adherence to a heterosexual family structure, political involvement, and investment in financial independence seems to play into the White heteropatriarchal system of capitalism that a Black radical politics of liberation should be trying to usurp. From this perspective, hooks' position on Black liberation, as a recognition of the self by the self and others who value one's identity is more in line with queere shared recognition, while the ideology of Black Nationalism is operating through a politics of recognition which simply reinforces the individual's adherence to the norms of the nation state in order to earn cultural capital or simply reverse the binary of White Privilege/Black Oppression.

The Possibility of a Black Queer Female Subject

Harkening back to the start of Black nationalism, in the book *Dreaming Blackness*, Melanye T. Price maps the history of the movement and its view that Black people should form one unified nation in opposition to White European nationalities. This view positioned Blackness as an identity diluted by its association with White society and in need of reclaiming a culture and mode of being which was lost through the institution of slavery and colonialism (Price 19-26). In this sense, Black people in America are positioned as diasporic, hybridized and in need of a return to the wholly pure identity that they should have inhabited within a particular nation of Africa. The dichotomy between nation/diaspora within the Black community also works to position queer identity as that which is not native to a more essential understanding of Blackness. Instead, the view that being queer is a White Westernized trait is reinforced through a failure to recognize queer individuals within the Black community.

As Gayatri Gopinath argues in the book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South*

Asian Public Cultures, discourses around nation and diaspora also position the nation-state as pure, whole, and heterosexual, while the diaspora is seen as impure, queer, and hybridized. In Gopinath's discussions of the queer diasporic subject, she also writes that for non-queer subjects "the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora" is still alive and well (Gopinath 15). Notions of queerness and queer sexuality, within many countries, is viewed as an influence of ideologies from Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This same viewpoint can also be seen when thinking about the ways in which queer sexuality is seen within the Black community. As Patricia Hill-Collins writes in *From Black Power to Hip Hop*, "Overall, those Black women who fail to have children or who reject the gender politics of the heterosexist nuclear family, face being labeled traitors to the race, too 'White,' or lesbians" (111).

Rejecting the impossibility of the queer female diasporic subject, Gopinath writes about her methods for reading this particular subjectivity by stating that "a queer diasporic formation works in contradistinction to the globalization of 'gay' identity that replicates a colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all 'other' sexual cultures, communities, and practices against a model of Euro-American sexual identity" (11). For Gopinath, queer is just as native to diasporic identities as it is to European-American identity. Like hooks, Gopinath seeks to define a queer of color identity not just in opposition to White queer identity (which tends to label any difference as deviant and backwards), but as operating within its own genealogies and cultural traditions. In addition, "by making female subjectivity central to a queer diasporic project" Gopinath "begins instead to conceptualize diaspora in ways that do not invariably replicate heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship and community" (Gopinath 6). Moving outside of the binary nature of understanding performance and identity, Gopinath

centers the standpoints of female subjects in order to establish an understanding of queer female diasporic identity that is not being judged based on the norms of heterosexual and/or male identity. Similar to the project of quare shared recognition, “these alternative strategies suggest a mode of reading and ‘seeing’ same-sex eroticism that challenges modern epistemologies of visibility, revelation, and sexual subjectivity” (12).

Instead of reading the performances, experiences, and representation of all women of color through the lens of heteropatriarchy, Gopinath reads the narratives of women of color through a queer diasporic framework which places the reality of female sexuality, desire, and caring at the forefront. In many ways, Gopinath’s framework for reading cultural texts in South Asia aligns itself with Black feminism. In their well-known statement, the Combahee River Collective declared the role of Black feminist thought as working to develop a “politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men” (266). In addition, this “political realization . . . comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women’s lives” which should be centered and seen as valuable (266). As Patricia Hill Collins states in the book *Black Feminist Thought*, a Black feminist analysis centers the experiences of Black women through a Black feminist lens, in contrast to relying on White feminist thought, binary oppositions, or a patriarchal understanding of race, gender, class, etc identity (v-xii).

In both Gopinath’s queer diasporic framework and Patricia Hill Collins’ Black feminist analysis, the role of identity politics is positioned as important to the liberation of women of color through a focus on their oppression and lived realities in methods of critical analysis and political thought. As the Combahee River Collective statement expresses:

Focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics comes directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women, this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. (268)

In this sense, the concept of quare shared recognition exists in tandem with the views of Black Feminist, Third World, and Queer thought through the importance of valuing the experiences of both oppression and liberation for women of color. These experiences are not only valued in relationship to the public heteropatriarchial communities that many of these women inhabit, but through an examination of the private spaces in which Black queer women congregate, love, and learn to value themselves and their identities. This feminist identity politics embraces the mantra that the personal is political, in order to include the lived experiences of sexual, gendered, classed, and regional identities in the construction of a method of reading which draws from a long history of Black liberation and cultural politics.

Quare Shared Recognition as Black Feminist Cultural Politics

In the essay "New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall discusses the role that politics plays in the construction and representation of Black identity. For Hall, the politics of identity begins with "the end of the essential black subject" which brings forth the issue that:

The recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that

‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature. (Hall 444)

Seemingly blending the theory of racial formation with the politics of representation, Hall states that this “entails a weakening or fading of the notion that ‘race’ or some composite notion of race around the term black will either guarantee the effectivity of any cultural practice or determine in any final sense its aesthetic value” (Hall 444). For Hall, the new Black cultural politics not only questions the essentialism of Black identity within society, but the role that centering essentialist notions of blackness plays in media representation. Instead of privileging one subject position (usually a Black cisheteromasculine position), the new cultural politics of representation seeks to include a greater breadth and diversity of characters in order to resist the reductionism of a singular Black experience (Hall 440-450). In this sense, identity is not stationary, but potentially changeable and becoming, being, and representing a particular identity can be viewed as a political act merely by representing it within cultural productions such as media texts.

In the book *Yearning*, hooks describes the important role that culture plays in Black liberation and political consciousness by stating that:

It is no mere accident of fate that the ground of current discourse on black subjectivity is cultural terrain. Art remains that site of imaginative possibility where ‘anything goes,’ particularly if one is not seeking to create a hot commodity for the marketplace. Black folks’ inability to envision liberatory paradigms of black subjectivity in a purely political realm is in part a failure of cultural imagination. (hooks 18-19)

For hooks, art and culture offer a world of possibility, especially when it comes to the formation of self and identity. As the well known adage goes: “You can’t be what you can’t see”. By representing a variety of identity formations in the public realm of media, individuals can begin to visualize who and what they can be in the world.

hooks writes that “perhaps the most fascinating conversations of black subjectivity (and critical thinking about the same) emerge from writers, cultural critics, and artists who are poised on the margins” and who all “recognize the primacy of identity politics as an important stage in [the] liberation process” (hooks 19). This view that those on the margins have a unique take on the world, can also be seen within the work of Sandra Harding and the theory of feminist standpoint epistemology. In the book *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*, Harding writes that:

The concept of a standpoint arose from women’s political struggles to see their concerns represented in public policy and in the natural and social science disciplines that have shaped such policy. These epistemologies propose that there are important resources for the production of knowledge to be found in starting off research projects from issues arising in women’s lives rather than only from the dominant androcentric conceptual framework of the disciplines and the larger social order. (Harding 149).

Similar to hooks’ assertion that Black cultural producers on the margins who recognize the political implications of their work are on the cutting edge of conversations around identity and Black liberation, Harding posits that through the centering of women’s lives, standpoint epistemology also brings to light important forms of knowledge that would be overlooked within work that centers a white heteropatriarchal perspective.

In conceptualizing quare shared recognition as a political act, within the study of the media Black queer women have mostly been left out of mainstream representation. In response to this viewpoint, quare shared recognition acts as a standpoint epistemology which positions Black queer women as “not just outsiders” in the world of media, by asserting that “the perspective from their lives, which are located not only on the margins of the social order but also in certain respects at its center, can reveal causal relations between the margin and the center” (265). This centering is primarily seen within the production and consumption of Black queer web series which focus on the experiences of Black lesbians. Black queer web series created for and by Black queer women enact a quare shared recognition which combines the tenets of a Lesbian Standpoint Epistemology and Black Cultural Politics.

In the book *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*, Harding describes lesbian standpoint epistemology as adhering to specific views in its understanding and representation of women. For Harding, “from a lesbian standpoint one sees women in relation to other women – or at least not only in relation to men and family” (253). When working from a lesbian standpoint epistemology, women are not just wives, mothers, and daughters, they can be understood as their own women with narratives and stories that can stand alone. As community members, women’s stories deserve to be told as texts which can authentically speak to and about their community. A lesbian standpoint also “permits us to see and to imagine communities that do not need or want men socially” (256). By focusing on the social worlds of women, lesbian standpoint epistemology makes the everyday lives and struggles of women the focus of representation and analysis. In addition, “a lesbian standpoint centers female sexuality, and female sexuality as constructed by women” (259). By not focusing on the male gaze, a lesbian standpoint epistemology understands female sexuality as that which is pleasing to women, and

not that which is meant to please or sexually gratify men. Finally, a “lesbian standpoint reveals the links between the oppression of women and the oppression of deviant sexualities” as “women’s sexuality is the paradigm of deviant sexuality for social and biological theorists” (261). While this is mainly seen through the representation or depiction of female sexuality within media texts, it can also be understood through the recognition of the stigmatization of Black queer female identity within society.

Combining Black cultural politics, which de-centers essentialist notions of Black identity through centering Black queer women’s experiences, with lesbian standpoint epistemology, Black queer web series producers engage in the feminist identity politics of quare shared recognition which values intersectional identities through representation. This representation seeks to include multiple intersections of identity when depicting various characters. Black queer web series producers engage in a politics of identity based on the conception of self-definition espoused by Black Nationalists, in conjunction with feminist standpoint theory. Despite the belief that racial identity needs to be unified and undifferentiated to truly represent the community, in the comments for *Between Women* it is apparent that even viewers who do not identify as queer are still invested in the series and enjoy the content. As many viewers state: “I aint a lesbian but this too good :)” and “i ran into this show by accident and been hooked, not gay either amazing story lines” (Daniels, “Episode 1”, comments). While some viewers focused on the narrative itself, other viewers pointed out enjoying the shows music and feel i.e. “I’m not gay either but damn this is gonna be my new fav show....and that song at the end of the episode was BEATTT!!! Loved it!!!” (Daniels, “Episode 1”, comments). For these viewers the series attracted them due to the non-representational qualities of the series.

At the same time, many non-queer viewers chose to support the show because of their interest in learning about another part of the Black community. As one commenter stated: “Ok, so I don't know nothing about Lesbians so this is very interesting to me. Might keep watching”. Another comment demonstrated that some non-queer viewers felt solidarity with the racial identity of the characters and the need to support Black productions. As one commenter wrote:

I'm always looking out for good black entertainment on YouTube, so props to you all for coming up with this series. The whole LGBT isn't really my cup of tea it's very foreign to me, though I'm glad I watched this first episode because it shows the diversity in a small community of people. (Daniels, “Episode 1”, comments)

Even though these viewers were unfamiliar with the LGBTQ+ community, they were willing to support Black queer women because of the racial solidarity they felt. Through their support of diversity and self-definition, these commenters also engage in a form of resistance which pushes back against the concerted effort to get members of the Black community to approve and conform to normative constructions of Black identity. These comments exemplify the fact that many Black queer web series are met with an overwhelming number of responses that show that individuals in the Black community are interested in the multiplicity of performances which can be seen as authentic Black identity. Regardless of their sexual orientation, many Black viewers are invested in the Black Nationalist rhetoric of self-definition i.e. the ability of the individuals and the group to define their identity for themselves, instead of a rhetoric of Black heterosexual respectability.

Between Women and Black Queer Representation: Critical & Textual Analysis

At the same time, *Between Women* not only acts as an important representation of Black identity, but Black queer women's identity. Premiering on YouTube in 2011 and still in

production as of 2018, the series was created by Michelle Daniels and has now moved behind a paywall to Daniels' The Damn Network, an online collection of the creators web series which focus on Black women and community in the South. By embracing the diversity of the Black queer community, according to the popular blog targeted towards Black Women, *For Harriet, Between Women* has been described as one of many "Brilliant Web Series Featuring Queer Black Women" and a "critically acclaimed Atlanta based show . . . centered around six friends and their hectic, explosive love lives" (Boom). The series focuses on an ensemble cast of mostly women (with some transgender men later in the series) and the unique challenges that they face as LGBTQ+ identified individuals and many viewers express their love of the series in relation to the series depiction of Black queer issues. As one viewer stated, "I love this show! -So hooked I have watched all episodes! You guys have very tastefully, yet honestly examined lesbian issues. This show speaks for the millions of us who are seeking validation because we don't want to feel alone. Thank you so much" (Daniels, "Episode 1", comments). From this perspective, *Between Women* does the work of engaging with a politics of queer shared recognition by giving queer women a space to be seen within the context of Black media.

This is also accomplished through the inclusion of a diverse cast of characters, as one commenter points out:

just now watching this for the first time - 9 minutes watched so far. excellent - very well done. wonderful to see us represented in all of our various and sundry shades and personalities. keep doing your thing and bringing us this kind of entertainment that we otherwise wouldn't get to see on television. the "I" word was nice, but as a sister, i needed something like this, which shows black women as the frame of reference. thanks for being a voice for us. (Daniels, "Episode 1", comments)

Especially as many Black series primarily depict heterosexual individuals and queer shows focus on gay men or white lesbians, Black queer women enjoy the series because its “. . . about time there is a lesbian series with all black women:)” (Daniels, “Episode 1”, comments). Through the exploration of the lives and loves of half a dozen Black queer women, series like *Between Women* are telling stories and depicting characters that have still yet to be seen within the realms of cable and network television.

From the first episode of *Between Women* there is an immediate jump into the drama of the lives of these women. In the opening scene, the viewer is presented with multiple cuts of images of Atlanta, GA from the perspective of a car riding around the city. The car radio is turned up to the highest level, and the scene is set to Young Jeezy’s “I Do”, a song which pronounces that the rapper “sees some ladies in here tonight” that he “might marry”. With this song the radio DJ announces that gay marriage has been legalized in Atlanta and the scene cuts to Rhonda Stephens, shown walking on the treadmill in feminine pink workout gear. Rhonda celebrates the announcement and immediately calls her girlfriend Miller Harris to proclaim the good news (Daniels). The scene cuts to the unfazed Miller, a handsomely dressed woman with long locs, who answers the phone from a couch in her office as her secretary sits on her lap. As it can be imagined, Miller and Rhonda do not have an open or non-monogamous relationship, and the phone call makes Rhonda’s ignorance of Miller’s actions at the office immediately apparent to the audience. This scene stands out not only because it foregrounds some of the drama that will unfold between Miller and Rhonda and the opening of the show, but for the viewer who knows her gay rights, this episode draws attention to the fact that Georgia (at that time) was not one of the thirty-seven states to have legalized gay marriage (Daniels). Initially this disjuncture between fiction and reality can be read as an indicator that the viewer has been invited to escape

into a queer utopia in which gay marriage is not just virtual (the potential to be), but actual. Yet even with this venture into a world where the seeming fullness of gay citizenship has been realized, the realm of *Between Women* does not fall into the trap of homonationalism by glossing over difference and the realities of the queer of color experience in the world. The show itself spends the remainder of this episode, and the entire series, dealing with the hard facts of the embodied experience of Black queer individuals, especially women.

