“THE DEVIL IS ALWAYS PAINTED BLACK”: A QUEER BLACK FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF THE ACCUSATORY SPACE IN *INSECURE*

by

ASSATU N. WISSEH

(Under the Direction of John Soloski)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines whether the emergence of Black women television showrunners, creators and executive producers of television series, disrupts the spectator positioning of Black women in the accusatory space by analyzing season one of the HBO scripted series *Insecure*. I argue that *Insecure*, by employing established looking relations, continues mainstream media’s practice of symbolically annihilating Black women, specifically Black characters who do not embody respectable traits. Despite the long tradition of Black women as oppositional image-makers, this thesis explores how *Insecure’s* adoption of mainstream conventions normalizes White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal hegemony.

INDEX WORDS: Black feminist criticism, Whiteness, Visual Pleasure

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ASSATU N. WISSEH

B.B.A., University of Georgia, 2005

M.A.T., University of Southern California, 2012

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ASSATU N. WISSEH

Major Professor: John Soloski
Committee: Valerie Boyd
Nathaniel Kohn

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This thesis examines images produced by Black women. In this historical moment, with movements such as "#OscarsSoWhite," there are calls for more diversity in the culture industry. The logic goes that employing individuals from underrepresented backgrounds will help to correct racist, sexist, ableist, xenophobic and heteronormative imagery. This thesis questions this logic that the oppressed "social situatedness" of cultural producers automatically yields consciousness and representations that challenge the status quo. In addition to social situation, what is required is what philosopher Sandra Harding calls (2004) standpoint that interrogates looking relations, the cinematic apparatus and constitutive dominant ideologies and discourses that produce subject-positions and "so-called natural conditions of human perception" (Mulvey, 1975). Accordingly, this thesis examines, from a queer Black feminist standpoint, the ways White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy operates as *normal*, even for Black women cultural producers. Also, this thesis confronts the ways Black women cultural producers do the "work by themselves" of dominant ideology (Althusser, 2014).

This confrontation is not new. Black women cultural producers such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* published in 1892; Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* published in 1892 and Harriet Jacob, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* published in 1861 have interrogated, from what is now considered a Black feminist standpoint, the taken for granted elite, White male gaze that produced representations of Black women's

purported natural impropriety (Carby, 1987; Giddings, 1985; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Higginbotham, 1993). These Black women entered the public sphere and contested social, political, economic and cultural structures that normalized dominance and reproduced oppressive social relations (Bobo, 1995; Carby, 1987; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). In a climate marked by dehumanization of people outside the ruling classes, their work as speakers, writers and journalists in various liberation movements from abolition to voting rights–all fields traditionally dominated by men–was opposed, as it violated the cult of True Womanhood (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Despite this resistance, the women persisted. After all, maintaining the institution of slavery required outlawing literacy for enslaved people of African descent. As result, these "race women" understood the liberatory potential of written images.

In the era of moving images, DW Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, cemented feature-length cinema as an apparatus used to circulate racist-sexist ideologies that rationalize the violent subjugation of men and women of color (Guerrero, 1993) and ushered in decades of representations shaped by Whiteness (Foster, 2003). As a result, Black women such as Ida B. Wells continued to use cultural platforms to challenge images that constructed Black men and Black women as sexually deviant in order to justify lynching and rape. Although Black woman reformers were not without issues, these U.S. Black women were early image-makers who rejected bourgeois capitalistic individualism and used their media presence in the service of collective uplift (Carby, 1987). The title of this thesis, "The Devil is Always Painted Black," is a quote from Cooper's (1969, p. 225) *A Voice from the South* in which she critiques White male cultural producers such as Joel Chandler Harris for appropriating African American storytelling traditions and constructing distorted images of Blackness for personal gain. As a result, Cooper

calls for Black people to interrogate social relations that privilege White-defined images and to produce cultural practices rooted in a collective self-defined standpoint.

Elite White men continued to maintain control of U.S. film and television production and distribution into the twentieth century. Black women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937; Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maude Martha* published in1953; Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* published in 1970 and Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* published in1982, were able to confront stereotypical constructions of Black womanhood through their cultural products and to construct Black women personae from the self-defined standpoint that Cooper encouraged (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith, 1982; Washington, 1975). However, visual representations in dominant film and television largely remained uncontested, as state-sanctioned Jim Crow segregation limited the reach and impact of “race films.” White-controlled mass media productions such as *Gone with the Wind* in 1940, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* in 1951 on CBS, and *Beulah* in 1950 on ABC dominated and propagated imagery rooted in sexist and racist ideologies (Staples & Jones, 1985).

In the post-Jim Crow era of the 1970’s, Black men emerged as feature film directors with nationwide theatrical releases. It was a widely held belief, as Cooper’s quote illustrates, that Black media makers would create representations, from a self-defined standpoint, that challenge dominant looking relations. However, film scholars Robert Sham and Louise Spence (2009) state Gordon Parks’s *Shaft* placed a Black male protagonist in the “actantial slot” occupied by White heroes. In addition, Black feminists Michele Wallace (1992) and Jacquie Jones (1992) state Black male directors Spike Lee, John Singleton and Mario Van Peebles maintain the dominant spectator positioning of Black women in what Jones calls “the accusatory space,” as the objectified *other* of a presumed male and White gaze. Similarly, nearly a decade

later, film scholar Norma Manatu took up this issue of Black women and the accusatory space. Manatu (2003) analyzed several films directed by men to determine whether the influx of Black male directors "altered the negative images of Black female sexuality in contemporary American films of the 1980's to the early 2000s" (Manatu, 2003, p. 3). For the most part, she found they did not. Black male filmmakers analyzed in Manatu's study such as Spike Lee, Doug McHenry, and Malcolm D. Lee practiced what feminist bell hooks termed "transference without transformation" (hooks, 1992, p. 126, 1996, p. 268).

However in 1992, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* became the first feature-length film by a U.S. Black woman to receive national theater distribution. In the tradition of U.S. nineteenth century Black women writers, Dash refused to accept the Eurocentric gaze and chose to make films "from a Black aesthetic and from a woman's aesthetic point of view" (Martin, 2007, p. 7). In other words, Dash's Black feminist/womanist standpoint disrupted conventional looking relations. Dash and her contemporary Black female novelists, playwrights and poets Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange sought not to position the Black community's plight for the pleasure of White spectators; instead these Black women artists created images for a Black communal gaze (Stuart, 1988). Seventeen years into a new century, a cultural trend in U.S. mainstream television production necessitates revisiting Manatu's question regarding the social situatedness of an auteur and representations.