The unfolding of the series sets the viewer up for a steady stream of issues that resonate on both a personal and national level. According to Kesiena Boom the show stands out from other queer of color web series because it serves as “an important vehicle for commentary on difficult issues including domestic abuse, which is often overlooked in the lesbian community” (Boom). In this sense, *Between Women* does not just intend to represent queer women of color in appearance, but by portraying real world issues to which viewers of the series can relate. As the creator Michelle Daniels states in an interview for the blog *After Ellen*:

I write about things I've experienced, and things that surround me and the people in my circles. The stories feel more real because I have gone through them and I know I'm not the only one. Domestic violence is the one topic that is particularly close to me because I grew up in a violent home. As an adult, I was also in a relationship that included both emotional abuse and physical aggression. I want people to know that they aren't alone when it comes to serious topics. (Farrah)

Here, Daniels connects the role that environment and the performance of relational norms plays into the type of relationships that one enters into. While Daniel's is not unique in constructing a narrative that represents the issues of domestic violence and physical/verbal abuse, her

representation of queer women of color in the series utilizes a politics of identity to hail a queer community. She states that “When people see what they’re going through on screen — whether it’s a web series or TV show — they have a chance to engage with their own issues in a different way” (Farrah). Through presenting a multiplicity of queer representations, Daniels allows viewers to relate to her characters and mentally inhabit their problems in order to imagine different possibilities and options for their own lives.

Especially through Daniels’ representation of domestic abuse within butch/femme relationships and hate crimes directed against lesbian women, *Between Women* performs the political labor of exposing toxic masculinity and misogynoir while promoting positive forms of masculine expression and identity. As Michael Kimmel describes in his book *The Politics of Manhood*, while there are many different forms of masculinity and “masculinity itself is not inherently negative,” “toxic behaviors can be accumulated in a sexist society” (301). From this belief, toxic masculinity can be viewed as a set of behaviors and beliefs which “poisons through means such as neglect, abuse, and violence” primarily enacted by men, but can also be seen amongst masculine identified individuals (301). In contrast to the belief that toxic masculinity only hurts women, Kimmel suggests that toxic masculinity harms everyone in society, and believes that men should learn to get in touch with their “deep masculine” selves, a form of masculinity which exists outside of the negative traits that society has attached to masculinity, in order to embody more positive values that do not cause harm to themselves or harm others (301-304).

While much of Kimmel’s work focuses on white heteropatriarchy, Kimmel also writes that “power is relational” and “masculinity is constructed in the context of historical relations of

gender, class, and race” as societal conceptions of masculinity and the politics of identifying with manhood “has alienated various groups of men – specifically, gays and men of color – by myopically relating masculinity to the white European history of conquest and domination” (175). Masculine identity positions itself within a legacy of white male supremacy which alienates any masculine identified individual who cannot live up to the requirements of that particular race, gender, and classed position. In relation to a series like *Between Women*, Daniels investigates how toxic masculinity infiltrates the construction and performance of Black masculinity through some of the women in the series who seek to display dominance in their relationship with other women through forms of violence and neglect whether through physical and verbal abuse, cheating, abandonment, etc. While most of the women in the series, such as the physically abusive Brooke, are punished for their behavior in some way, the expression of these forms of toxic masculinity rarely makes the women (or men) who display them less attractive within social and romantic relationships. Daniels complicates our view of the series by not simply reversing binaries which would position heterosexuality and men as bad and queer women’s sexuality as consequently good. Instead, Daniel’s works to represent the ways in which the politics of identity truly play out in the construction and performance of masculinity and femininity within Black queer community.

In relation to other Black television series and as the title suggests, *Between Women* is also unique because the series not only centers Black queer women, but creates an entire world without men acting as main (and rarely peripheral) characters. Pushing the concept of lesbian standpoint epistemology, what we come to know about the lives of Black queer women within the series is only constructed through the interactions between and individual experiences of the Black queer women in the show. Speaking to the nuance and complexity of Black queer

relationality, the women in the series are positioned in different types of relationships with each other as friends, lovers, and partners. By not focusing on their roles in relationship to men, the women are able to be seen for themselves in various expressions of gender, career options, and day to day lives. Especially with the lack of representation of queer women of color within television, even more so queer women who have a masculine gender presentation, Daniels' series opens up an opportunity for audience members to see themselves on screen as well as allowing viewers to engage with other members of the community through commenting on YouTube. Therefore, we can see how viewers use their online space in order to expand the types of identities that Black women can comfortably inhabit.

Commenting on Black Femmes and Heteromascularity

In analyzing the comments for *Between Women*, there are several themes which appear throughout the season. One such theme focuses on femme definitions and dynamics, and in this case speaks to viewers concerns about the lack of representation of femme women's relationships in the series. Even with the various types of gender expression portrayed in the series, the narrative of *Between Women* does primarily focus on the relationship between butch and femme characters. Of the main couples in the series, only one couple is matched in their gender presentation (femme/femme), with the majority of the couples depicting the traditional butch/femme binary of Black lesbian relationship categories. Although viewers were not overly concerned with a lack of butch/butch relationships, a pairing that is still considered taboo by many in the Black lesbian community, there were many comments which spoke to the concern around the lack of femme/femme relationship pairings. In particular, commenters were disappointed that the series would leave out such an important representation of Black queer

sexuality. As one viewer stated:

UM...WTF [What the Fuck] is this? i am watching this because i just don't see many black lezzies on tv or in true life (who are not studs) but it seems that one needs to be a stud and the other a femme in order to have a lez relationship -_- . (Daniels, "Episode 1", comments)

So, even though Daniels gets a lot of things right by including representations which are not commonly seen on television, viewers still have higher expectations for the series when it comes to varieties of femme representation.

For many viewers, the lack of femme/femme relationship pairings in the series made them feel like their own sexual and romantic interests weren't being represented. First inquiring into the lack of femme/femme relationships, one viewer went on to write that ". . . not all lesbians like the fem x butch pairing. I myself a effeminate lesbian like very feminine girls not those who talk like guys or act like guys" (Daniels, "Episode 1", comments). While this viewer is using this comment to point out their own understanding of sexual attraction and identity, this portion of the comment also speaks to greater societal beliefs about the construction of femininity. For many individuals, a feminine identity and gender presentation works in service of masculinity, and primarily hetero-masculinity. Overt displays of femininity are meant to attract a masculine partner or male attention and are not viewed as an embodiment which can work in favor of the female gaze.

Femme/femme pairings are also more common within the portrayals of lesbian identity on cable and network television. Many times, femme/femme is used as a way to portray the politics of recognition that attempt to capitalize off of Black and/or queer representation instead of a politics of shared recognition which is attempting to actually represent the community.

This is because the representation of femme/femme pairings is reminiscent of the girl on girl pairings produced in mainstream pornography and created in service to a male, not a female, gaze. Within mainstream television, the representation of lesbian relationships is commonly reduced to femme/femme, leaving out the butch/femme pairings that are common in the lesbian community and that many Black queer web series work to include. At the same time, these views do not justify the lack of femme/femme pairings in the series, but speaks to the potential reasoning behind there being less attention paid to this section of the Black queer community. Despite the fact that the majority of the commenters for the series express attraction to masculine characters, this reasoning is still problematic in that it assumes that a female gaze is always already oriented towards masculinity, leaving out the viewers and commenters who find femininity to be the most attractive aspect of a woman.

Even with this lack of focus on femininity as an identity which is not only constructed in relation to the male gaze, the comments for *Between Women* also demonstrate the ways that the series destabilizes the male gaze. Turning to the second theme reiterated in the series comments, Heteromascularity applies to comments where the commenter is asserting an alliance with a particular form of gender reality, in which one's gender expression, sex, and sexuality exist within a heteronormative framework. As Commenter Kimora stated in response to the first episode of the series, "Nah im good!!! fuck is this shit! lol sorry mama's you'll never have a dick!! and it feels great lol"(Daniels, "Episode 1", comments). A similar type of comment is repeated later on in the comments section by another user who states "Why are these lesbians acting like men? Ridiculous!" (Daniels, "Episode 1", comments). Drawing connections between this web series and *The Peculiar Kind*, in many of the comments for *Between Women*, viewers immediately read the Black lesbian women in the series within the framework of a confining

gender reality, that is, that sex and gender should map onto each other and that gender follows from sex. In addition, while there are transgender characters within the series, these comments are posed in an episode in which no transgender characters appear. Therefore, the representation of the masculine presenting characters in this episode are not meant to signal a transgender identity or the performance of manhood. Despite this fact, for these commenters, the logical conclusion that can be taken from the visible representation of Black women wearing suits and slacks is they are attempting to look like men, therefore they must think that they are men.

From these comments it can be interpreted that not everyone who watches and/or comments on the episodes of *Between Women* comes from the same ideological standpoint, resulting in a comments section which is heterogeneous in its perspectives on the series. Sandra Harding describes these responses from outsiders looking in by writing that:

The fact of the feminist love of women can be confusing to onlookers who are not used to the idea of loving and valuing women for themselves rather than primarily for how they serve the needs of men, children, or the dominant groups in society. To such people, a love of women appears to be a betrayal of ‘the natural order’ – that is, of patriarchal principles, or class loyalties, or racial pride, or cultural identity. (Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, 252-253)

Especially for the commenter who expressed exaltation in having a penis while the women in the series do not there is an apparent conflation of interest in women as being purely sexual. .

This is because “Generally, men see women in relation to themselves as sexual objects or domestic servants” (Harding 254). From this perspective, if these women don’t have a penis what could they possibly offer to the women that they seek. For these viewers, queer sexuality is

configured as lacking in relation to heterosexuality due to the fact that they are incapable of understanding that a lesbian standpoint epistemology on sexuality is not only constructed through sex, but romance, attraction, and emotional bonding/caring.

These comments also demonstrate the misrecognition that occurs when non-queer subjects attempt to interpellate queer ones. The fact that the series *Between Women* does not privilege a male gaze by making the gender presentation of its characters fit the understanding of Black women as straight and feminine results in the illegibility of the characters to heteropatriarchal eyes. While José Muñoz describes misrecognition as imagining himself “as something other than queer or racialized”, it is also possible to conceptualize misrecognition as the moment in which non-queer subjects cannot get a grasp on what exactly is queer about the identity of certain queer subjects and therefore cannot inhabit the space of shared recognition (Muñoz 95). In many ways, this inability to recognize the performance of masculinity by Black lesbian women as simply a performance of, and not an attempt to embody a, male identity is also related to the inability of many individuals to read Black women as inhabiting a queer sexuality. Similar to Gopinath’s discussions of the queer diasporic subject, for nonqueer subjects “the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora” is still alive and well (Gopinath 15).

Finally, these comments primarily demonstrate the need for cisgender Black men to assert the seeming authenticity of their own gender identity and performance in the face of the performance of female masculinity. However, this assertion tends not to take into account the role that recognition and stereotype plays into their understandings of their own masculinity and the role that masculinity plays in the construction of Black female identity. Complicating the

question of who owns masculinity, in the article “Lipstick or Timberlands,” ethnographer Mignon Moore writes that “when transgressive lesbians appropriate certain representations of masculinity owned by black and Latino men, they portray images that are raced, classed, and associated with violence and menace” (130). This statement, especially the use of the term “appropriate” seems to give credence to an understanding of Black masculinity as being solely owned by Black men. However, the second half of the statement, which speaks to the stereotype of Black masculinity as uncontained or hyper-masculine and therefore violent/toxic, seems to complicate the use of the term appropriation. Especially in relation to the portrayal of toxic masculinity within the series, the performance of Black masculinity, and its ownership by Black men, is not steeped in an authentic representation of Black male identity. Moore seems to be suggesting that Black lesbians tend to perform a stereotype of Black masculinity, which is owned by Black men, in the sense that certain characteristics that are most commonly attributed to them, even though they may not have created those characterizations for themselves.

This understanding of the role that masculinity plays in the performance of identity is complicated further when we think about the historical attribution of masculinity to Black women. In order to place Black womanhood in opposition to white womanhood, Black women are commonly depicted without stereotypically feminine traits, and instead are seen as strong, independent, and therefore masculine creatures. This interpretation is supported later in the piece when Moore writes that:

When black lesbians take on these forms of gender display, they run the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about black women’s sexuality and subject themselves to dangerous confrontations with a larger society that devalues any raced expression of sexuality but particularly denounces and denigrates images of masculinity in black

women. Transgressive presentations of self also reify stereotypes of black women as mannish and are particularly threatening to the male possession of masculinity” (130)

Moore continues, “as a result of their gender display, many [masculine presenting women] face hostility from conformists in mainstream society” as the expectations of a respectable performance of Black womanhood requires a feminine gender presentation (130). Therefore, in conjunction with Halberstam’s conception of female masculinity and Harding’s standpoint epistemology, it is important to move away from an understanding of masculinity which ties the concept to maleness and instead to think about how masculinity exists within and on the bodies of women, and in this project, Black queer women (Halberstam 16).

Commenting on Black Lesbian Representation

Although I believe that the representation of queer women of color in *Between Women* is unique and innovative, many viewers feel that the show does not resist the “homonormative models of sexual alterity” and instead reinforces them through its constructions of privilege and power dynamics. These concerns around representation mostly come in response to the relationship between Brooke Scott and Allison Young, who exemplify the issue of domestic abuse that the creator of the series is trying to illuminate. These comments are coded under the theme representation, as they speak to viewer expectations regarding the representation of Black lesbians. Within the series, the character Brooke, a masculine identified lesbian is incredibly over-protective and jealous in relation to her feminine girlfriend Allison, who she eventually ends up beating so badly that Allison has to be hospitalized (Daniels). Comments about this representation are numerous, but these conversations become especially salient when reading through a thread of comments in which three YouTube users go back and forth on the issue of

representing masculine identified Black Lesbian women. Commenter Ashlee begins this conversation by stating that:

Commenter Ashlee: i think it's weird how "butch" black lesbians channel the thuggish, abusive tendencies of a certain segment of black males. it's sort of gross actually. being gay obviously does not free people's minds.

From this comment there is another conflation between the stereotypes of Black men and the identity formation of Black lesbian women. Also within these comments you get an unintentional reference back to bell hooks and the idea that embracing a queer identity should have liberatory potential, at the very least the potential to “free your mind” and make you more conscious of the systems of oppression and privilege that go into the performance of masculinity. While commenter Ashlee gives Black men the benefit of the doubt by stating that only some of them are abusive, the commenter also uses that statement to conflate the representation of women within the show in order to generalize about the lived reality of all “butch black lesbians.” In response to this comment, Brenda questions the authenticity of Ashlee’s sentiment by writing:

Commenter Brenda: “Dude stfu [shut the fuck up] you obviously don't know shit! How many "butch" black lesbians do you know in real life?! How come you say ALL "butch" black lesbians act like a SEGMENT of black guys?? Have you mutha fuckin met all of us?! No. Get out of my face with this bullshit.

Separating reality and representation, Brenda points out to Ashlee that this series is merely a representation of reality, and assumes that Ashlee’s comment is not based on actual knowledge or lived experience as a Black lesbian. Brenda utilizes the authority of experience as a Black

lesbian, placing herself in the queer community by using the term “us” in order to dismiss Ashlee’s comment as invalid. Yet, the conversation continues:

Commenter Ashlee: well right here you're just proving my point.

Commenter Brenda: What that I get OFFENDED when someone generalizes a whole group of people?! Ya I'm gonna be a bit pissed off. It's like saying all Asians are quiet and obedient. You CAN NOT generalize a whole group of people! It's ignorant and beyond offensive. We are not our stereotypes. We are individuals who share the same identity, the same experiences. That doesn't make us one being that can be judged as a whole. no. so like I said get that bullshit out of my face and educate yourself.

The facetious reply from Ashlee attempts to dismiss Brenda’s experiential claims by intimating that Brenda is just like all of the other thuggish Butch lesbians. However, Brenda refuses to be silenced and reiterates her perspective by stating the idea that all Butch lesbians are thuggish is a generalization or stereotype, giving the comparative example of the Asian Model Minority. Brenda goes on to state that despite the fact that individuals within queer communities of color might have a similar culture (shared practices and customs), that does not mean that they are all the same and that to make such an assessment indicates an obvious lack of experience spending time with actual Black lesbians.

After the conversation between Ashlee and Brenda appears to be finished, another Commenter writes back:

Commenter Chelsea: Hi [Brenda]...I feel your point about generalizing, but I'm a straight woman who's put off by how the studs are portrayed in this episode. They are

made to look abusive to those who are not familiar with the LGBT community. I have lesbian friends and NYC is pretty diverse.. In fact, I have a lesbian couple who live on my floor and the stud is nicer than the femme and never passes you without "Good morning and a smile." She's a teacher and gets along great with the kids in the building.

Chelsea's use of her own personal example of the nice "stud" (masculine presenting lesbian) as evidence to combat the stereotype of Bad butch lesbians is also problematic in its simplicity, but this commenter does attempt to create an argument based on stereotype threat. For this commenter, the representation of Black butch women as abusive is not problematic because it is a stereotype in and of itself, but because that stereotypical representation can potentially be seen by heterosexual people (or those outside of the queer of color community) who would not know how to properly read this representation as not a normal part of Black lesbian culture.

From these comments, we can see the concerns around representing Black butch women as physically abusive. Due to the lack of mediated representations of queer women of color the weight of this one representation increases within the media landscape, exemplifying the politics of representation. Therefore, many viewers feel that the creator of *Between Women* should take on the burden of representing all queer women of color, by only including positive portrayals of them. While this expectation to take on the burden of representation is common from those within marginalized communities, it can also be argued that the purpose of the media is not to engage in a politics of respectability but to represent whatever aspect of a community or identity it chooses. In addition, there is no cohesive stance on whether or not the show is doing a good or a bad job of representing queer women of color (and it would be reductive to assume that a series is simply doing one or the other).

This politics of representation is also discussed within scholarly texts. As Herman Gray states in the book *Cultural Moves*:

The question of who has a rightful claim on a particular version of blackness as representative, or indeed the need to delimit what constitutes blackness, no longer defines the terms of black cultural production. Most immediately, this means that the still entrenched language of positive or negative images, polemics about the commodification of blackness, and the endless search for authenticating narratives have come under critical scrutiny and finally been put to rest. (Gray 16)

While Gray asserts that academics have laid to rest these arguments around positive/negative images, the comments section for *Between Women* (and many other Black web series) demonstrates that the nature and impact of media representation is still a very important topic of discussion for audiences. So, while academics may have settled the representation debate, media viewers continue to have mixed interpretations of what constitutes authenticity and acceptable representation of intersectional Black identity.

These mixed reviews of *Between Women*'s representational choices are exemplified when analyzing the other comments that fall under the theme of Representation, in which viewers express that the show does do a good job of representing queer women of color. Commenter Melissa writes that "Actually, the different gender presentations are quite accurate representations of black lesbian community life. I appreciate the work you are doing." And Commenter Gina, who states " :) Nice!! Seems like its going to evolve into something even better. Its not really stereotypical like most people think.... its basically real life drama, real life situations faced everyday in the community" (Daniels, "Episode 1", comments). Even with these

comments we see the tension between what is reality and what is representation. While the show itself is simply a representation of queer women of color, for many of the viewers there is a belief that the series is, or should be, representing a reality or lived experience. There is also a tension between how the viewers feel a lived reality should be represented (a diversity approach in which every aspect of queer of color communities are given voice) and Michelle Daniels', the creator of the series, approach (telling stories about issues that occur in the lives of queer women of color).

Commenting on the Politics of Desire

The idea that representation is more than just seeing one's self on screen speaks to the belief that many marginalized groups have around the politics of identity and representation. For many Black queer women, there is also an expectation that those representations will meet their own standards of queer female identity. This expectation tends to be layered with particular classed and social understandings of the performance of masculinity. As Mignon Moore states, "some lesbians resent this [masculine] presentation of self in other women because it is associated with an image of men who are disrespectful to women" (132). For many middle to upper class lesbian women, a feminine presentation is considered respectable while masculine representation is laden with the stereotypes of violence and criminality that circle around Black and Latino men. At the same time, "many feminine women are attracted to this type of masculinity on a female body, finding the image of a hip-hop 'bad boy' alluring or cool when modified and transplanted on a woman" (132). This understanding has led Moore to make the statement that "in trying to understand how black lesbians are negotiating the organization and

meaning of gender display, I found that it is desire, not feminism or politics, that takes center stage” (132).

Exemplifying Moore’s view that desire plays the most important role in one’s gender display within Black lesbian communities, a final analysis of the comments for the series *Between Women* showed that the theme of Desire was especially common. This theme was specifically seen in comments where viewers would express their attraction or sexual/romantic desire for the series characters. Yet, this expression of queer desire within the comments section was not equally divided amongst all of the characters. Within the comments section for the first episode of *Between Women*, Miller and Rae are highly favored by commenters as seen in the following comments:

Ray is just my type

Miller is sexxxxxxyyyy

Miller and Ray so fine.owie them my baes.lol fr

This recurrence was especially interesting because each of these women depict masculine, and not feminine, presenting Black lesbians. One possible reason for this uneven expression of attraction is that the gender performance of a masculine queer woman allowed the heterosexual women who are in the comments section to feel comfortable expressing their queer desire as attraction to a butch lesbian did not necessarily question their own role within the gender binary. However, I think it is also worth noting that especially in reading the comments about the characters bad behavior, such as cheating on their feminine partners and even being abusive, it is obvious that within queer communities there is many times still a privileging of masculinity, which is evident when even at its worst, it can still be seen as attractive and desirable.

Even in addressing the issue of domestic abuse, the characters' attractiveness seemed to mitigate their toxic masculinity. As one commenter stated "All of the studs in this show are really, really attractive. Brooke is mad controlling and bitchy, tho!" (Daniels, "Season 1, Episode 1, Comments). As it was stated earlier Brooke is not just "controlling and bitchy", throughout the series she is physically and verbally abusive to her partner, but the desire that masculinity garners downplays the significance of these facts. For this viewer and others like her, the commonality of cheating amongst the majority of the masculine presenting characters on the cast are an afterthought to their attractiveness. As one commenter wrote "Damn they all cute! But they're all cheatin lmao" and another commenter stated "Damn is anyone faithful in this show?". On one level, this nonchalance towards the cheating by the characters can also be attributed to the drama of the series unfolding, as one commenter wrote "They all cheating on each other and its only the first episode!! zann". Similar to a soap opera, the cheating and violence within the show can be seen as exciting to a viewer, and portrays an over the top representation of lesbian relationships.

On the other hand, the desire for these masculine characters despite their failings also seems to speak to a belief for many queer and heterosexual women, which is that women are not capable of hurting other women in the same way that men are. As one commenter stated in response to the overabundance of cheating on the show: "Seriously - you STILL have to deal with cheating, abuse, being taken for granted? I thought women were better?". Especially within relationships, the stereotype that women are naturally caring and loving nurturers who want more than sex out of a relationship, seems to allow the masculine women in the series to engage in toxic masculinity because the women who desire them are blinded by the assumptions based upon their womanhood. Positioning the series as somewhat of a warning to women who might

believe this view, one commenter writes to discourage women from entering into lesbian relationships by stating: “See, women cheat too, even on each other not only men cheat so don't think being with a women is any safer”. Another commenter joins in on this sentiment by writing, “If anyone says they are gay because a man cheated on them they are stupid” because as another commenter stated “Looks like the gay females are just as bad as straight men, lol” (Daniels, Season 1, Episode 1, Comments).

Despite having knowledge and awareness of this mode of being, especially in relation to the character Ray, many of the women described the harsh manner of speaking that the masculine characters expressed to their partners and lovers as one of their best traits. One comment that stood out in particular was the statement “omg i love rae 1 she like a nigga ! talk to me like that anyday” (Daniels, Season 1, Episode 1, Comments). By stating that Rae talks “like a nigga,” the commenter is reinforcing Mignon Moore’s assertion that many Black queer women are attracted to the Bad Boy or street/hood persona of some masculine presenting women. This is especially obvious with the character Ray, who in her personal life works as the rapper LookAlive whose accent references a southern Louisiana drawl. As one commenter writes “i LOVE the way Ray talks, so her accent if she has one. Especially when she say "watch your mouth." she so fine lol” (Daniels, Season 1, Episode 1, Comments).

This quote of one of Ray’s oft repeated phrases to her girlfriend(s) “Watch your mouth,” is also referenced in another comment, which states:

Watch your mouth Jess.. Watch your mouth man... I love it! Lower your tone, 7:59-8:25
it's the whole truth and nothing but the truth! It's no different straight/lesbian world.. a
bond with a child is a bond indeed. If more men did their job or kept their bond with their

boys like this it would be a better world. I love it.. "I'm trying to keep my hands off of you.." lol.. (Daniels, Season 1, Episode 1, Comments)

While many of the commenters are unsure as to why they find Ray's brash way of speaking to her girlfriend(s) is so attractive to them ("I don't know why, but I found it so attractive when she kept telling her to watch her mouth lol. So weird but damn she's fine"), this comment also seems to draw attention to the role that masculine presenting women also play in the lives of the women who love them. Speaking to Ray's choice to remain a surrogate father figure to her ex-girlfriend's son within the series, this commenter speaks to the role that masculine women play in the lives of women who have been abandoned by the biological fathers of their children. In this sense, Ray's harsh tone and manner of speaking could simply be attributed to her masculine performance, and is therefore welcomed as familiar to women who may have began their lives in romantic relationships with Black men.

This view is seconded within the comments, as these characters' particular manner of speaking and acting is described by many of the women as an exemplar of how all Black men and masculine presenting people should behave. Drawing on a Black cultural politics in which Black cool is prized as a mode of being and performance, one commenter writes in reference to one of the characters, "these niggas aint got no playa swag they need to take a miller class" as another commenter states "ray is too smooove niggas [need to] sit down and watch" (Daniels, Season 1, Episode 1, Comments). For these viewers, the women's behavior and word choice is not viewed as disrespectful, but as a form of "swag," or a form of confidence and suave which is unique to communities of color. By describing the women as "playas," there is an expectation that their behavior will represent a playboy lifestyle, which tends to include multiple partners, spontaneity, and fun, all of which could be seen as desirable traits on the outside looking in.

So, while Mignon Moore stated that desire and respectability play a large role in the reception and performance of particular points in the lesbian gender continuum, we can also see the role that Black cultural politics plays in this construction as well. As bell hooks writes in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, Black masculinity can be defined as a type of cool that is unattainable to white masculinity and therefore is prized and envied (hooks 14). At the same time, in the book *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America*, Richard Majors and Janet Billson describe the way that cool also operates as a survival strategy and “as a performance, cool pose is designed to render the black male visible and to empower him” (5). However, “when cool behaviors are placed ahead of acknowledging and dealing with true fears or needs, pent up emotions and frustrations result, which are then released in aggressive behaviors towards those who are closest to [them] . . . other black people” (19-20). So, while some of the characters in the series are able to engage in a positive form of Black cool in which their masculinity gives them a confident swagger, characters like Brooke are enveloped by the cool pose to the extent that we see her acting out and abusing her girlfriend in the series while refusing the advice and help of her other close friends.

By positioning Black cool as a potentially toxic and restrictive form of coping with the assumptions and expectations of living within a White capitalist society, viewers are pushed to not only interrogate the series, but their own families, friendships, and romantic relationships. Speaking to the politics of identity, liberation, Black culture, and representation, Michelle Daniel’s portrayal of a complex cast of characters engages in various aspects of queered shared recognition. Instead of creating a rosy representation of Black queer communities and relationships, Daniel moves past the neoliberal imperative to paint a picture of the nuclear family or progress narratives. Within *Between Women*, Daniel takes on a lesbian standpoint

epistemology which illuminates the real problems that are experienced by Black queer women by creating a public world out of the private sphere of a lesbian social circle. Daniel does this, not only to value and create space for particular identities that are not commonly seen within the media, but also to call out the toxic masculinity that seeps into various parts of Black culture and the performance of masculinity in order to offer viewers the possibility of liberation from their own struggles.

Conclusion

In conceptualizing quare shared recognition as a politics of identity, feminist thought, and Black cultural analysis, Black queer web series producers engage in a form of political labor which expands our understanding of the imagined Black community through various representational strategies. In contrast to a simple politics of recognition, quare shared recognition defies the privileging of heteronormativity by centering the experiences of Black queer women in the study of media representation. This form of analysis aligns itself with both Black Feminist and Third World Feminist thought, and speaks to the importance of valuing Black female experience within the politics of liberation and Black radical thought. In contrast to viewing queer female sexuality as impossible and deviant within Black communities, quare shared recognition creates connections and ties between the performance of queer female sexuality amongst community members in both private and public spheres.

Through the series *Between Women*, the complexity of the performance of gender within queer communities of color is seen through the disagreements and discourse around the subject. Some individuals dismiss the view that the masculine/feminine dichotomy is inherently radically queer by positing their interpretation of those gendered identities as operating within a

heteronormative code. At the same time, there are other individuals who feel that queer community does not always have to be defined in opposition to other groups and the best that we can do as queer individuals is to express our gender identities as we see fit. This is exemplified through attempts to recode queer identity formations as not a reflection of heteronormativity but as their own constructions to be made legible within a queer context i.e. butch/femme is not the equivalent of man/woman. Yet, within these views (of which there are many more variations), there is always an underlying concern that queer women of color in particular must articulate and address a queer politics that does not re-create the systems of privilege and oppression that the gender binary is based on. For many queer women this requires the negotiation of a politics of recognition, from which decisions must be made around the presentation of one's gender identity and how that identity fits with how one chooses to move and interact with others in the world.