Since 2012, a trend of one-hour, scripted television programs produced by Black women, featuring Black female leads emerged. ABC aired *Scandal*, one of the first scripted, primetime, "Big 3" network television series starring a Black woman lead since *Julia* in 1968 on NBC and the Blaxploitation drama *Get Christie Love!* in 1974 on ABC. Prior to *Scandal*, shows produced by and starring Black women as leads such as *Living Single* in 1993 and *Girlfriends* in 2000

aired when fourth networks like Fox and UPN (now The CW) were fledgling enterprises (Gray, 2005; Zook, 1999). In addition, these programs involved ensemble casts, whereas *Scandal* is in the tradition of a Hollywood star vehicle like *Julia* in 1968. A Black woman, Shonda Rhimes, is creator and executive producer of *Scandal*. In addition to *Scandal*'s mainstream success, it was the top-rated, scripted series among Black women in 2013, according to Nielsen (2013, p. 17). After *Scandal*, elite media corporations including NBC/Universal, Viacom and Disney/ABC developed scripted programming featuring Black women in lead roles such as *Deception* in 2013, *Being Mary Jane* in 2013 and *How to Get a Way with Murder* in 2014. In 2016, HBO continued this trend, premiering *Insecure*, whose creator, executive producer and star is a Black woman, Issa Rae.

Insecure is loosely based upon Rae's memoir and web-series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. The half hour drama/comedy follows the life of Issa (Rae), who struggles to impress her nonprofit boss Joanne (Catherine Curtin) and support her unemployed boyfriend Lawrence (Jay Ellis) with the help of her best friend Molly (Yvonne Orji). Reviewers praise *Insecure*'s realist imagery. *The Atlantic*'s David Sims states, "*Insecure*'s conflicts, whether romantic or platonic, always feel organic" (Sims, 2016). *Variety*'s TV Critic Sonia Saraiya says "…'*Insecure'* feels like 2001's 'Bridget Jones's Diary,' which brought viewers into the messy world of its lead character's unacknowledged dysfunction and colorful vernacular, punctuated by her own nervous tics and the foibles of her friends" (Saraiya, 2016). *The Griot*'s Niki McGloster writes, "For a late 20-something-year-old black woman living an honest-to-God regular life, Rae's new breakout comedy series '*Insecure'* is the type of small screen fare we've been praying for since 'Girlfriends'" (McGloster, 2016).

The purported realism of *Insecure* and crossover appeal of Rae are two reasons it was selected for analysis. The *Hollywood Reporter* named Rae one of "Hollywood's 50 Most Powerful TV Showrunners" (O'Connell, 2017). The series pilot of *Insecure* drew over one million viewers (Obenson, 2017). *Insecure's* ratings, comparable to its predecessor *Girls*, speaks to HBO's effort to attract "female and younger" audiences since HBO does not rely on ratings to boost advertising sales but on increasing subscriptions, which currently hovers around 135 million (Berg, 2017). In addition, a Nielson report on television viewership finds non-Black viewers watch numerous programs featuring a predominantly Black cast or narratives centering Black cultural themes (The Nielsen Company, 2017b). Of 11 scripted programs, Rae's *Insecure* is the only series that names a Black woman as creator/executive producer, constructs narratives from a Black, college-educated, middle-class woman's perspective and centers a predominately Black cast.

Accordingly, *Insecure*'s Black woman genesis and Black woman-centered narratives make the series a fitting case for a Black feminist critique, which privileges lived experience as a source of knowledge. For instance, Rae's social situation as the daughter of a Senegalese immigrant and an African American mother adds a diasporic component that complicates the usual intersectional analyses revolving around race, class and gender. Focusing on ethnicity and national heritage emphasizes difference among Black women, which challenges essentialism. As Mary Helen Washington states (1975), centering Rae and *Insecure* enables exploring how images of Black woman created by Black women cultural producers differ from the representations in texts by White cultural producers or by Black male cultural producers.

This thesis examines whether the emergence of Black women television showrunners– creators and executive producers of television series–disrupts the spectator positioning of Black

women in the accusatory space by analyzing season one of the HBO scripted series *Insecure*. It is argued that *Insecure*, by employing established looking relations, perpetuates mainstream media's practice of symbolically annihilating Black women, specifically Black characters who do not embody respectable traits. Despite the long tradition of Black women as oppositional image-makers, this thesis explores how *Insecure's* adoption of mainstream conventions normalizes White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal hegemony.

Approach and Method: A Queer Black Feminist Critique

Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" introduced the term intersectionality. Intersectionality rearticulated a central sentiment of Black feminist thought since the days of early reformers: Every marginalized group consists of a privileged class whose values and needs become identified with the group as a whole, which operates to erase the heterogeneity within the group. Crenshaw argues that with anti-discrimination discourse and practice, the subject-positions of Black, middle-class men become synonymous with "Blacks," and the term "women" signifies only White, middle-class women.

Similarly in the landmark essay "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," political scientist Cathy Cohen (1997) builds upon Crenshaw's intersectionality and makes clear a single-axis oppression framework not only misrepresents power relations within subordinated groups by marking all members as equally marginalized, but masks how privileged group members accrue status and other benefits through their ability to assimilate in ways that non-normative group members cannot. In addition, Cohen states the need to expand the use of the term queer to incorporate, for instance, how the dominant classes marginalize poor racialized women who produce offspring in heterosexual unions as "welfare

queens" and "baby mamas." According to Cohen, poor racialized persons are ridiculed and denied access to dominant spaces in ways similar, not identical, to sexual and gender minorities. This thesis utilizes Cohen's queer politics and Crenshaw's intersectionality to critique how the *normal* subject-position of heterosexual, middle-class, college-educated, cisgender Black women depends upon situating non-privileged or *queer* Black women in the accusatory space.

Black feminist criticism, which Crenshaw employed, is the theoretical approach by which *Insecure*'s representations will be analyzed. Black feminist writer and activist Barbara Smith first used the term "Black feminist criticism" in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" published in 1978 (Carby, 1987). This text was republished in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave,* and, in this text, Smith offers principles to guide critiques of Black women's artistic productions. Following Smith's (1982) recommendations, this thesis works from the position that Black women cultural producers constitute an identifiable tradition; second, this thesis is rooted in a Black feminist standpoint; and, third, this thesis seeks to challenge prevailing notions regarding the text (*Insecure*) under analysis (B. Smith, 1982). As a result, this thesis does not aspire to conduct so-called neutral scientific analyses; rather this author " 'speaks' from a particular, historically specific, social location" (S. G. Harding, 2004, p. 4) to produce knowledge about similarly located subjects.