Utilizing the politics of shared recognition, we can also see the ways interpellation and hailing play a part in making queer representations and communities legible within the YouTube sphere. Although lesbian viewers of queer of color web series have a high expectation on how a queer identity should be represented, it is important to realize that what we see is not always what we get. Just like the performance of female masculinity does not necessarily indicate a false consciousness that is constrained within the systems of patriarchal oppression, the representation of serious issues of domestic abuse and violence within queer communities of color is not simply reinforcing stereotypes about Black Butch lesbians. In addition, recognizing that Black men do not have ownership over the performance of masculinity creates room for a critique of the role that identity politics play within Black lesbian communities. Therefore, it would seem that the further we move away from these assumptions and expectations the closer it can get to the creation of a more open-minded coalition of queer individuals

CHAPTER V

If I Was Your Girl: Preaching and Pleasure in Black Queer Commenting Communities

Thou shalt not go near, thou shalt not touch, thou shalt not consume, thou shalt not experience pleasure, thou shalt not speak, thou shalt not show thyself; ultimately thou shalt not exist, except in darkness and secrecy. To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex.

- Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality* 84

· For black lesbians, pleasure – finding, creating, and sustaining places of pleasure – is a battle against internalized and external heteronormativity and white supremacy.

- Kai M. Green “Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* Analytic”

When viewing Black queer web series, desire is often expressed in relation to the performance of Black female masculinity, complicating the way in which we think about that particular identification as well as the construction of masculinity within communities of color. In addition, the policing of Black women’s pleasure in the YouTube comments by other commenters both within and outside of the Black queer community speaks to the expectations of Black female identity within and outside of the Black community. In analyzing the series *If I Was Your Girl*, the explicit representation of Black lesbian sexuality within the series brings forth conversations around pleasure and eroticism within the comments section for the series. This discourse is not only proclaimed by Black queer women, but is also seen amongst women

who identify as heterosexual, showing the extent to which depictions of Black female sexuality are able to cross the boundaries of sexual identity in order to encourage shared recognition amongst many types of women viewers. At the same time, the explicit representation of Black women's sexuality and engagement in sexual activities opens up the comments section to viewers who are morally and culturally opposed to the series content. Through the statements, arguments, and rebuttals within the comments section, as well as the series content, *If I Was Your Girl* serves as a vehicle to explore the role that religion and respectability play in the Black community and accepted performances of Black womanhood. By conceptualizing shared recognition as the means by which Black women are able to engage in and enact pleasure, we can also see how the series encourages many Black women to embrace different expressions of their sexual identity and to find empowerment in the erotic.

Introduction

From psychoanalytic theory to the study of affect, the concept of pleasure has played an important part in how we theorize human communication, interactions, and motives. While the pleasure principle has undergone many modifications in the years since Freud first cited it, the idea that the basic feelings of pleasure and pain govern human behavior with people being inclined to pursue pleasure over pain has great relevance in the study of media and identity. Within communication, this need to seek pleasure over pain or to take the path of least resistance is seen with Nicholas A. Valentino et. al.'s theory of selective exposure which is a minimal effects theory in which individuals select which media messages that they want to be exposed to and opt out of exposure to media that does not agree with their wants, views, or beliefs (Valentino et al. 594-596). In this sense, even when viewing media, there is an expectation that individuals will select media that gives them some form of pleasure and suits their interests over

media which opposes their beliefs and worldviews and therefore causes them psychic stress or pain. Selective exposure is also supported by Elihu Katz's theory of uses and gratifications which states that audience members can use the media to fulfill specific social, psychological, and political needs including, but not limited to, pleasure (Katz 166-180).

Building on the theory of uses and gratification, the scholar Jake Harwood develops his own iteration which states that one of the main reasons that people consume media is to fulfill social identity gratifications (SIG). SIG supports the pleasure principle by asserting that individuals tend to consume media that supports and affirms their social identities (Harwood 125). Thinking about race as a type of social identity, Jessica Abrams and Howard Giles combine the research on uses and gratification of social identity with theories on selective exposure to analyze the role that race/ethnicity plays in the psychology of media consumption. Abrams and Giles developed the term "ethnic identity gratification" to analyze the role that the media plays in supporting an individual's group identity through television texts (Abrams and Giles 118).

Through these later additions to the theories of selective exposure and uses and gratifications, we can see that pleasure plays an important role in why particular viewers select the media that they are interested in. As Jennifer C. Nash writes in the book *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, "When scholars examine black pleasures, they have focused on black cultural production, envisioning black popular culture as the primary articulation of black pleasure . . . yet black pleasures beyond cultural production remain relatively undertheorized" (Nash 4). For Nash, this under-theorization prompted her to move past discussions of cultural production and ownership in order to "ask how black pleasures can include sexual and erotic pleasures in racialization, even when . . . racialization is painful"

through the examination of texts which display Black bodies in pleasure but are not produced by Black creators (4). Focusing on racialized pornography, Nash points out that within Feminist and Black Feminist thought, the sexualization of Black female bodies has been generalized as a negative representation which should only be classified as objectification. Instead of offering an analysis of pornography which judges the work based on its categorization, Nash discusses some of the possibilities for getting out of the “bind of representation” which seeks to place representations in either a positive or negative light (6).

She accomplishes this through conceptualizing the term “racial iconography”, which “asks how black female protagonists negotiate the minefield of representation, and studies how representation can be a site where spectators and protagonists exercise freedom, even within the confines of a visual field structured by race and gender” (6). Demonstrating that there is more to unpack in racialized pornography than a simple good/bad dichotomy, Nash instead provokes the reader to see the political power and pleasure in viewing this type of imagery (147-49). This chapter builds on Nash’s argument by theorizing Black female pleasure, not through pornography, but through a visual text created by a Black female content creator which is viewed as erotic by many commenters. While many of the responses to this content seek to place it in either a good/bad category, like Nash, I plan to fully analyze the role that politics and pleasure play in Black queer web series in order to engage conversations about the role of the erotic, not only for the viewer/performer, but also for the producer of the content being viewed and the comments which are produced in response to that content.

Defining the Erotic

Like many of the Black feminist theorists that Nash writes about, in the essay “The Uses of the Erotic,” Audre Lorde creates a dichotomy between the erotic and the pornographic which

positions pornography as purely sensational and without feeling of empowerment. Lorde writes that:

we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (Lorde 54)

This understanding of the pornographic as the anti-erotic does a disservice to the political possibilities of both porn and experiencing pleasure through visual texts. Instead, I would argue that pornographic or sexually explicit material can act in concert with or encourage the erotic when created and consumed in particular ways. Lorde goes on to define the erotic as:

a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (Lorde 54)

This initial definition positions the erotic as epistemological, emotional, and ethical. The erotic can be used to gain knowledge of the self, to fully experience various feelings, and to engage in a moral consideration of the individual and others. Lorde goes on to break down the etymology of the word by stating that “erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony” (Lorde 55).

Applying this etymology of the erotic as uncontrollable love/loving, Lorde writes that “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our

history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). Positioning the erotic as uncontrolled love, it follows that the erotic exists within the soul as the catalyst for living life to the fullest.

Through these definitions, it is also apparent that the erotic does not just exist in the bedroom or during sexual encounters. Lorde outlines some of the fundamental uses of the erotic as “sharing joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual” with another person, allowing one’s body and soul to fully enjoy “erotically satisfying experiences” and sharing one’s feelings with others as well as openly expressing and embracing one’s inner wants and needs instead of hiding them (living in your truth) (Lorde 56-58). Throughout the piece, Lorde encourages women to not live in fear of their desires, as this fear is used to oppress women, but instead to embrace the “erotic guides” that exist “within ourselves” (58). Lorde’s uses of the erotic speak to the fact that for many women, taking pleasure in self, in life, and in sex and relationships tends to be criticized, so the erotic energy within them has yet to be released because of societal fear and apprehension. From this assertion, it follows that the pornographic can potentially encourage the erotic in women, in so far as it incites women to embrace desire and greater knowledge of the self and others in opposition to fear of the sexual self.

This same fear and apprehension is seen when it comes to discussions of pleasure, sexuality, and embracing the erotic within Black communities. Summarizing the works of Black Feminist scholars such as Evelyn Higginbotham, Darlene Clark Hines, and Tricia Rose, in the book *Mutha' is half a word: Intersections of folklore, vernacular, myth, and queerness in Black female culture*, Lamonda H. Stallings points out that when examining Black female sexuality there is an expectation of silence within the Black community (6-25). Instead of operating in the full power of the erotic, women’s erotic capabilities are stifled in favor of serving their community, family, partner, and/or employer. This same silence and stifling of desire due to fear

emerges when it comes to the expression of gender and sexuality for LGBTQ+ members of the Black community. In the book *Nobody is Supposed to Know*, C. Riley Snorton uses an understanding of the “down low” i.e. masquerading as a straight Black man while engaging in same sex practices, in order to argue the many ways in which “Black sexuality then is figured within a ‘glass closet,’” which is a space “marked by [both] hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle and speculation” (Snorton 4). Instead of being free to embrace one’s sexuality, the glass closet operates as a somewhat liminal space where everyone knows but nothing is spoken.

These hang-ups around expressing one’s sexuality are built on societal beliefs around the expression of Black sexuality. Within Western society, Black sexuality exists under a microscope, where the sexual decisions of Black people become a regular topic of discussion within communities and the public sphere of media and society. Like a magnifying glass, the media has promoted a stigmatized view of Black sexuality through fear mongering around the subjects of teen pregnancy, single motherhood, down low men, and masculine queer women. As C. Riley Snorton goes on to write in his theorization of the glass closet:

Whether it is the glass that makes up the screens of our television sets and computers, or the mirror, a looking glass that allows us to understand how we might appear to others, this substance [glass] is endemic to our understanding of representation and to forms of mediation more generally. (Snorton 15)

Despite the view that sexuality exists in silence, the the history and critique of Black sexuality in America of Black follows with Foucault’s “History of Sexuality” and the incitement to discourse that is enacted when discussing it. From the periods of slavery to reconstruction and civil rights, Black bodies and sexuality have routinely been made a public spectacle, offered up for public inspection, consumption, and critique in both physical and mediated spheres. Using the glass

closet as metaphor and method, the silence around Black sexuality within the Black community gives way to an “incitement to discourse,” as those within and outside of the Black community maintain the room and voice to speak on these matters.

However, the glass closet does not just silence Black people on the nature of their own corporeality. Building on another Foucauldian concept, Snorton states:

Thus, while glass closets, stabilized by biopower and sutured together by institutional and social modes of regulation, may be a condition of black sexual representation, they are not spaces in which their inhabitants lack the capacity to act. Those figured within the projections of a panoptical public imaginary, do act – sometimes in strategically incomprehensible ways, which is to say, in ways that gesture towards the limits of racial-sexual knowledge. (Snorton 34)

Despite the discourse of Black sexuality which positions it as deviant and in need of regulation and surveillance, Black people usurp this discourse by engaging in activities which are not always understood within the ideological beliefs of society. Whether that be taking part in spaces where there is freedom to express one’s sexuality for example, through drag and ballroom culture or using cultural productions to speak one’s truth through music, film, television, etc; the norms of Black sexual expression do not necessarily silence queer representation.

As Lamonda H. Stallings writes, even as the mainstream media tends to reflect a discourse on sexuality which positions Black women in specific roles, Stallings points to the role that production cultures can play in breaking out of these roles. Stallings states that “in order to create and sustain radical Black female sexual subjectivity”, Black female cultural producers “must embrace difference as a foundation without simply reversing the established order that fosters readings of difference as deviance” (Stallings 6). Similar to the assertions of both bell

hooks and Stuart Hall, Stallings understands that simply reversing the binary that would position Black female sexuality as deviant is not going to improve societal beliefs or the representation of Black women. Instead, Stallings writes that:

In order to disturb Western constructs of sexuality in African American cultural texts, cultural producers have to perform three specific tasks: overturn racialized sexuality, uproot the heterosexualization of desire, and explode the binary of hetero/homo in sexuality. (Stallings 158)

In this sense, Stallings calls on Black cultural producers to create media texts which reflect complex and diverse representations of Black womanhood. This is done not only through a recognition of the role that intersectionality plays in the construction and performance of sexual identity, but through acknowledging the role that queer bodies and their pleasures play into producing cultural texts.

Especially in producing Black queer web series, there is a strategic investment in the representation of different types of queer bodies, as well as the pleasures and desires of queer individuals. Embracing the erotic, Black female producers engage in a form of quare shared recognition which allows them to use queer sex and the portrayal of pleasure in order to garner a specific audience, as well as to make room in the public imaginary for Black sexuality that does not fit into a heteronormative or homonational mold. This representation of pleasure then carries over into the comments section, as viewers express their own desires and pleasures around the series. While these affective responses are not always positive responses to the series content, the heterogeneity of comments speaks to the differing views and beliefs on releasing Black sexuality from the silence of the closet. These expressions of pleasure, and displeasure, also create space for the enactment of emotions within the context of a presumably unfeeling online world,

demonstrating the importance of including conversations about the body and emotion in the study of cyberspace, social media, and television.

Black Feminist Touch: Reading and Feeling Sexuality Online

Within recent scholarly research on the internet and online communities, questions around the role that the body plays in the construction of online space and the interactions that are found there have been aimed at promoting a view of space which includes corporeality. This is because, in the early days of internet research, there was a belief that the internet was the ideal place to transcend the body. However, as Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman write in the Introduction to *Race in Cyberspace* while “You may be able to go online and not have anyone know your race or gender [but] . . . neither the invisibility or the mutability of online identity make it possible for you to escape your ‘real world’ identity completely” (Kolko et al. 5). Like affect, identity markers have a certain stickiness which makes them much harder to truly put on and take off in various contexts because “we can’t help but bring our own knowledge, experiences and values with us when we log on” (Kolko et al. 6). As Sara Ahmed explains, affect can be described as “sticky” in that “affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (Ahmed 29). This same connection to the body and self online also relates to how we feel when processing digital content.

Although the investment in transcendence primarily focused on leaving behind the identity of the body (i.e. the ability to be whatever race/gender/sexuality/etc online) in order to exist as mind online, the transcendence of the body also implies an expectation that once online individuals can leave their feelings and emotions behind. Without faces or voices to interact with, the performance and reception of emotions online are very different from offline spaces where signifiers such as tone and facial expressions allow us to read into what individuals are

expressing. However, this does not mean that all feeling is lost online. Similar to the representation of race and gender in digital spaces, without many nonverbal signifiers feelings and emotions are also expressed through linguistic statements which are used to signify one's emotional state. In comments sections, expressions of emotion are tied to viewers' feelings towards and around the series content, which gives us a glimpse into their affective modes. For Black queer web series, viewers, expressions of pain and pleasure also act as a way to mark identity through specific modes of spectatorship. Expressions of pleasure do the work of placing a viewer in alignment or agreement with the series content and its effectiveness. In contrast, expressions of displeasure marks the viewer expressing that emotion as someone who does not want to identify with the series and therefore becomes a part of an identity group that is not Black, queer, and/or woman.

Complicating the view that bodies do not exist in cyberspace, the YouTube platform constructs a unique relationship between verbal and nonverbal signification on screen and primarily linguistic signifiers in the comments section. In thinking about this relationship between representation and identity, Black feminist researchers, sparked by an investment in Black bodies and the relationship between both pain and pleasure, have theorized the role that emotion plays in viewing bodies in relation to the self on screen. As bell hooks reports in "The Oppositional Gaze" when she writes about asking a young Black woman why she thought black female spectatorship was so undertheorized and "she commented 'we are afraid to talk about ourselves as spectators because we have been so abused by the gaze'" (hooks 100). The belief that Black women's bodies have been "abused by the gaze" has a long history, dating back to the capture and enslavement of Black women for the purpose of visual display, as seen in the case of Sarah Baartman (commonly known as the Hottentot Venus). These experiences continued during

slavery, reconstruction, and the civil rights era as Black women were denied the right to bodily autonomy and safety as sexual assault and violence created a fear of being looked upon as potentially seductive or hypersexual. Due to this history, Jennifer C. Nash writes in her book *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, that the Black Feminist theoretical archive tends to focus on the representation of the Black women through a narrative of violence and “protectionism” in which Black women are either harmed or violated through the production of visual imagery which depicts the Black female body, especially those visual texts which sexualize the Black female form (27-30).

Viewing the sexualization of the Black female body as a reiteration of years of oppression and denigration, the image of respectability is produced in order to protect Black femininity and to claim an identity which had once been denied. However, reversing binaries is many times just as controlling as what was thrust previously upon one, and as Patricia Hill Collins writes in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, the construction of the respectable Black Lady in popular culture and society operates as just as much of a “controlling image” as the oversexualized Jezebel (Hill-Collins 69-80). Instead of replacing one controlling image for another, scholars such as Amber Jamilla Musser take on the project of getting out of the bind of positive/negative representation. In her book *Sensational Flesh*, Musser proffers the term “empathetic reading” in order to center sensation as a method, a reading practice, and a way of understanding the world with an emphasis on embodied experience (Musser 21-23). Specifically, empathetic reading is “attentive to the sensations aroused in the reader” when interacting with a particular text (24).

Similar to Musser’s use of “empathetic reading,” queere shared recognition operates as a reading practice which is invested in understanding the pleasure that viewers get from seeing

images of the erotic Black body, or to use Nash's title, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*. Instead of focusing on the uses of televisual representation to create ties that bind Black womanhood and femininity to an either/or dichotomy of ratchet (trashy) and respectable (classy), focusing on the pleasure of the audience allows the text to speak for itself by analyzing the way that text makes the audience feel. Although Nash and Musser focus on multiple visual texts to argue for the importance of feeling and emotion in the study of representation, there are also scholars who focus on the role that pleasure plays in the experience of viewing television.

In the article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Television," Helen Wheatley writes about the role that erotic pleasure plays in the viewing and production of television through an analysis of Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Referencing research for her book *Spectacular Television*, which "looks at the fascination of attraction and arousal in a number of contemporary serial television dramas . . . and the bodies that we pause to erotically contemplate on TV", Wheatley draws us to an understanding of "how other people watch and engage with television as a source of visual pleasure tied to the erotic" (Wheatley 896). The book not only focuses on cinema but it also considers "what happens when that screen is not a television screen, held at an intimate distance, but a handheld or a movable screen: a tablet or laptop, even a phone" (Wheatley 896).

Focusing in on her main argument, Wheatley states that many cable and premium television dramas use what she calls "intentional erotic spectacle", which is defined as "moments, images, characters, even episodes which both seek to represent and provoke desire" as well as unintended erotic spectacle within the media text (896). Similar to the concept of "fan service" in Japanese Anime, these moments are placed within the text to excite members of the audience. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes and the concept of "erotic intermittence,"

Wheatley argues that “the appearance and disappearance of erotic spectacle is fundamental to the structures of television narrative” and “Barthes’ exploration of the play between presence and absence in the erotic, and the making of what is ‘private’, ‘public’ expresses something of what is specific to a televisual presentation of the erotic” (896). In the book *Spectacular Television*, Wheatley also demonstrates that the expression of sex and desire in television has become a commonplace inclusion in the quality television series offered by networks such as HBO and Showtime which use erotic spectacle to get viewers to stop and look (Wheatley 196-203).

Utilizing Mulvey’s work on visual pleasure, Wheatley points out that although scholars such as John Fiske and John Ellis argue that television does not have the same potential for voyeurism as cinema, moments of erotic spectacle in television demonstrate the important part role the voyeuristic gaze still plays in this viewing (Wheatley 897). In her research for the book *Spectacular Television*, Wheatley found that television promoted the “idea of a ‘sexual awakening,’ or the realization of the desiring self” for its viewers (897). This is because “At the level of address, television has become adept at speaking to diverse audiences, potentially offering ‘something for everyone’ when it comes to the presentation of desire and the articulation of gendered/sexual looking relations” (898). At the same time, this diversity is what makes fitting the medium of television into Mulvey’s cinematic model somewhat challenging as looking relations are not just gendered and sexual, but as we will see include other identity categories which influence both the looked at and the looker (898).

Like Wheatley, I agree that there are many aspects of the experience of watching a media text that can be understood using Mulvey’s framework. Within the era of hypermedia, different types of media texts can be viewed on multiple platforms. In the same way that film was no longer confined to the cinema following the invention of home viewing devices like the

television, VCR, or DVD player, the internet and streaming capabilities result in television narratives no longer being confined to the television set. Similar to television, web series can be viewed on tablets, mobile phones, desktop computers, laptops, television screens, and any other viewing device that has access to the internet and/or streaming services. Understanding the experience of the viewer is not static, but can change depending on how the viewer chooses to engage with the web series text.

At the same time, while the experience of how one views the media text may change, the message, and therefore the reception or reading of the text, tends to remain the same. While Marshall McLuhan famously stated “the medium is the message,” I would argue that in analyzing web series, while the medium may change (i.e. the experience of viewing the text), the message does not (what the text says and what it does to the audience). Therefore, even though Mulvey uses the concept of voyeurism to describe the cinematic experience, her analysis of the viewers’ response to the film text is just as relevant in the study of web series as it is to the study of a certain type of film from a previous era. Specifically, I will analyze Mulvey’s work in conjunction with the work of bell hooks to discuss how the gaze operates in the experience of viewing Black queer web series.

Pleasure in Looking: The Uses and Gratifications of Black Queer Web Series

As Laura Mulvey writes in her foundational essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” scopophilia or the idea that there is pleasure in looking is as much a part of the experience of viewing film as interpreting the storyline of the text (Mulvey 59-62). Similarly, I argue that representation and emotion can be discussed as two critical components in understanding the significance of diversity and intersectionality when it comes to media consumption. For many minorities, seeing one’s-self on screen is not only a moment of

recognition, but a moment which is imbued with certain affective stances based on the nature of that representation. In describing the production of mainstream cinema, Mulvey indicates that:

The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. (Mulvey 59)

For Mulvey, the production and consumption of cinema creates a space of voyeurism in which the viewer is encouraged to “focus attention on the human form” as well as being placed between moments of “recognition/misrecognition” in viewing the human form on the screen (Mulvey 60-61). Mulvey suggests that the camera’s gaze tends to be focused on the female body, privileging a male viewer who is encouraged to objectify the woman seen on film (61-62).

While many Black queer web series play on the “scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object)” and “ego libido (forming identification processes)” that Mulvey outlines for cinema, these series also eschew the male gaze in favor of attracting a female gaze instead (Mulvey 67). In this sense, Black queer web series promote a form of shared recognition which encourages Black women to gaze upon the bodies of other Black women in order to garner both a pleasure in looking and moments of recognition. It is also through this use of a queer female gaze that viewers can engage with Black women’s sexuality and bodies in a way that does not seek to do violence to their representation or objectify/commodify their sexual selves.

In addition, as Mulvey’s discussion of scopophilia brought light to the construction of the male gaze in cinema, these examples seem to point to what bell hooks describes as the oppositional gaze. In the essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship,” hooks

describes how the gaze has historically been denied to Black Americans through slavery and Jim Crow, while also referencing her familial moments of gazing at Black representation on television (hooks 207-209). Eschewing the belief in a passive audience inundated by media, hooks references audience awareness of the ideological underpinnings of media narratives, by writing that:

When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation. It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing independent black cinema. (hooks 95)

In this sense, the symbolic annihilation of Black bodies on television coupled with the stereotypical representations of those who were seen resulted in the development of the oppositional gaze for Black viewers. This oppositional gaze allowed Black viewers to look upon themselves with a critical eye that could take early representations of Black Americans with a grain of salt. Especially for Black female viewers, hooks adds an intersectional analysis to Mulvey's theories to state that:

Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallogentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood . . . created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed. (hooks 99)

Not existing in the role of woman or male onlooker, the Black woman as viewer is always already positioned to deconstruct the text based on her standpoint as outsider in relation to many mainstream media texts.

Yet, as hooks points out, “Black women have written little about black female spectatorship, about our moviegoing [and television viewing] practices”, and over time “A growing body of film theory and criticism has only begun to emerge” (96). hooks starts the conversation by describing the dissatisfaction that many Black women felt in viewing Black women on film, similar to Stuart Hall’s “negotiated reading” of a text, this positionality serves as a starting point for the formation of an oppositional gaze. hooks writes that “critical black female spectatorship” does not only emerge however, “as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking” (hooks 103). The oppositional gaze also carries over into the realm of production, as Black women “do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels” in order to create narratives that do not just inspire opposition (hooks 103). Referencing multiple Black female producers and Stuart Hall, hooks points out the ways in which creating media texts outside of the mainstream imagines “new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity” (hooks 104)

Although the role that negative affect plays with regard to media consumption is prevalent in discussions of stereotypes, self-esteem, and discrimination, moments of positive affect are also significant in their capacity to also influence self-esteem, identity formation, mood enhancement, enjoyment, and solidarity. In addition, focusing one’s gaze to move critically beyond what is seen or not seen helps to critique and complicate the role that representation

plays in our study of the media. Focusing on positive affectual responses to recognition take on a particular significance when thinking about Black queer women and their relationship to representation. Due to the lack of representations of Black queer women in mainstream media and discourse, it is important to not only take into account the types of images that are produced and represented within the media, but study the role that these images play within the psyche and subjectivity of individuals. Quare shared recognition acts as an affective or emotional response to a lack/discovery of representation of the self within the media; this same recognition moves cultural producers to create texts which are well received within their communities.

The Black Church: On Race, Religion, and Mediated Respectability

At the same time, not everyone within the Black community accepts the representation of Black queer sexuality as a necessary component of Black cultural production. In the article “‘Killing the Messenger’: Religious Black Gay Men's Neutralization of Anti -Gay Religious Messages,” researcher Richard N. Pitt draws on 2008 PEW Research statistics to make the statement that “Of all major racial-ethnic groups in the United States, blacks are most likely (88 percent) to report a formal religious affiliation” and “Even among blacks who do not claim a formal religious affiliation 75 percent report that religion is either somewhat or very important in their lives” (Pitt 56). From these statistics, it is apparent that just like nationalist beliefs of Black American solidarity, the Black Church plays an important role in the construction and interpretation of the imagined Black community and cultural identity. In the book *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, the authors explain that the belief that “black churches constitut[e] the central institutional sector in black communities is common in the American understanding of the black subculture” (7). Referencing the long history of Black

churchgoing, the authors point to and spread the perception that “black churches were one of the few stable and coherent institutions to emerge from slavery” (7).

Speaking to the communal and ideological role of the church, C. Riley Snorton suggests that the Black church largely emerges as a Protestant:

institution of refuge, political change, and spiritual fulfillment – the arbiter of unique cultural traditions – but also alternatively as a place for gender and sexual regulation, the site of hyperbolic homophobia, and the primary location for the maintenance and perpetuation of black respectability politics” (Snorton 93)

From this perspective, many people in the Black community view the Black church as not only a part of their individual identity, but as an important part of Black culture in general. At the same time, there is a tenuous relationship between Black church members and openly gay congregants and attendees, as many Black church services espouse biblical teachings which vilify any lifestyle that does not fall under the norms of a successful Black nuclear family, including but not limited to same-sex coupledness, sex outside of marriage, non-binary or queer gender expression, and any other mode of being not approved or promoted in the bible.

As Lincoln and Mamiya state, “religion is . . . the heart of culture because it raises the core values of that culture to ultimate levels and legitimates them. The relationship between the black sacred cosmos and black culture in general is similar” and this relationship can also be seen in “other black militant, nationalistic, and non-Christian movements” (6). For those within the community of the Black church, Black identity and embodied experience are seen through the lens of Christianity. In contrast to the impetus of freeing Black sexuality from the silence and sanctity of the glass closet, the Black Church is invested in constructing an image of sexuality which supports a narrative of respectability. Quoting Michael Eric Dyson, Snorton points out

that ““To a large extent, the black church has aimed to rid the black body of lascivious desires and to purge its erotic imagination with ‘clean thoughts’” through “the condemnation of queer and feminine aesthetics” (Snorton 103). This condemnation is usually seen through the work of preaching and spreading the biblical word on the sexual sins of homosexuality, lust, or fornication in order to reverse sexual stereotypes about Black Americans and to uphold fundamentalist Christian values.

Despite the fact that there are many churches, African American and otherwise, which accept queer sexuality, for those who do not, there is often not only resistance to visibly/vocally queer identity within the church, but to the performance of queer sexuality in public space such as the media. It is not unheard of for churchgoers to argue that the “liberal media’s” representation of queer individuals and lifestyles will result in the homosexualization of children and young adults. Subscribing to the hypodermic needle model of television viewing, these critics position young audiences as passive and easily influenced in order to gain support for the censorship of mainstream media texts. As Foucault states in the *History of Sexuality*, “the logic of censorship” is “affirming that such a thing is not permitted, preventing it from being said, [and] denying that it exists” (84). This is because “what is inexistent has no right to show itself . . . [so] that which one must keep silent about is banished from reality as the thing that is tabooed above all else”, the thing which is not to be named (84). Operating under the belief that “you can’t be what you can’t see,” anti-queer censorship seeks to keep representation of queer individuals, and especially queer sexuality, out of the media in an attempt to erase homosexuality from societal reality.

Using a similar logic, these views on the censorship of queer sexuality do not not only apply to conservative church rhetoric, but are also seen within organizations that promote a

respectable portrayal of queer individuals. Queer positive censorship adopts the belief that through representation, queer youth and young adults can find role models to look up to in the media, which is especially important if they do not have community support or access to queer spaces and individuals. Engaging with the passive audience model, many queer advocates encourage representations of queer identity which model a homonational ideal where gay couples are seen as successful and happily married. Pushing the rhetoric of the “It Gets Better” Project, queer positive censorship tends to ignore the narratives of struggle that are faced by many POC, queer and trans individuals on a day to day basis.