The method used to analyze *Insecure* is close reading/textual analysis. African American literary scholar Valerie Smith describes how close reading in a Black feminist context is "reading intersectionally," which "directs our attention to the ways racism, misogyny, homophobia, and class discrimination have functioned historically and in the present to subordinate all Black people and all women" (V. Smith, 1998, p. XXIII). Maintaining the tradition of Black feminist criticism as introduced by Barbara Smith, close reading/textual analysis has been utilized by

recent women of color feminist film scholars (Esposito, 2009; Everett, 1995; Griffin, 2014; Hobson, 2002; Nash, 2014; Wallace, 1992). This close textual analysis seeks not to determine whether representations in *Insecure,* as an artistic piece, accurately reflect the lives of Black women but to determine whether *Insecure*'s imagery challenges or normalizes the White supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchal gaze. As a result, this thesis employs Black feminist criticism to ask how the construction of Rae's insecure/awkward Black girl subject-position, as a counter-image, reinforces dominant looking relations and representations. The following literature review clarifies the theoretical context of this queer Black feminist critique.

Literature Review

In 1978 sociologist Gaye Tuchman published *Hearth and Home*, a collection of essays from scholars who argue U.S. media, controlled by elite White men, promulgate sexist imagery that is resistant to change. In the text, Tuchman et al state "mass-media stereotypes of women as housewives may impede the employment of women by limiting their horizons" (Tuchman, Benét, & Daniels, 1978, p. 7). Two ideas undergird Tuchman's viewpoint: first, the reflection hypothesis states the content of mass media align with the social beliefs of the dominant classes (Tuchman et al., 1978) and, second, "symbolic annihilation" describes how representations of women reduce them to "child-like adornments" or domestic damsels in distress (Tuchman et al., 1978). *Hearth and Home* is an important text that discusses implications of mass-media images during the television era. However, according to Tuchman, the book focuses primarily on representations of White women in characteristic American families of the 1950's: parents and children living in private, single-residence homes or White male-dominated workplaces in texts such as *The Doctors*, *All in the Family*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *McCall's* (Tuchman et al., 1978, p. 8). Tuchman does not extensively address raced *and* gendered representations.

In 1990 Patricia Hill-Collins published *Black Feminist Thought.* The chapter "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" expands the investigation of representations of women by focusing on the ways dominant popular and scholarly discourses construct Black womanhood (Collins, 2000a). Collins concludes White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy produces images of Black women to explain and to justify oppression of U.S. Black women in order to maintain dominance. Building upon tropes identified by other contemporary Black scholars (A. Y. Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; O'Neale, 1986; Staples & Jones, 1985; Washington, 1974), Collins categorizes four main controlling images: the Mammy, Matriarch, Jezebel and Welfare Mother, which function to symbolically annihilate U.S. Black women (Collins, 2000a, pp. 69–96). Like *Hearth and Home*, *Black Feminist Thought* confirms the hegemony of elite White men is supported by imagery of Black womanhood that upholds dominant beliefs. Given the analyses of Tuchman and Collins, it seems logical to conclude that Black women gaining institutional power to produce cultural products would mean a shift in representations of Black women.

In 1975, film scholar Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" employed psychoanalytic theory to explore the tension between two psychic drives: ego/narcissism (identification with one's likeness) and libido/scopophilia (pleasure in looking at an individual as an object). Accordingly, the mainstream film industry, rooted in phallocentrism, produces looking relations "split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). Thus, the alienated subject, constituted in the patriarchal order, identifies with the active male protagonist and satisfies scopophilia through the objectification of the woman as image. The point here is the cinematic structure is not neutral; rather, it is constituted in phallocentric and patriarchal ideologies, which produce specific looking relations. However, a major criticism of

Mulvey's work is that her cinematic gender binary stops short of taking into consideration how dominance in Western society is structured through and across other categories besides gender (Diawara, 1988; Everett, 1995; Gaines, 1986; hooks, 1992). As a result, film theorists such as Steve Neale (1983) extend Mulvey's argument regarding the structure of visual pleasure beyond a male/female dichotomy.

This thesis complicates the single-axis framework by combining Mulvey's conception of looking relations, Cohen's Black feminist queer praxis and Crenshaw's intersectionality. Jones's accusatory space captures the necessary fusion of Black feminist queer praxis, intersectionality and spectator positioning. Critically reading visual pleasure from a Black feminist standpoint, Jones notes that Black men, privileged in the category of Black people in a racist patriarchal society, centered Black male icons and so-called Black narratives, which decentered the normalcy of middle-class Whiteness. However, these films maintained Black female representation in "the narrowness of the two categories that Black women are allowed to occupy in this cinema–that of the bitch and that of the 'ho" (Jones, 1992, p. 96). In this way, Jones elucidates that neither the structure of active male agent/passive female object was disrupted nor the racist-sexist look constructing Black women as controlling images. Accordingly, Black men occupied the space of bearer of the look and Black women took on the position of the spectacle but not in the glamorized sense as White woman as image. Black women remained the jezebels and matriarchs of the racist, sexist, and classist cinematic apparatus.

Applying Jones's accusatory space to examine difference within the category of Black women, this thesis posits an active privileged subject/passive non-privileged subject dichotomy, as opposed to a gender split, in the texts of Black women cultural producers. Accordingly, subject-positions of spectators shaped by White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy would

identify with the active White, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender male gaze, regime of representation and looking relations split between active agent and objectified Other. This means Black middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender females, as active agent, displace their purported deviance onto queer (meaning poor, outside the protection of heterosexual marriage and transgender) bodies, specifically queer Black women. This is the meaning of accusatory space and queer used in this thesis. In sum, dislocating "the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions…" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 18) requires interrogating, from an intersectional rather than a single-axis oppression framework, voyeuristic-scopophilic looking relations and how this structure, rooted in dominant ideologies, produces subject-positions.

Black Feminist Thought

What distinguishes contemporary Black feminist thought from the mainstream woman's movement, Black liberation, or Marxism is the refusal to privilege one structural location such as gender, race, or class as the basis of domination (White, 2001). In fact, "A Black Feminist Statement" composed by The Combahee River Collective, dated April1977, states, "We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (1982, p. 13). In this way, Black feminist thought senses identity categories of race, gender, sexuality and class as enmeshed structural locations that speak to varying lived experiences of privilege and discrimination.

Black feminists use various terms to describe this interconnectedness of simultaneous oppressions: hooks (1984) employs the term imperialist, White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, Collins (2000a) uses the term matrix of domination, and Crenshaw (1989, 1991) coined the phrase intersectionality. Audre Lorde (1984) articulates the condition of simultaneous,

interlocking systems of oppression by employing the term "difference." Although each intellectual offers nuances regarding the definition of each term, the meanings are similar: simultaneous oppressions that are inextricably linked shape Black women's lived experiences (The Combahee River Collective, 1982). In *Home Girls: A Black Woman's Anthology*, Smith (2000) describes the concept of simultaneous oppressions as Black feminism's chief contribution to the fight for liberation, as other women of color and LGBTQ movements have incorporated the idea as a foundational tenet. Accordingly, the focus on intersectional oppression makes Black feminist thought the appropriate standpoint and framework to critically read *Insecure*.