Attempting to satisfy both those who do and do not readily accept queer individuals, mainstream legacy networks promote a safe and sanitized portrayal of homosexuality which leaves out much of the reality of queerness (such as sex and sexual relationships). Instead of presenting all aspects of queer reality, which includes individuals of different racial, gendered, and class backgrounds, many networks continue to place white, upper class gay men at the center of queer narratives or as token queer characters in mostly straight mediated worlds. As marriage equality became a topic of political conversation, these men are also represented in familial roles which presented a model for gay social mobility and “proper” American citizenship. Despite the positivity of these images, the lack of inclusion of other types of queer imagery in favor of narratives which seek to diminish difference and promote assimilation results in some of the same issues that were seen in the representation of Black characters. Pushing limited positive representations instead of focusing on diversity and nuance only creates controlling images which position certain types of queer identity as acceptable/respectable (the kind that the mainstream media focuses on) and other types of queer identity as inherently deviant or pornographic (not safe for television and mainstream viewing audiences).

Outside of cable networks, queer individuals are rarely seen dating, hooking up, or even kissing their partners, and like many network and cable television series, most Black queer web series do not display explicit or lengthy representations of sexual acts or romantic moments between same sex individuals. However, within series like *If I Was Your Girl*, the representation of sexuality focuses more on the pleasure of queer sexuality through the explicit representation of lesbian sex. While some viewers disagree with this type of representation based on their own beliefs about race and religion, other viewers use these series to express and uncover their own erotic pleasure. The performance of Black lesbian sexuality within web series brings the role that pleasure plays in queer shared recognition into sharp focus. Due to explicit sexual representations such as those in *If I Was Your Girl*, viewers not only engage in discourse around sensation (both pleasure and displeasure), but also create a commenting space where the intersection of race, religion, gender, and sexuality are contested and defined in unique ways.

Textual Analysis: Reading *If I Was Your Girl*

Beginning as a spin-off of the 2012 film of the same name, *If I Was Your Girl* was created, written, and directed by Coqui Hughes. Charting the rocky relationships and ups and downs of queer women of color in an urban space, the series goes back and forward in time in order to construct a narrative around four queer women in Chicago who are navigating the drama of relationships, incarceration, and child-rearing among other things. The series initially premiered in Chicago (which also serves as the setting for the series) in 2012, and in 2013 Hughes presented the first episode of *If I Was Your Girl* as web series. Unfortunately, the series didn't last for long, and it was canceled after only three episodes and a season finale, and has currently been removed from YouTube (although it is available on other video streaming sites).

However, during analysis of the series in 2016, episodes 1 through 3 spanned an almost 90 minute segment on YouTube and garnered well over 3 million views and 2,000 comments.

From the very beginning of the compilation video that encompasses episodes 1-3 of the series, the viewer is introduced to three of the four main characters (Lynne, Stacia, Toi, and Rhonda) in the narrative via explicit representations of their sexuality. The opening scene depicts Lynne naked, though covered in a sheet, while simultaneously smoking a cigarette and calling Stacia. Then there is a cut to a back shot of Stacia and Toi, their heavily tattooed bodies entwined together as they writhe naked on the bed. The scenes then cut back and forth between Lynne frantically leaving a voice message and Stacia and Toi having sex in bed with seemingly no knowledge of the drama that would unfold from Lynne's call, or their coupling (Hughes). In many ways, this portrayal of Black queer sexuality speaks back to normative representations of Black women in the media, which generally do not represent Black queer women due to the fraught relationship between beliefs about what constitutes proper Black female identity and representation and which does not. As Jasbir Puar writes in the book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, whiteness operates as a queer norm and straightness operates as a racialized norm, so based on these normative assumptions the Black queer is inconceivable through his/her invisibility within society, the media, and wider representation (Puar 35-36). These assumptions also relate to how many groups draw their boundaries of who is and who is not included within a particular identity group or larger national affiliation.

Right from the start, *If I Was Your Girl* pushes back against the normative representation of a safe and sanitized White queer sexuality in order to actually present the viewer with not only Black queer women, but Black women engaged in queer sex. I read this opening scene as a very blatant and political move on the part of Coquie Hughes to construct the intended audience or

community insiders for the series as the Black queer women she chooses to portray. With that being said, by hailing a Black queer audience, Hughes signals that the series is not shy about or ashamed of the performance of Black queer women's sexuality or the representation of pleasure. Although *If I Was Your Girl* is not an example of racialized pornography, the opening scene could be read as pornographic due to the fact that the term "pornography has become both a rhetorical device and an analytical framework, a strategy for describing and critiquing a particular re-presentation of black women's bodies" (Nash 7). By displaying black female bodies in the act of sex, the series utilizes the conventions of pornography and aligns itself with mainstream television narratives by using the visual text to illicit desire and scopophilia in the viewer.

As Nash argues, many critiques of pornographic conventions states that porn centers a male gaze and emphasizes racial/gendered difference. This observation "erases black pornographic spectatorship (male or female) and implicitly assumes that pleasure-in-looking hinges on difference, rather than analyzing how spectators might take pleasure in sameness, in seeing themselves - their bodies, their pleasures, their longings - projected on screen" (Nash 19). However, instead of simply focusing on sameness or difference, the pleasure of queer shared recognition which is found in Black queer web series, operates on both levels as viewers are encouraged to look at and desire bodies which are both similar and different to themselves. This sameness and difference specifically plays out within the series representation of its characters as the main characters of *If I Was Your Girl* represent a variety of gender identities and performance. While the gender binary within normative heterosexual society creates a binary opposition between man/woman, within same sex queer communities these differences tend to, but do not always, play out through a gender identity binary of masculine and feminine.

The performance of the masculine and feminine within queer communities of Black women is discussed in depth by the ethnographer Mignon Moore. According to Moore, during the 1970's, while many white Lesbian women refuted the the performance of a feminine/masculine dichotomy within their communities, Black lesbian women maintained this form of gender presentation within their own lives (Moore 116-17). Through an ethnographic study of Black lesbian communities in New York, Moore posits that there are three forms of Black queer gender presentation based on her survey data i.e. femme, gender-blender, and transgressive (120-124). A femme gender presentation reflects a more feminine appearance displayed through traditional women's clothing like dresses and makeup. Whereas the gender-blender aesthetic mixes the masculine and the feminine to create a unique look, the transgressive (which is sometimes described as butch or stud in certain regions) tends to present as masculine through wearing men's clothing, accessories, and hairstyles (124-126).

Looking at the characters in *If I Was Your Girl*, both Lynne and Toi would be described as femme or feminine presenting, while both Stacia and Rhonda exhibit a more masculine or transgressive appearance. While these representations depict a realistic portrayal of Black queer community, the authenticity in portraying a variety of gendered and sexual performances also challenges normative portrayals of Black women in the media, which are almost always feminine, and intersectional stereotypes i.e. that Black women are inherently masculine. Playing on both conceptions, the undesirability of Black female masculinity within heteronormative society is upended as Stacia is positioned as the most desirable character within the series, engaging in sexual relationships with more than one woman in the series. In addition, the feminine characters balance their femininity through unique portrayals which do not simply utilize stereotypes to portray their characters.

By exploring the characters narratives in a non-linear storytelling format, Hughes not only queers normative representations of Black female identity, but the construction of temporality within episodic forms of television production as the series jumps back and forth in narrative time, from present, to past, to future. By accepting the omission of episodes 4-9 in the series, watching the first three episodes and finale together, releases the viewer from having to work to piece together the major plot points of the series in order to get at the narrative as a whole. Instead the incomplete and fragmented nature of the work allows viewers to simply experience the drama as it unfolds, while also ruminating on how that drama relates to their own lives and experiences. By understanding the series through quare shared recognition, the major concerns of the characters become analogous to issues that are seen within the larger Black queer community, such as state intervention/regulation of the Black family, the effects of mass incarceration and other forms of trauma on Black women, as well as the role that relationships, gender identity, and the performance of sexuality play into one's everyday life.

This form of resistance through the creation of the media is especially evident within YouTube, as content creators such as Coqui Hughes use their work to hail a specific queer counterpublic within the larger YouTube sphere by pushing against respectable or heteronormative portrayals of Black women. At the same time, YouTube is still a public online space that is open to anyone with the means to online access. Therefore, the actual audience and commenting community for *If I Was Your Girl* is constructed of multiple individuals who have opinions that both coincide with Hughes creation and those that diverge from that view. Specifically, while there are many viewers who self-identify as Black and queer or state queer sexual attraction to the show's characters in the comments section (sometimes explicitly so), there also individuals who are either confused by this particular performance of Black female

gender and sexuality (in part because they are not the intended audience) or who vehemently disagree with the construction of a Black queer sexuality for a variety of reasons. Based on these differing forms of discourse on the site, I examined four major themes that appeared within the YouTube comments section of the episodes 1-3 compilation video for *If I Was Your Girl*, which are as follows: rejection, respectability, representation, and public pleasure. In constructing these themes rejection and respectability operate through expressions of displeasure with the portrayal of the series characters and its content for viewers identified as community outsiders, while the themes of representation and public pleasure tend to express the pleasure and desire(s) of the intended audience for the series.

Discourse Analysis: The YouTube Comments for *If I Was Your Girl*

Comments which coincided with the theme of rejection demonstrated that while there were many individuals who could be identified as community insiders, there were also quite a few individuals who were outsiders to the queer community who coalesced around the series. Rejection themed comments tended to come from individuals who did not seem to have the discursive tools to accurately read/understand the performance of queer identity and who used a variety of rhetorical methods to push back against queer sexuality, mostly via expressions of disgust and religious sentiment. Comments such as:

Commenter A: I hate gay bitches that personate as men. esp. the black ones, they are very disgusting

Commenter B: What is the purpose of this? Showing your wicked lifestyle and praising it thinking its ok? This homosexual wickedness must cease to exist. The Father is going to put judgment and destroy you all.

Commenter C: I came across this thinking it was about 'a girl' wanting to be in a normal relationship with 'a boy'. Oh well, watched 2 minutes and felt like vomiting. YUK!

Commenter D: This seems like a world of mentally fucked up in the head homosexuals. What a ruff life. And sickening as well.

These comments tend to speak to the ways in which those who don't identify themselves as part of the queer community seek to reject queer individuals from their own racial/religious /sexual communities through rhetorical devices which "other" queer experience and individuals. By referencing beliefs around religion, mental health, and heterosexuality these commenters are reinforcing dominant ideologies which position heterosexuality as the normative position within society and those who are not heterosexual as deviant, perverse, or pathological. In many ways these beliefs do not only reference common societal beliefs but are even more so based in understandings of how the public sphere of Black national identity and respectability position and police the sexuality of Black women as a whole.

As Gayatri Gopinath argues in the book *Impossible Desires*, discourses around nation and diaspora position the nation-state as pure, whole, and heterosexual, while the diaspora is seen as impure, queer, and hybridized. In Gopinath's discussions of the queer diasporic subject, she also writes that for non-queer subjects "the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora" is still alive and well (Gopinath 15). In this sense, notions of queerness and queer sexuality within many countries is viewed as an influence of ideologies from Western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This same viewpoint can also be seen when thinking about the ways in which queer sexuality is seen within the Black community.

of identity in the name of forging a national community" (Alexander-Floyd 22).

This is especially seen with comments identified under the theme of Respectability, which referenced the role of the respectable Black woman who is a God-fearing wife and mother within a heterosexual relationship. This role was cited and used in opposition to the series characters as well as the Black women who the series sought to represent, such as in this comment:

Commenter E: Sistas whenever you want to come back home to us and raise STRONG FAMILIES, there are still good black men around who are looking for wives. There's a lot of good brothas out there, so don't think that you have to settle for another woman.
Peace

Enacting a queer sexuality is seen as a conspiracy or plot against the Black community and the success of the Black family. By engaging in same-sex relationships and/or non-reproductive sex, Black queer women are positioned as selfish and acting in opposition to the interests of the Black community. This comment in particular implies that Black women are settling for other women because they have given up on finding “good” Black men, denying the reality of the existence of Black queer women within the larger community.

These types of respectability comments also build on the understanding of queer identity as a White European trait that doesn't hail from Africa, as seen in the comments below:

Commenter F: What the hell is all this crap? rubbish brainwashing stupidity..

Commenter G: This ain't the state of the true nature of the black queen..this is Eurocentric thinkin

In both of these comments Black heteromascularity positions itself as the arbiter of what it means to be Black as well as the saviour of the Black queer woman who has taken the wayward path and fallen astray by engaging in White homosexual deviance. It is only through coupling

with the Black man that the Black woman and community can return to its original African glory with the title of Kings and Queens. However, this origin story simply reinforces decades of stereotypes which position Black women as second-class citizens within their own Black community, incapable of thinking and choosing the right path for themselves and their family.

After coding comments which reference respectability it is apparent that even within a discursive commenting community that is positioned around video content created for and by Black queer women, the politics of the greater imagined Black community and Black nationalism is ever present within community discourse. At the same time, these comments of rejection and respectability did not go unquestioned within the commenting community for *If I Was Your Girl*. Throughout the comments section there were many viewers and community insiders who rejected the comments from those outsiders who sought to position their own dominant ideological beliefs on the series and the series intended audience, as follows:

Commenter H: I hate to say this but you guys know what you were getting into when u looked at this . . . its for gays grow tf [the fuck] up tired of the judgment don't watch it the same motherfuckers who have problems with it watched all parts to the end

Commenter I: All these homophobic, ignorant ass comments are bullshit why are you watching a lesbian web series if you don't agree with homosexuality aren't there other things you could be doing

Instead of remaining silent, these commenters questioned the presence of the actual audience members who had not been hailed by the series content and subject matter. In this sense, the intended audience members for the series are able to reclaim the space for themselves by not

allowing the views of community outsiders to dominate the discursive commenting community that has formed around the series content.

The Politics and Performance of Pleasure

So, despite the role that the themes of rejection and respectability played within the comments section for the majority of community outsiders, there were still many moments in which both joy around representation and the public pleasure of viewers were also spoken within the commenting community. In particular, the theme of representation was seen as community insiders expressed their joy and appreciation at seeing Black lesbian women's personal and sexual lives reflected within a series, from which they stated:

Commenter J: I Love This Webseries!! The Part Where Toi Danced For Lynn Was EXTREMELY Sexy!! I Love All Characters :) Can't Wait For MORE!!!

Commenter K: Thank you youtube for finally suggesting something worth watching! So glad there are a couple of lesbian web series that I can enjoy now. Subbed!

Commenter L: This is the real L word ! :-)

Commenter M: I have Between Women and now this Show. Youtube have me right with the shows.

In each of these comments, viewers voiced how much they loved the series due to the fact that it represented queer women in a variety of ways. In addition, many of the comments that were themed as Representation also made allusions to other series in both mainstream television (*The Real L World*) and YouTube (*Between Women*), which furthers the argument that the intended audience for *If I Was Your Girl* is comprised of individuals within the niche market of Black

queer women and/or individuals who are knowledgeable of and enjoy queer women's programming.