Critical Black Female Spectatorship

The "critical reading of the spectator" is one of three cinematic looks that can contribute to the disruption of conventional visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975, p. 18). Living as a Black woman in the United States does not automatically translate to being a critical media spectator. On the contrary, this standpoint is a deliberate position achieved through the struggle against the status quo (A. Bailey, 1998; Collins, 1986; S. Harding, 1986, 1991; S. G. Harding, 2004; Kourany, 2009; Rolin, 2009). For this reason hooks states, "Many black women do not 'see differently' precisely because their perceptions of reality are so profoundly colonized, shaped by dominant ways of knowing" (hooks, 1992, p. 128). Similarly, critical theorist Paulo Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* also, reasons subjectivity of oppressed individuals is shaped by modes of domination.

Stating that a critical standpoint is achieved is not intended to pathologize Black women, but to state that women of color do not posses innate immunity to hegemonic practices and expectations. Native American feminist Barbara Cameron describes internalizing "racist pictures" of Asians, Blacks and Latinx that she learned from various forms of media (Cameron,

2015, p. 44). Chicana cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa states it took her over thirty years to unlearn dominant ideas that convinced her Latinx are inferior to Whites (Anzaldúa, 2015). Anti-racist activist Ellen Pence describes how racist socialization causes many Whites to enact their privilege, even when they reject racism on a conceptual level (Pence, 1982, p. 46). As Theologian J. Kameron Carter notes Whiteness is not a matter of biology but of discipline (2013). However, this discipline can be interrupted.

Critical Black female spectatorship means seeing and unsettling the ways hegemonic discourses produce subject-positions as natural. Although the culture industry is persuasive and constructed to produce particular emotional responses, the audience has agency to engage in readings of texts in ways that work for them (Braudy & Cohen, 2009, p. 663). Interrogating taken for granted beliefs is essential, for repetitive exposure to negative stereotypes regarding one's in-group can lead to the acceptance of such tropes as *true reflections* (Manatu, 2003). As cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall states, hegemonic codes spread in a specific cultural context and learned at an early age appear natural (Hall, 1999, p. 95). While mainstream feminist film criticism's sole focus on gender works "to reinforce White middle-class values," the intersectional approach of Black feminism necessitates acknowledging other oppressive structures (Gaines, 1986, p. 61). A Black feminist oppositional stance centers Black feminist "subjectivity in the arena of visual pleasure" (Hobson, 2002, p. 54). In order to resist oppression, one must first recognize contradictions once considered natural (Sandra Lee Bartky, 1975).

Accordingly, a Black feminist reading seeks to reveal how oppressive systems such as racism, classism and heteropatriarchy merge to legitimate the subjugation of various peoples, and a Black feminist critique, also, seeks to challenge power as domination (hooks, 1992). As with nineteenth century Black woman intellectuals who sought to effect structural change by making

use of mass media, critical textual analysis such as this study operates to trouble the normalization of commercial film and television (Diawara, 1988). Further, Black feminist film scholar Jacqueline Bobo (1988) describes how the oppositional gaze is grounded in the understanding that the mainstream cinematic apparatus has never represented Black women in an unproblematic way. Thus, a Black feminist reading illuminates the ways media representations of Black women maintain systemic oppression and provides a means to subvert looking relations. Cahiers du Cinéma editors Narboni and Comolli assert "it is the job of criticism to…slowly, patiently, not expecting any magical transformations to take place at the wave of a slogan, to help change the ideology which conditions them" (2009, p. 689).

The dominant cinematic apparatus has produced multiple forms of media from newspapers to vaudeville shows to radio programs to disseminate racist sexist imagery that upholds the status quo (Collins, 2000a; Dijk, 2002; Feagin, 2010). As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that the culture industry greenlights Black productions and hires personnel that are not subversive but comply with the interests of those in power (Bell, 1980; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Consequently, an increase in mainstream media productions headed by Black women at elite media corporations cannot be the single standard by which Black feminists, or Black people in general, measure progress. It is important that Black women critical spectators confront the status quo by "looking" at "the ways power as domination reproduces itself in different locations employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control" (hooks, 1992, p. 115). It is not the objective of Black feminists to seek advancement in the current system via these new "mechanisms of control." Frantz Fanon's (2004, p. 140) warning that marginalized persons can be "disarmed by some concession or another" remains relevant.

Challenging the existing White supremacist neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchal mainstream media is the aim of critical Black female spectatorship by exploring how the dominant gaze persists and how it can be deconstructed (E. Hammonds, 1994). If critical spectatorship enables one to see that conventional looking relations produce the White woman as image. Then, Critical Black female spectatorship reveals how the accusatory space constructs Black woman as the controlling image. One way to confront the status quo is to name the ways dominant media construct Black women as the opposite of idealized White womanhood. As a result, a review of the mammy, Black lady, jezebel, and sapphire controlling images follows.

Controlling Images and the Accusatory Space

There is power in naming**.** The re-naming of African peoples, who already defined themselves, speaks to colonialists' hubris and to the primacy of a Eurocentric worldview. Literary critic Hortense Spillers communicates this assessment effectively: "The nicknames by which African American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene…demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative" (Spillers, 1987, p. 69). To fully understand the interplay of voyeurism, capitalism and dominant conceptions of Black womanhood, it is necessary to examine the seizure and exhibition by European men of South African woman Saartjie Sarah Baartman, named the "Hottentot Venus." In *Venus in the Dark*, media scholar Janell Hobson (2005) explains how Baartman, between 1810 and 1815, came to signify the supposed ugliness and oversexed nature of Africans. The reduction of Baartman, a Khoisan woman, to an object is a grim example of scopophilia, masquerading as culture and science (Collins, 2004; Mama, 1997). Further, it speaks to how images of Black women are inextricably linked to racial and gender ideologies that construct both non-White peoples and women of all races as inherently inferior (hooks,

1981; Mama, 1997). The commodification of Baartman's Black and female body for a European market is central to any discussions of representations at the intersections of race and gender (Hobson, 2005).

The current neoliberal climate divorces media images from their historical and ideological significance. This section of the literature review does the opposite and seeks to make clear how the Black woman symbolizes "chaos that must be excised, and it is her excision that stabilizes the West's construct of the female body" (O'Grady, 1992, p. 14). Dominant views of Black women in the United States continue to mirror this same dichotomy of Baartman, who embodied both the antithesis of beauty and the epitome of lechery. Along these two extremes, the mammy and matriarch represent the ugliness of Black women, as the jezebel and welfare mother/crack whore signify Black women's presumed deviant sexuality. It is through the dominant White supremacist neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchal gaze that the cinematic apparatus positions Black women in the accusatory space.