Under the theme of pleasure, there were even more comments on the series from both community insiders and outsiders which spoke to the desire that viewers had for the characters themselves. On one level there were comments such as those below which positioned the commenter as an individual who was comfortable with expressing queer desire and scopophilia i.e. pleasure in looking at the queer women in the series.

Commenter N: I really love this series I watched it like 4x already lol toi body is on 100 and temper sooo sexy i love her song :)

Commenter O: "omg temper is so damn fine.. why can't I find a stud [masculine presenting queer woman] like her bro. you can wife me up all day!!!!"

At the same time, there were commenters who were not as comfortable with potentially aligning their own sexual identity with a queer one, so they prefaced their comments with statements which referenced their heterosexual identity and newfound desire for queer women. These comments included, but were not limited to:

Commenter P: i am straight but i LOVE this..series

Commenter Q: I'm a straight female, but Stacia is sexy as hell.

Commenter R: lawd i aint gay but i'd seriously date Stacia. And where's the playlist i love the music that was in here

Commenter S: I LOVE THIS SHOW.I AM A STRAIGHT WOMAN AND I FIND STACI SO EFFIN SEXY! DAMN! SHE BAD!!!

Although these commenters do not identify as queer, the decision to articulate a queer desire within the public space of the YouTube comments section speaks to the role that video content plays in constructing a discursive commenting community which operates as a queer sexual counterpublic where individuals have the freedom to take pleasure in viewing and expressing queer sexuality and desires. It is also important to note that of the commenters who self-identified as heterosexual women, their desire tended to be oriented towards the character Stacia, who is masculine and not feminine presenting. In this sense, Stacia's gender performance as a masculine queer woman allowed heterosexual women to feel comfortable expressing their queer desire as Stacia's gender performance did not question their own role within the gender binary.

These expressions of desire also speak to the tension between Lorde's conception of the erotic and the pornographic and how I see the two working together. As many viewers express in the comments, there is both positive and negative commentary about the series opening scene. Reading the opening scene through the negative comments and conception of pornography as anti-erotic, the scene can be interpreted as gratuitous sexual expression which is solely being used to encourage deviance and the hyper-sexualization of the Black female body. However, by reading the scene as pornographic and acting in concert with the erotic, the positive comments show that viewing two women in a sexual act encourages greater knowledge of the self and one's sexuality, and empowers the viewer to freely express their desire within the comments section.

Conclusion

Although there is a belief that the Black community is inherently homophobic, by analyzing the comments for Black queer web series, beliefs around race do not tend to be the sole or primary concern for individuals who express dislike, discomfort, or disgust towards expressions of Black queer sexuality. In examining the discursive commenting community which

has formed around the series *If I Was Your Girl*, it is clear that outsiders to the Black queer community continuously seek to police the representation and reality of the lives of Black queer women. They enact this form of policing Black women's sexuality and gender performance through comments which position their own ideological beliefs around race, religion, sexuality, and mental health in opposition to the representations within the series, which they position as "other". Especially within the comments for *If I Was Your Girl*, comments which pushed back against the expression of Black queer female sexuality spoke to the themes of religion and heteropatriarchy more often than a simple concern about racial identity. In coding these comments, I found that the corresponding themes of Rejection and Respectability spoke not only to the particular standpoints of commenters who worked to separate themselves from the narrative of the series, but also to long standing discourse within the imagined Black community and the political rhetoric of an authentic Black national identity. This rhetoric promotes the belief that defining Black womanhood and femininity is not the domain of the Black woman, but instead only legitimates and creates space for her Black identity as a reproductive vessel within the heteronormative Black family structure.

At the same time, comments from insiders to the Black queer community spoke out against these monolithic views of Black womanhood by speaking against the community outsiders who rhetorically rejected them and for whom the series was not created. These commenters questioned the role of community outsiders within the commenting community for *If I Was Your Girl* which spoke back to creator/director Coqui Hughes' intentions of specifically creating a series for an audience of Black queer women. Through discourse that I themed as Representation, these community insiders spoke up for the importance of having their lives and experiences represented in a series as well as their role as the intended audience members for a

variety of other queer programming. In addition, self-identified queer and heterosexual women spread discourse around the public pleasure that they found in not only watching the series, but their individual parasocial desires for the queer women represented. Building on this theme of pleasure, we can see how the performance of queer sex and sexuality within *If I Was Your Girl* supports a commenting community which acts as a queer sexual counterpublic for women, especially queer women of color.

In this sense, a queer sexual counterpublic is fostered through the protection that community insiders enact in allowing women to express their own queer desires in however they see fit within the space. While these declarations are not approved, in the same way that the performance of Black women's sexuality in the series itself is not approved, by community outsiders, community insiders do not allow this policing to silence their voices. As a queer sexual counterpublic, the discursive commenting community for the series *If I Was Your Girl* is full of discourse which works against a respectability politics which positions Black womanhood as proper, heteronormative, and safe. Instead, Black queer women speak to their sexual and spiritual desires for representation not only to claim space for themselves in opposition to the audience members who would oppose them, but to engage in a quare shared recognition that allows Black queer women to affirm each other as a part of the larger imagined Black community.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion: Unpacking the Quare Politics of the YouTube Platform

Despite the promises made, ‘platforms’ are more like traditional media than they care to admit. As they seek sustainable business models, as they run up against traditional regulations and spark discussions of new ones, and as they become large and visible enough to draw the attention not just of their users but the public at large, the pressures mount to strike a different balance between safe and controversial, between socially and financially valuable, between niche and wide appeal.

- Tarleton Gillespie “The Politics of Platforms”

YouTube, as a broadcast medium open to most anyone with access to the internet, encourages and facilitates the four iterations of quare shared recognition described in the previous chapters i.e. production, performance, politics, and pleasure. Yet, the rhetoric of YouTube as a space where anyone can be heard and seen hides the corporate aspects of the site which limit the visibility of certain types of content and content creators. This lack of visibility translates into content which is not as popular as similar content on the site that is perhaps more commonly followed and picked up by viewers or better funded by producers. So, instead of offering the production and dissemination of Black queer web series as a cure-all to the symbolic annihilation of Black queer people on cable and network television, it is also important to analyze how and why the YouTube platform works in favor of a majoritarian politics of representation through perpetuating the norms of both cable and network television. By

discussing the politics of platforms and the labor that many Black queer people participate within and outside of the platform to get their YouTube series to audiences, I argue that although quare shared recognition gives viewers the opportunity to recognize themselves in content, that content is not always visible to viewers. Therefore, quare shared recognition also encompasses the moments in which queer viewers use their own networks and other platforms to share content with those that they believe should see and experience it. The concept of Quare Shared Recognition is not only inclusive of the YouTube platform but can be applied in the analysis of other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, etc in conjunction with the role that they play in discussing media texts and identity formation.

On the Production of Black Web Series

By linking the structural possibilities of YouTube with the realities of certain individuals, it is apparent that the structural aspects of the site give us the opportunity to draw conclusions about race, gender, and sexuality in relation to the types of video content that individuals produce and consume through the YouTube platform. In contrast to producing content for legacy networks, which requires connections and finances, creating YouTube videos is as simple as pointing a camera phone and taking a picture. YouTube applauds itself for promoting a DIY culture which supports amateur content production and a long “history of vernacular creativity” which includes activities such as storytelling and family photography (Burgess & Green 25). As it is well known, and well studied, it is difficult for any person outside of the white male hetero-patriarchy that also knows someone within the industry to be able to publish anything within the mainstream media (Gray, *Cultural Moves* 6; Smith-Shomade 33-36). Spaces like YouTube open up an opportunity for web content creators that are not usually represented within the mainstream

to create their own content that speaks to vastly intersectional communities and standpoints (Christian “Fandom as Industrial Response”).

As Anna Everett states in the essay “Black Film, New Media Industries, and BAMMs (Black American Media Moguls) in the Digital Media Ecology”, the current time period has ushered in many Black American Media Moguls who are changing the face of film and television. Citing well-known figures such as Oprah Winfrey and Spike Lee, Everett ends her piece by stating that for “black film’s next act, stay tuned to such innovators as Issa Rae, whose *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* web-episodes on YouTube and other ventures have become a sensation” (Everett 133). She goes on to write that “As new media technologies provide black media producers with new outlets and options for their creative and educational work, our discussions of black film and media may need to be tweaked or rebooted” (133). By positioning Issa Rae’s “Awkward Black Girl” as the next step in the study of Black television, like Christian, Everett also links the formation of web series to a legacy of Black television and film as well as a departure into a new future of the forms.

For many Black women, web series can be seen as one of the ways in which the dichotomous representations of Black female identity are being re-interpreted to encompass the invisible middle of viewers that are not regularly represented on television. Shows such as Issa Rae’s “Awkward Black Girl” and the YouTube network “Black and Sexy TV”, act as a referent to and divergence from mainstream portrayals of Blackness on television. As derivatives of television, web series can be seen as series which borrow from the conventions of television in order to create shows for a niche audience of viewers. For example, “Awkward Black Girl” borrows from the conventions of Black television by situating itself in the middle of Herman Gray’s continuum of Black TV shows and in conversation with Patricia Hill Collins controlling

images of the Black woman. Despite these shifts in the television industry, large amounts of Black Americans still primarily watch network and cable television, in part because the amount of Black Americans that have access to the Internet is not as large as the amount of Black Americans who have access to a television set ("Cross-platform media consumption"). However, as the PEW Internet Research group has shown, while Black Americans do not have the same amount of access to the internet as White Americans, many have access to the internet through the use of other mobile media devices such as smartphones (Smith).

In this sense, Black cultural content producers that choose to create web series that depict the lives of Black Americans have a ready audience through YouTube's integration with mobile technology. This research also proposes that African Americans are more likely to use social media platforms in comparison to other users, which speaks to the use of cell phone apps and conceptualizing YouTube as not just a video sharing site but a social media site that is integrated with Google Plus. In furthering the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in his article "Camp 2.0" on videos that embody the "camp" aesthetic commonly seen in drag performances, Aymar Jean Christian states that the ways in which YouTube videos are produced speaks to a certain construction of queer identity. He writes that "YouTube and its structures may compel and allow the assertion of self on one's own terms" (363). In terms of queer identity, the self that is produced does not have to be explicitly spoken but instead, YouTubers that make these types of videos "let their gender performances, politics, and camp sensibility speak for themselves" (363). This is also depicted through the video editing that the site supports, which encourages the presentation of a cohesive self that has been constructed for the audience.

One of the ways that we see how the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality speaks for itself is through the creation and consumption of Black queer web series. As it has been stated,

while mainstream television attempts to represent most all individuals, Black queer women are underrepresented within television. When they are represented they tend to be sexualized for the benefit of a dominant male gaze and not a queer female gaze, (as seen through the lack of masculine presenting queer women in the media) because mainstream television is meant to reflect mainstream societal values. Similar to the Black content creators that came before them, many queer women of color also moved to the digital realm in order to represent themselves and their community. As Marlon Raquel Moore writes in her article “Close-Up: Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in Black Films and New Media,” just like other Black web series, productions which focus on Black queer women are expanding mainstream media and societal constructions of Black queer sexuality. Working through a history of Black queer film and television, but focusing on the series *Between Women*, Moore writes that the series creator:

Michelle Daniel and director Christina Brown employ the Internet as a small-screen platform to disrupt hegemonic, whites only, or interracial (read as more palatable) constructions of same-sex eroticism on television with a show premised on the idea that a circle of women who sleep with, live with, and/or fall in love with other women, will not all easily fit under the “lesbian” umbrella - and they definitely won’t all be white-skinned. (Moore 210)

Black queer web series such as *Between Women* are able to utilize the YouTube platform to speak to an audience whose identity does not exist in the dichotomous or homogenized articulation of queer identity that is generally promoted within mainstream media productions. Instead, Black queer web series create productions which speak to the polymorphic nature of intersecting group identities.

In addition, Black queer web series advance innovation in series development and set the stage for creating queer community online through identification with content, creators, and characters within the series. While mainstream network and cable television address Black queer communities as market “niches,” promoting “disidentification” between racialized subjects and the text, Black queer content creators predominantly recognize their audiences as community members (Munoz 72). In response I find that Black queer web series promote a Quare shared recognition between users through the production of web series, the performance of intersectional identities, the politics of Black community-making, and the pleasure in viewing characters that represent racial, gendered, and sexual identity and desires. Quaring and shared recognition undergird the reading practices viewers bring to performances of Black queer identity within web series, framing the discourse through which they negotiate the paradoxical invisibility and hyper-visibility of Blackness and queerness which frames the reality of black queer productions and publics.

By promoting the recognition and performance of self through the production of videos as well as endorsing the production of original content, YouTube is structurally invested in supporting users who do not fit into the norms of mainstream media. While it can be said that all identity is performance, within the world there is an assumed non-performance when we present ourselves and interact with others. YouTube’s pronouncement to “Broadcast Yourself,” without a definition or implied normative self, seems to encourage difference, or queer presentation. At the same time, the digital has its own technological limitations. While YouTube can be seen as a site that is revolutionizing how we think about television, mainstream broadcast/cable television still reigns, YouTube is still a corporate entity, and as Candace Moore states in the essay “Distribution is Queen” as larger corporations learn how to use the Internet they will primarily

use it for their own benefit (Moore 137-140). Therefore, the platform exists within the dual position of expanding the possibilities of Black queer production while also limiting the visibility of those productions to a smaller sphere of niche audiences. We cannot simply take into account YouTube's potential to make changes, we must also discuss the role of the YouTube platform, corporate practices, and algorithms in the visibility of queer content online.

Politics of the YouTube Platform

In the "Politics of Platforms" Tarleton Gillespie writes that the term platform is just as much a part of the discursive formation of Web 2.0 as terms such as network and participation. For Gillespie, the "platform" is not only given the computational significance that Bogost and Montfort afford it, but also a host of other connotative and denotative meanings. YouTube utilizes all of these meanings as its platform can be seen as:

Computational, something to build upon and innovate from; political, a place from which to speak and be heard; figurative, in that opportunity is an abstract promise as much as a practical one; and architectural, in that YouTube is designed as an open armed egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical restrictions". (Gillespie 352)

While this language appears to be a neutral take on the possibilities of the site, YouTube uses this same language to attract both YouTube users and the advertisers and corporate entities that also utilize it. For its users, YouTube is a platform which hosts user generated content and appears to be a unique blend of democracy and creativity that gives anyone with access to the necessary technology the opportunity to present one's content to the public (353-354). For advertisers, YouTube is a revolutionary platform in that it gives businesses the opportunity to market their products and goods to a semi-captive audience of YouTube users (355). As such,

YouTube elides the binary opposition of being both a corporate entity and a site made for publishing free openly accessible user generated content by positing that it is a platform for all of these endeavors that operates as a neutral and objective middle man.