The Mammy. Mammy signifies a pernicious form of Black womanhood, as the trope links Black women with both innate ugliness and maternal instinct. According to Collins the dominant class propagated the mammy myth as the rationale for the exploitation of house slaves and the restriction of Black women to domestic service; for these reasons, the mammy icon serves as the index by which all Black women are measured (Collins, 2000a, p. 72). African American actress Hattie McDaniel's epitomized the loyal, obedient, asexual domestic in various mass media formats. Stephens and Phillips (2003) assert the mammy trope is a script of the protective and nurturing Black woman who happily serves Whites. Coincidentally, Collins (2000a) describes the mammy as the ideal Black woman, who is rewarded by Whites for knowing her place and placing her White families' needs above all. Activist Angela Davis

maintains the mammy stereotype "presumed to capture the essence of the Black woman's role during slavery"(A. Y. Davis, 1981, p. 5). Fundamentally, mammy represents Black women in White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal imagination: a childlike Black woman incapable of thriving outside of White control.

Further, the mammy performs an asexual identity often attributed to her dark skin complexion and large physique. This erasure of Black women's sexuality speaks to a deep fear regarding the purported threat of Black women's bodies to White domesticity. In *African American Women and Sexuality in Cinema*, Manatu asserts the notion of the neuter Black woman hails from the days of Thomas Jefferson who attributed Black women's purported ugliness to their dark skin color (2003, p. 18). Film historian Donald Bogle states mammy "is representative of all-Black woman, over-weight, middle-aged, and so dark, so thoroughly Black, that it is preposterous even to suggest that she be a sex object" (Bogle, 1989, p. 14). Characterizing Black women as asexual, ugly mammies serves to erase the knowledge of White men's rape of house slaves and domestic servants. As a result, mammy imagery has been a staple of American moving images, as articulations of the mammy appear in films as recent as *A Raisin in the Sun* released in 1961(Bogle, 1989) to 2010's *The Help* and 2013's *Tyler Perry's The Haves and Have Nots.*

Positioning of Black women as asexual mammies on screen persisted. A study of television advertisements found that African Americans are least likely to be pictured as families, and Black women are less likely than White women to be represented as spouses emotionally bonded in home settings (Coltraine & Messineo, 2000). In the imagination of dominant media, Black women are ill fitted for fulfilling, heteronormative relationships. As a result, their rightful place is serving a White family, where they receive rewards for upholding dominant

expectations. It is important to remember the political context of the house slave and domestic servant. Slavery and Jim Crow lynch law restricted Black women's freedom to choose alternative ways of being without facing severe sanctions including death and rape. In contemporary times, Collins finds that this group oppression of Black women continues stating, "for reasons of economic survival, U.S. Black women may play the mammy role in paid work settings" (Collins, 2000a, p. 74). As Black women make gains in education, the mammy trope climbs the corporate ladder.

The Black Lady. In dominant media, Black working women are represented as the Black lady, a modern-day mammy who has risen to middle-class status. The Black lady trope is as deceptive as the mammy because it symbolizes middle-class politics of respectability and appears to transform controlling images (Collins, 2000a, p. 80). On a visible level, there is nothing seemingly malicious about the trope. However, Black feminist scholar Kimberly Springer names *The Cosby Show's* Claire Huxtable the iconic Black lady, as the representation is visibly raced but avoids overt references to systemic racism (2007, p. 258). The image of the Black lady obscures how appropriating Black women within an oppressive structure is tokenism that convinces masses of oppressed persons that they too can make it if they work hard and adopt the right values. As such, the underlying meaning of the Black lady is consistent with what sociologist Howard Winant calls the "liberal racist project," which seeks to erase acknowledgement of how race restricts the material conditions of minorities (2001, p. 107). Consequently, the Black lady in mass media embodies post racial discourses of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and post-feminist discourses of self-surveillance. The icon reinforces the belief that it is poor choices and culture that produces the Black underclass, but the success of the

Black lady is the result of middle-class ethic (Springer, 2007, p. 259). Assimilated images like the Black lady make claims of unjust societal conditions appear harsh.

In addition, dominant media productions encode the Black lady with familiar stereotypical traits. The image advances aspects of Moynihan's "matriarchy thesis—Black ladies have jobs that are so all consuming that they have no time for men or have forgotten how to treat them" (Collins, 2000a, p. 81). This constructs Black women as the opposite of ideal White femininity, for, even with education, Black women cannot ascend to the status of a lady. In a study of African American professionals, sociologist Adia Wingfield states dominant media portray bourgeois Black women "as 'Black Ladies' whose potentially unrestrainable sexuality is safely confined to heterosexual marriage, 'educated Black bitches' who are manipulative and controlling, or 'modern-day Mammies,' who uphold White-dominated structures, institutions, or bosses at the expense of their personal lives" (Wingfield, 2007, p. 198). The Black lady functions as an oxymoron, symbolizing how Black womanhood and middle-class respectability are inherent contradictions (Lubiano, 1992, p. 341). In sum, the representation can be read as a Black, middle-class amalgamation of the loyal mammy and unfeminine matriarch.

Matriarch/Sapphire. As the historical landscape changed, so did controlling images. Dominant media portrayals of Black, working women as sapphires/matriarchs coincided with Black women's increased political involvement and "critique of U.S. patriarchy" (Collins, 2000a, p. 75). In terms of mainstream imagery, the vocal matriarch is the opposite of the docile mammy. Sapphire Stevens of *The Amos and Andy Show* typifies this unfeminine, aggressive female, who emasculates her husband. On the contrary, Bogle describes mammies as bad-tempered and states this trope made its debut in "the comedy, titled *Coon Town Suffragettes*," which portrayed, "a group of bossy mammy washerwomen who organize a militant movement to

keep their good-for-nothing husbands at home" (Bogle, 1989, p. 9). Although names vary, the meaning of the trope is unequivocally associated with Black female social and sexual deviance.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan is largely credited as the source of the matriarch argument. However, Davis states Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier developed the matriarch thesis in his 1939 book *The Negro Family* (A. Y. Davis, 1981, p. 14). Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action" problematizes Black families headed by single mothers as pathological and dysfunctional (Moynihan, 1965). Further, Moynihan largely attributes the prevalence of female-headed households to Black women's alleged rejection of normative gender roles: "Given the strains of the disorganized and matrifocal family life in which so many Negro youth come of age, the Armed Forces are a dramatic and desperately needed change: a world a way from women…" (Moynihan, 1965, p. 42). According to this perspective, the ascent of the supposed Black matriarch triggered the destruction of the Black nuclear family and symbolizes the punishment Black society faces when Black women step out of their rightful places as dominant society's mammies (Collins, 2000a, pp. 76–77). The matriarch is a scapegoat, which shifts the source of the Black family's oppression from White, heterosexist, capitalist patriarchy to single Black mothers, who have no institutional power (Morgan & Bennett, 2006). The Matriarch trope survives in portrayals of Black women in non-scripted programming such as the *Bad Girls Club* and in fictional characters such as Aunt Esther of *Sanford and Son* and *Empire*'s Cookie Lyon.

Jezebel. Black woman's sexuality is the central theme of the final controlling image. This trope is rooted in sexist ideologies that regard all women as men's possessions. In 1792 White, bourgeois intellectual Mary Wollstonecraft (2009) published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* The text elucidates how connections between constructions of the Biblical Eve as

inherently evil and justifications of sex-based oppression show that male dominance has been a problem of human relations since ancient times. In addition, Nigerian/British feminist activist Amina Mama (1997) states the intensity of anti-women sentiment and violence in Europe shaped colonialists' views of African women. As a result, imperialism and slavery made racist and sexist ideologies shackles in Black women's lives, as "racial difference was linked to sexual difference in order to maintain White male supremacy during the period of slavery" (E. M. Hammonds, 1997, p. 95). The jezebel controlling image was prominent in the days of Thomas Jefferson who claimed Black women mated with orangutans, which produced in them animalistic tendencies (Manatu, 2003, p. 17). White patriarchal constructions of Black women as animals allowed White women to be elevated as True Women (hooks, 1981).

This dichotomous representation of women served to legitimate oppression. Although society strictly policed women's sexuality, ruling class men possessed sexual freedom. Sociologist Robert Staples states this racist-sexist double standard of White men claiming premarital sex as a prerogative while denying it to women, "always poses the problem of what females will provide the source of sexual gratification for bachelor males" (Staples, 1981, p. 10). Marking White women as pious, pure, submissive, and domestic, and characterizing Black women's sexuality as inherently deviant edified cultural norms by creating boundaries (Collins, 2000b, 2000a; A. Y. Davis, 1981). Reverence and protection was allotted to White women and Black women were rendered open prey. Sociologist Robert Staples asserts the historical record shows White males exploited Black women's enslaved status by forcing them into "various sexual associations" (Staples, 1981, p. 10). Davis clarified "sexual associations" in firmer tones, explaining that White men used rape as a form of terrorism: "Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in

the process, to demoralize their men" (1981, pp. 23–24). Black women's bodies came to signify deviance both to conceal this reality of their oppression and to exculpate White men. More dangerous, the representation of Black women as jezebels implies that Black women prefer and choose sexual immorality.

In visual media, the jezebel was first evoked in feature-length film in *Birth of a Nation's* representation of the mulatto Lydia (Bogle, 1989, p. 14) Lydia is not the wife but the power-driven mistress of a White carpetbagger, and Lydia "is also the film's only passionate female" (Bogle, 1989, p. 14). The jezebel trope was not confined to visual culture. Davis reminds us that statesmen, academics, journalists, and literary artists engage in similar ideological assaults by portraying Black women as promiscuous and immoral (1981, p. 176). The concept of the sexually aggressive Black woman is frequently perpetuated in Black music forms of Hip/Hop and R&B. Multinational media conglomerates pressure commercial artists to reproduce the White supremacist male gaze, deploying an image of woman eternally available to satisfy the sexual demands of men (Rose, 2008). Stephens and Phillips state, "The 'exoticizing' of African American women as wild, sexually promiscuous, and amoral continues to be normalized by descriptors that are widely circulated, accepted, and used to frame ideas about this population" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). At the intersection of class, the crack whore/welfare mother represents supposed sexual deviance of Black women, and, at the intersection of sexuality, the dyke trope proves the "jezebel can also be masculinized and once again deemed 'freaky' if she desires sex with other women" (Collins, 2000a, p. 83). Thus, the jezebel image arguably is the most identified and pervasive of controlling images of the new millennium.

Images are not problematic simply because they are negative in themselves but take on meaning in relation to other images. For example, a representation of a Black woman who

engages in sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is not necessarily a jezebel. It is important to interrogate how the arrangement of images and the spectator positioning produces meaning. A reasonable site of examination is whether the succession of images, the syntagmatic structure, constructs the Black woman icon's sexual activity as deviant in relation to other personae or whether the order of sexual imagery is constructed to mark the morality or normalcy of another figure. In addition, if looking relations are structured in ways that limit the spectator's ability to identify with the character, then the icon is a controlling image.

Controlling images constitute a paradigm of psychological imprints constructed from a White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal gaze. Black feminist scholar Tricia Rose (2008, p. 167) discusses how the deployment of hoe/jezebel and bitch/Sapphire icons in hip hop commercial media culture is rationalized by the argument that "There are hoes and bitches." Rose makes the point that controlling images are ideological and discursive productions. A hoe or bitch does not have a flesh and blood referent. Instead, the ideals, practices and rituals of White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy produce a poor, scantily clad Black woman who lives in the projects and dances in a music video as a hoe, while constructing an educated, professional, scantily clad White woman homeowner like Madonna who also dances in music videos as a feminist icon. The act of dancing or dressing the body is not significant on its own; rather, raced, gendered, classed and heteronormative beliefs inscribe the acts and produce meaning. The work of ideological apparatuses such as the film and television industries is to mask this process of inscription and to conflate the image and the referent, producing the notion that such images are natural and worthy of censure in the case of the hoe and praise in the case of the feminist icon. Imagistic disparity in mass media persists because it does the ideological work of normalizing power relations.

Next Chapters

The ways that conventional drama and comedy work to justify social relations by constructing and naturalizing agonistic subject positions, one group for celebration and the other for ridicule, is of central importance (Frye, 2000). This thesis continues by exploring how the accusatory space serves to perpetuate imagistic disparity in Black women's texts by centering *Insecure*. Mulvey (1975) argues the Hollywood cinematic apparatus both normalizes and idealizes conventional looking relations–man as possessor of the look and woman as spectacle–via the star system. As a result, the thesis interrogates the standpoint of Rae's star persona in chapter two, "The Insecurity of Symbolic Representation: Issa Rae's Aggressively Passive Wokeness." This textual analysis examines how Rae's beliefs, performances and practices, as self-articulated in her memoir and several media interviews, shape the production of the *ordinary*, college-educated, middle-class Black girl subject. Employing Brittany Cooper's conceptualization of embodied discourse, this chapter troubles celebrations of crossover Black women public figures and to interrogate how Rae's public performances as the celebrated *ordinary*, college-educated, middle-class Black girl subject depend upon the marginalization of non-normative/queer Black women to the accusatory space. In this way, Rae's public persona as a respectable Black woman whose success depends upon distinguishing her image from "bad Black women" simultaneously colludes with and confronts the dominant gaze.