It is important, then, to think about the political aspects of the platform, specifically the formation of media conglomerates and the convergence of internet companies. As Jose Van Dijck writes in the book *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, we have to think about the many webs of associations that construct social media platforms. Not just the technology and the users, but also the ownership and management of these platforms. For Van Dijck, this look into the political economy of YouTube “regards platforms and digital networks as manifestations of power relationships between institutional producers and individual consumers” or content creators (Van Dijck 27). For YouTube, this political economy can be exemplified by analyzing the relationship between Google’s corporatization of the site in conjunction with the users of the site. Specifically, the co-optation of YouTube by Google in 2006 marks an important shift in the site itself. Just like Facebook changed when it became a public company that had to answer to shareholders and not just users, YouTube has also changed as Google is constantly looking for new ways to monetize the site. This monetization is seen through the increase in advertisements as well as the type of content that is promoted on the sites main pages.

As it was stated in the history of YouTube, the site began as a space that supported and promoted original content created by amateur producers. However, when you actually look at what types of videos get the most views on YouTube and which channels have the most subscribers, a different narrative is constructed. Now music videos reign supreme, and the Vevo channel is seen as a major component of YouTube. Even more prolific than the cute animal

videos that simply constructed YouTube as a space for watching virals, YouTube has become a kind of quasi-MTV as major channels such as MTV and Vh1 have moved into other forms of media production (Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms”, 353). In 2014, YouTube also began to monetize content through a paid streaming service known as YouTube Red. Similar to services like Hulu Plus, for a monthly fee of \$9.99 users are given access to original premium content as well as YouTube videos and music without the ads or pop-ups used to monetize the main site.

For some scholars, this move to music videos, movie trailers, premium content and other corporate productions also seems to be indicative of YouTube’s move away from amateur content and towards the more professional (and higher grossing) content. Another recent change that is indicative of this move towards content which generates the most views is seen with the YouTube’s decision to begin limiting the ad revenue of video content that doesn’t reach a certain amount of likes. Viewed as a penalization of YouTube channels with smaller pools of viewership, this change is another example of how the corporate tactics of Google influences the way that the site is run and places it further away from its original purpose.

The YouTube Algorithm

According to Gillespie’s “The Relevance of Algorithms,” just as the term platform itself matters “as much for what they hide as for that they reveal” algorithms also operate as their own systems of knowledge which structure our interactions with technology (Gillespie, “The Politics of Platforms”, 360). Due to fact that YouTube operates as a service or delivery platform, the main algorithm for YouTube, when it comes to the selection of videos, is an Application Programming Interface (API) which “offers the means for third-party applications to access data retained within a web based service following a collection of technological standards and protocols” (Akoumianakis et al., 89). Therefore, an API is an app that does not have to operate

through the web site or tool that you are using, but can be programmed to retrieve certain types of information from that site based on how the program is written. For YouTube, the API is run through the Google Data Protocol (GDP), which means that the programmers at Google have access to the YouTube system and can therefore use the API to improve upon that system (91).

During the 4th ACM conference on Recommender systems, a panel of Google programmers first described how people generally find videos on YouTube and the ways that the YouTube API has been programmed in order to simplify that process. Generally, YouTube users utilize the site for “direct navigation” (to get to a video that they found on another site i.e. links, or embedded videos), “search and goal-oriented browsing” (the user knows what video he or she would like to see and sets out to find it), or “unarticulated want” (the user doesn’t know what they want to see, but is simply interested in watching a video) (Davidson et al., 293). While the first two utilizations involve user intent, the last use gives the algorithm the opportunity to make recommendations to the user. These recommendations are based on a combination of video content (date, popularity, type of video) and user interest (other videos watched, liked, favorite, subscribed, etc) (295).

Generally, recommendations take a long time for the system to generate, so they are “pipelined” i.e. the system generates new data multiple times every day for its users through hidden mechanisms (295). In viewing videos on YouTube, this system creates a kind of branching mechanism as similar types of users will generally be led to certain types of videos, creating links from one to the other. This recommendation system is also very successful, as the programmers at Google concluded with the statistic that “recommendations account for 60% of all video clicks from the [YouTube] home page” (296). Although this recommendation system is incredibly efficient, it also speaks to some of the issues with operating systems that create both

an echo chamber of feedback through a pre-constructed sphere of resources that separate users (and in the case of YouTube, videos) based on content that is just as much about identity and representation as it is about popularity and the date of upload.

As Tara McPherson writes in “U.S. Operating Systems at Mid Century” from *Race After the Internet* it is not only important to think about what the invisible technologies of algorithms or operating systems do beneath the surface, but also how they influence the institutions and practices above this surface. She suggests that as academics we should bring together arguments about “race, electronic culture, and post-structuralism and further argue that race, particularly in the US is central to this undertaking fundamentally shaping how we see and know as well as the technologies that underwrite or cement both vision and knowledge” (McPherson 24). In relation to the YouTube API used to recommend videos, there is an apparent “lenticular logic” of thinking about race and the formation of certain technologies and the types of knowledge that those technologies produce (25). While the UNIX system was based in the color blind logic of the post civil rights era, the YouTube algorithm can be seen as even more deeply situated in the post-racial logic of the Obama era (24-25). Just like the UNIX code, the algorithm for the YouTube recommendation system is focused on the importance of modularity and discreteness in programming. With the millions of videos on YouTube, there is a need for the system to efficiently and effectively recognize what users want, even if they don’t know what they want. Therefore, the algorithm is created based on generalized tools that are able to perform tasks independently in order to promote the reduction of complexity through the predominance of simplicity which is displayed through the “clean interface” of the YouTube homepage (27-28).

Overall, users know very little about how their videos are chosen for them so there is an apparent lack of transparency in operation between the computer and the user. For McPherson,

hiding the inner logic of the system can be seen as a form of neoliberal colorblindness which segregates individuals in the name of modularity (McPherson 30). This segregation of users is seen with the types of communities that are formed around content, in which users only know what they are already subscribed to or what YouTube tells them that they should watch. By creating recommendation software that reinforces the interests of its users in conjunction with what is popular and profitable on YouTube, it becomes more difficult to stumble upon the lesser known content that is created on the site. In addition, this neoliberalism can be viewed through Jasbir Puar's conception of homonationalism as it relates to the recommendation of Black queer web series. As Lisa Nakamura states in the book *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, the rhetoric of Internet use has relied on a colorblind neoliberal logic which prides the online sphere on being democratic and nondiscriminatory (Nakamura 4-5). However, by only recommending the most popular Black queer web series to users who already watch these types of web series, the YouTube algorithm is doing the work of promoting the most popular Black queer subject(s), discriminating against certain types of content in order to construct a specific image of the mediated homonational subject (Puar 37-42; 61).

Thinking about identity and representation, even if the creators of videos on YouTube are making content that speaks to a particular imagined niche audience, unless those audience members already know about the content or watch a lot of content just like it they will never find it. In this sense, the extent to which YouTube search gives one access to a plethora of content, it also hides the majority of the content that is available within the site. Similar to the ballrooms and buffet flats that marked the offline sphere of black queer sociality and performance within the 20th century, Black queer web series of the 21st century tend to be hidden in plain sight, only known to those who are already in the know about the series existence. While Black queer web

series existence in what C. Riley Snorton calls the “glass closet” can be described as fostering safety and greater communal bonding, this does not result in widespread popularity and mainstream success for the creators, producers, and performers of these series. So, while the YouTube platform can be seen as having the virtual potential to create a new space for the expression and reception of various modes of Black queer sexuality, there is still much to be done in ensuring that these creative productions receive the recognition that they rightfully deserve.

Pushing the Platform and Audience Labor

Despite the realities of the computational platform of YouTube, Black queer viewers and producers believe in the potential of YouTube as a platform which makes narratives from the Black queer community known. Even without garnering the same level of viewership as other web series on the site, viewers and producers perform the extra labor of disseminating the series within their own interpersonal and professional networks. For producers, this work takes on the form of producing web series using their own resources, without getting outside funding to pay actors, workers, and for equipment, costumes, set design, etc. Then, after the series are complete, many of these producers and actors do the work of marketing these productions through events, film festivals, social media, and various other campaigns. In conjunction with these marketing tactics on behalf of producers and actors, viewers themselves are encouraged to share their favorite series with friends and families from both word-of-mouth and social media campaigns. As YouTube and other platforms allow content creators to monetize their content through using paywalls, content that was once offered to viewers for free must now be purchased (as seen with the series *Between Women*). In addition, if content does not garner a large enough audience or enough funding it can cease to exist (as seen with *If I Was Your Girl*).

Although fans of a series are generally overjoyed to share their favorite series with their own networks, this process of sharing not only speaks to the limitations of the YouTube platform, but demonstrates the norms of media production and audience labor within the digital economy. As the success of the Web 2.0 era of the internet rests on user-generated content and getting individual users to continually share content, the labor that audiences are expected to do in relation to consuming the media increases. As Tiziana Terranova writes in the essay “Free Labor”:

The Internet highlights the existence of networks of immaterial labor and speeds up their accretion into a collective entity. The productive capacities of immaterial labor on the Internet encompass the work of writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/Web sites/chatlines. These activities fall outside the concept of "abstract labor," which Marx defined as the provision of time for the production of value regardless of the useful qualities of the product. (Terranova 42)

From a Marxist perspective, many media scholars have come to understand free labor as the ways that users support platforms and producers without monetary compensation. This could be as simple as tweeting about a show with a suggested hashtag when it premieres or as extensive as creating products and plotlines for a fan film contest that will later be used by a production company. While viewers of Black queer web series, and most fans, do this work gladly in order to ensure that their show stays in production, in the case of Black queer web series viewers this expectation also speaks to the seeming inadequacy of YouTube’s “Broadcast Yourself” rhetoric.

Open TV and the Future of Web Series

As Aymar Jean Christian writes in the book *Open TV*, “the open tv market is at odds with corporate media’s distribution strategies, which constrain creativity and diversity in search of

reliable profits” (Christian 252). Instead of focusing on intersectionality and diversity in programming, video streaming services are intent on attracting audiences in order to monetize their content in the same ways as the legacy television networks that came before them. As Google continues to learn how to efficiently monetize the YouTube platform, changes in the American political sphere do not bode well for the future of small scale independent productions on YouTube. After years of debate and protest, from 2017-2018 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruled against net neutrality. For years, net neutrality required internet service providers (ISP’s) to give all internet sites and users equal access to content and applications regardless of the source of said data. At this current time, net neutrality has only been in effect for a short period of time, but the implications of this FCC ruling could cause an increase in pay for play content, in the event that ISP’s decide that it would be in their benefit to charge a higher premium for quality access to social media or streaming sites. Especially in light of the recent changes to the YouTube platform, it is time to look elsewhere for spaces to produce and disseminate web series, and in particular Black queer indie productions.

Instead of relying on corporate entities and streaming services, the book *Open TV* concludes with some examples of how indie productions can begin to flourish outside of these institutionalized networks. Instead of focusing on large scale production, Christian writes about Open TV (beta), a platform which produces the creative work of a diverse collective of queer and/or trans people of color. This content spans many genres, with series that can be categorized as dramas, comedies, docuseries, and many more styles of programming. This platform is not only unique in its diversity of creators and programming, but in its intent, as Open TV (beta) promotes the work of local artists in the city of Chicago. Christian notes that it is important that television scholars “focus on the small and the local, on analyzing and sustainably developing

sources of innovation before venture capital takes notice” (Christian 257). Especially as larger networks learn that they cannot simply produce their own diverse programming without the help of diverse creatives, small and local series must be supported so that they can develop on their own and outside of mainstream modes of production.

Created locally and sustaining themselves independently, many of the Black queer web series that I have discussed focus on particular cities and the queer communities found there: *The Peculiar Kind* brings to light the work of creators in Brooklyn, *Between Women* focuses on Atlanta, and *If I Was Your Girl* offers a representation of Chicago. With each of these series, you also see the interaction between the series creators and cast and the local audience for each of the series. Almost acting as a reward for fan labor, many of these series have public viewings in the communities that they depict as well as locally held events to help raise funds or increase viewership. Cast and crew from series like *Between Women* are also regulars at film festivals and in the community, where they host workshops on performing in and producing Black queer content. Despite the many changes that have occurred in the political and technological landscape, as long as Black queer content creators have the support of their communities, they will continue to be able to produce content and that content will eventually find an audience, no matter how small.

Concluding Remarks

Black queer web series are unique in their representation of Black queer women and in their ability to foster discursive commenting communities on YouTube, the sphere of YouTube is not a queer utopia or a digital democracy. Hence, it is important to understand both the possibilities and limitations of the platform as well as the content of Black queer women’s web series, even as these web series bring positive benefits to many individuals within their audience.

By examining the role that queere shared recognition plays in the production, performance, politics, and pleasure of Black queer web series and their viewers, it is apparent that these web series offer viewers the opportunity to see themselves in ways that they are not seen within cable and network television. In the YouTube comments sections for Black queer web series, these viewers engage in discussions which not only include conversations focusing on recognition, but how these viewers understand identity, community formation, and relationships. In this sense, queere shared recognition acts as an epistemological and existential paradigm, which uncovers how both researchers and Black queer women can come to know more about the intersectional self in relation to others.

By centering Black queer women's narratives and experiences in this project, this unique standpoint acts as a starting off point to investigate the norms of media production and viewership, as well as the role that platforms and the performance of identity play in those processes. Future research projects can use the theory of queere shared recognition to explore how other groups which experience intersectional marginalization within society and their own communities create and produce media texts which communicate their own unique experiences to others who can understand or are interested in them. Although this project focused on the unique struggles and strategies of Black queer women, queere shared recognition as epistemology, ontology, and reading practice can be tailored to suit the media production and consumption practices of other groups. For example, it would be fascinating to examine series which focus on queer LatinX identity or Black trans identity both online and offline. Especially because the YouTube platform is an important space for creating independent productions, there are multiple social media platforms which support content that speaks to groups that are not commonly featured in the mainstream media. Some examples of social/digital media platforms for potential

study include, but are not limited to, Vimeo, Vines, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. These platforms each have their own specific affordances which allow for particular types of content to be posted and responded to by content creators and consumers. They are also spheres which are easily accessible to a variety of individuals from around the world and success on any of those platforms can result in greater success and recognition within the mainstream sphere of film and television production. In examining these platforms, research questions can still focus on how the group is perceived within society and by the group itself, in order to draw conclusions about how the digital/social media platform is being used to construct a particular understanding of that identity that will garner heterogeneous responses from individuals from within and outside of the community.

Consequently, this dissertation brings together conversations on race, culture, gender, and sexuality to draw conclusions about the way that individuals communicate interpersonally, intrapersonally, and through channels of media production. As an intersectional approach to the study of media, shared recognition acts as both theory and method for the study of multiple platforms and types of independent production. Yet, in focusing on Black queer women's experiences, the theory still seeks to address the lack of focus on addressing intersectionality as more than a dualistic understanding of identity. In addition, by using YouTube comments as the primary data, I hope to assuage other researchers of the belief that comments sections are not worthy of critical analysis. Instead, this project displays the myriad ways in which comments on race, gender, class, and sexuality continue the conversations that content creators start in the web series being produced on YouTube. Even in the moments that negative comments attempt to dismiss or downplay the importance and relevance of the content, viewers and fans overwhelmingly populate the space with expressions of solidarity and shared recognition

showing that there is always room for quare comments and creations as long as there are individuals who seek quare representation.

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