After exploring Rae's star persona, the thesis moves on to examining looking relations and images in *Insecure*. Chapter three "Mapping Mammy 2.0: *Insecure* and the Middle-Class Black Woman's Burden" probes Rae's construction of the relationship between Black intellectuals and the (common) folk. Using Evelyn Higginbotham's politics of respectability, it is argued that Rae normalizes White supremacist capitalist patriarchy by producing an

assimilationist, middle-class Black woman icon as the respectable active agent and positioning in the accusatory space a Black women persona that embodies vernacular culture as *the Other* worthy of discrimination. In "Decolonizing the Suffering Black Girl Discourse in *Insecure*," chapter three examines *Insecure*'s production of Black women's sexual relationships and the positioning of Black women in the limited accusatory space of the matriarch/bitch and the jezebel/hoe (Jones, 1992). I explore how *Insecure's* sexual relationships are structured in the suffering Black girl discourse, which perpetuates the racist and heteropatriarchal notion that Black men are "no good" and Black women are inherently flawed. In addition, this chapter examines how *Insecure* constructs personae that represent sexual minorities as humorous or, in parlance, "butt of the joke." In this way, *Insecure* maintains the dominant spectatorship positioning of Black sexuality as the deviant, exoticized spectacle.

In keeping with Cohen and Crenshaw's perspective of privileged subgroups within marginalized groups, this thesis interrogates asymmetric power relations within the group labeled Black women. As a result, the remaining chapters speak to how the failure to recognize differences of privilege and power within oppressed groups such as Black women forecloses the possibility to see how privileged marginalized persons identify and assimilate into the dominant culture, become normal, at the expense of non-normative/queer individuals of the same group becoming deviant. Accordingly, *Insecure* reproduces dominant looking relations of active agent and passive other, which positions queer, non-White dramatis personae, usually queer Black women icons, in the accusatory space. With *Insecure*, the centering of Black narratives, actors and writers disrupts the status quo on one hand. However, employing established looking relations and conventional narrative structure that produce oppositional stereotypes as normal work to naturalize White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy on the other.

CHAPTER 2

THE INSECURITY OF SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION: ISSA RAE'S AGGRESSIVELY PASSIVE WOKENESS

Introduction

In the article "The Accusatory Space," Jacquie Jones (1992) suggests that Black male directors are able to gain mainstream/crossover success, albeit limited, by positioning images of Black women in their cultural products in the accusatory space. Jones's notion implies the existence of an individual who performs public acts or puts forth a separate public image from an outlook that courts the pleasure of the dominant gaze. This chapter is concerned with this public image and this outlook, the "coherent continuousness" that represents "what the star 'really is,'"(Dyer, 1986, p. 10), what in scholarly and popular discourses is called a star persona. The star persona is a representation, a text, a constructed image, and a production of the culture industry that encompasses the star's film and television projects, media appearances, interviews, biographies and other media texts that contribute to what people think they know about the star (Dyer, 1986). This chapter explores how the star personae of Issa Rae is connected to a public strategy of avowal, disavowal and/or ambiguity regarding images of Black women and the accusatory space.

To probe this strategy in relation to Rae, this chapter borrows from women of color media scholars Mary Beltrán (2002), Kimberly Springer (2007), Mia Mask (2009), Robin Means Coleman (2012), Anna Everett (2015) , Dayna Chatman (2015), Ralina Joseph (2009, 2016) and Janell Hobson (2017). The work of these scholars explores how non-white women of crossover

status such as Oprah Winfrey, Beyonce, Tyra Banks, Jennifer Lopez and Shonda Rhimes navigate visual culture and social media, while negotiating post feminist, post racial and pro-woman of color discourses. The consensus of much of this body of work is that mainstream success largely depends upon the ability of the non-White woman personae to approximate Whiteness by performing what cultural studies scholar Richard Dyer (1997, p. 80) describes "as being nothing in particular, the representative human."

Joseph's (2016) term "strategic ambiguity," which she employs to describe the star persona of media maker Shonda Rhimes, informs this chapter. Strategic ambiguity is "strategic in that is a mindful choice; it is ambiguous in that it deploys a primary facet of post-race, not naming racism. It is ambiguous in that its explicit goal is to simply claim a seat at the table; it is strategic that inclusion provides an opportunity to repudiate racism" (Joseph, 2016, p. 304). Similarly, Rae's public acts, interviews, and memoir incorporate aspects of strategic ambiguity. Issa Dee, the television icon Rae's constructs on *Insecure*, uses the phrase "aggressively passive" to describe her persona. Likewise, Rae's public persona is aggressively passive in her ability to minimize the importance of racism in dominant spaces and strategically perform wokeness. This chapter argues Rae's public performances can be read as *aggressively passive wokeness*.

Although a 21st century term, highly visible Black women have executed wokeness for over one hundred years, as images of Black womanhood have resided in the accusatory space of dominant culture, even before the NAACP protested DW Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. As a result, Black women reformers turned to public spaces, literature and nonfiction writing, to serve as "agents of wokeness" (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikari, 2017), critiquing the racism of the woman's movement (Carby, 1987; Giddings, 1985; hooks, 1981), Black masculinist rhetoric of so-called manhood rights (DuCille, 1993), interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender (B.

C. Cooper, 2017; Guy-Sheftall, 1995) and state-sanctioned lynching and rape (Carby, 1987; A. Y. Davis, 1981; Giddings, 1985). In sum, they took action to transform social relations. Contrary to *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks's (2017) assertion that being *woke* is the of successor of being *cool*, the work of prominent Black women media figures such as Ida B. Wells, Frances Harper and Anna Julia Cooper constitute blueprints of wokeness and demonstrate that Black woman media–social activism is not a fad but a long-standing practice.

Black feminist scholar Brittany Cooper calls this practice "embodied discourse" which "refers to a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak" (B. C. Cooper, 2017, p. 3). This intersectional textual embodiment seeks to achieve dignity rather than respectability. Cooper argues dignity connotes valuing a person's intrinsic humanity, whereas respectability stipulates that impeccable character will earn the recognition of one's humanity. Embodied discourse disrupts the common sense logic of White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, controlling images and the accusatory space. I engage close reading as an interpretative tool to examine Rae's (2015) memoir *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and various media accounts that articulate Rae's star persona. This study of lived experiences and standpoint examines how Rae speaks and writes her body and the bodies of other Black women into U.S. popular discourse and probes whether the standpoint of Rae's star persona is oppositional or conciliatory.

Insecure Standpoint of Awkward Black Girl Stardom

There are two definitions of standpoint operating in this chapter. The first definition of standpoint is the market positioning of Rae's star persona, which is largely produced by the culture industry in terms of the interviews that are granted and the book deals that are greenlit

(Dyer, 1986). The second definition points to the outsider within status, which is the standpoint of Black women navigating dominant spaces who "learn to trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge" (Collins, 1986, p. S29). Discussing representations of women on television, sociologist Gaye Tuchman states taken for granted dominant ideals and values operate as resources for the development of mass media productions (1978, p. 8). This chapter has already noted that Jones suggests dominant ideals shape the outlook of Black male cultural producers, which contributes to the position of Black women images in the accusatory space in their cultural texts. More and more, Black women such as Rae are the creators and stars making use of dominant U.S. ideals, which produce constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class and other structural locations. As a result, this chapter examines the tensions regarding the interplay of crossover stardom, the White gaze, and oppression.

This is important because the end credits of *Insecure* conclude with two, consecutive images: one that reads "Issa Rae Productions" and the other "A Penny For Your Thoughts Entertainment." With television being the producer's domain, the aforementioned monikers designate executive producers Rae and Prentice Penny as auteurs of *Insecure*. As executive producers, they run the show by performing the main tasks of supervising cast and crew, steering the creative focus of the series, maintaining a cost-effective production, and balancing the notes from their network HBO with the creative team's vision (Means Coleman & Cavalcante, 2012). Indeed cast and crew, advertising professionals and network executives contribute to the production of a television series. Despite this fact, the showrunner, an executive producer in television parlance, largely directs the construction of the televisual text from pre-production to editing. In *The Producer's Medium*, Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley state "the television producer is the creative center who shapes, through choices big and small, works of television art

that speak of personal values and decisions…" (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p. 17). Thus, it is important to examine not the correctness of star persona but whether the ways Rae speaks and writes her body and the bodies of other Black women into popular discourses collude with or contest the status quo.

Although Rae and Penny both share the title of executive producer for *Insecure*, it is important to clarify their contributions to the production. Given the success of her web series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* from 2011 to 2013, Rae developed the concept for a half-hour comedy television series revolving around the lives of college-educated, twenty-something Black women and pitched the idea to HBO executives (Wortham, 2015). However, *Insecure* marks Rae's entry into network television (Fresh Air, 2016). As a result, HBO hired Prentice Penny, an experienced television producer and writer, to help manage the production, as television is a "venture fraught with risk due to the possibility of losing large sums of money and other capital" (Coleman and Cavalcante, 2012, p. 34.). In this way, Penny functions as a supervising producer, guiding the series as it is a business.

However, HBO works to construct the message that *Insecure* is Rae's star vehicle. In an interview with Southern California Public Radio station KPCC, Penny explained Rae selected him as co-executive producer: "I did something really old-school: I wrote her a letter... In the letter, I just explained to her how much I loved what she was doing, how much I loved the script, what I related to in the script" (Lanz, 2016). In the same interview, Penny confirmed his job is to support Rae's outlook: "You're brought in to protect and nurture that vision first and foremost. This is not your time to make it be your agenda or this or that…Your job is to make the best show that she wants to make possible" (Lanz, 2016). Rae confirmed, in an interview with *Vox*, that Penny is "so careful to make sure that my vision is there. He'll always ask me at the end of

the day, 'You good? Is this what it's [supposed to be]?' He has no ego about anything, and it's the nicest thing ever. His contributions really make everything better" (Framke, 2016). The quotes of Rae and Penny reveal Rae's star persona guides *Insecure.* HBO promotes Rae's lived experiences, not those of Penny, to serve as the public imagery that connects with audiences.

Rae's articulated standpoint and lived experiences that contribute to her star persona are key to reading the relationship of ideology and hegemonic discourses to cultural productions such as *Insecure*. Cultural studies scholar James Lull notes hegemony does not congeal solely through the articulation of ideology; rather everyday practices of society's basic institutions such as families, schools, workplace relations and intimate relationships are sites for the reproduction of "dominant ideological streams" (Lull, 2011, p. 34). As cultural artifacts reflect and produce a showrunner's standpoint, which stems from lived experiences, an optimal way to examine what dominant discourses shape a production is to critically read media texts that construct the star persona. In this way, lived experience from a Black feminist perspective constitutes a legitimate form of knowledge. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins defines lived experience as "the ideas that Black women share with one another on an informal, daily basis" (2000a, p. 34).

Similarly, media scholar and journalist Kristal Brent Zook (1999) notes that Black-produced television series display a distinct tendency toward constructing the autobiographical by drawing from individual and collective memories. A 2016 interview with *Fresh Air's* host Terry Gross establishes that Rae's self-defined standpoint informs the production process of her series*:* Rae states, "I was sitting on my bed in New York one day…having a reflective moment and trying to figure out what I wanted to do and just was writing in my notebook and wrote down the phrase, 'I'm awkward, period, and black'" (Gross & Fresh Air, 2016). Also, the interview text depicts Rae in the act of self-definition: "And that was just a revelatory moment

for me in so many ways. Like, I knew I was black, obviously. But the awkward part really just defined me in a sense. Like, it defined why I was always, like, socially uncomfortable. It defined my introvert status" (Gross & Fresh Air, 2016). In addition to Rae's standpoint as showrunner, she is also the series' star, whose embodied performances shape the series. Consequently, Rae's star persona is of chief importance to the production of *Insecure* and to this chapter.

#Woke and The White Gaze

Although the focus of this textual analysis is star persona, this chapter seeks not to construct a biographical or psychological sketch of Rae. It is an analytical discussion of various media texts—interviews and Rae's memoir—which construct her lived experiences and standpoint in her own words. As intertextual signifiers, the accounts represent the instability of their productions and contradictions of the entertainment industry and stardom (Mask, 2009). The goal here is to mine and interpret texts not to present Rae's *real perspective* regarding her values and ideals. With that said, the texts point to the tensions of performing a pro-Black womaness, colorblindness, respectability, and ideological ambiguity. This discussion elucidates how Rae's star persona simultaneously complies with and undermines neoliberal capitalist patriarchal Whiteness that shapes popular visual culture in this digital age (Hobson, 2016).

#BlackGirlMagic and The Accusatory Space

Rae, a highly visible Black woman in U.S. dominant culture, presents a pro-Black/feminist public image. On the 69th Primetime Emmy Awards red carpet, Rae asserted that she was "rooting for everybody black," which provoked the ire of *Fox News* on-air personality Tucker Carlson who scolded her for reverse racism (Stedman, 2017). Pages in her memoir describe a young Rae sporting natural hair in grade school and traversing the globe with an African American mother who is a school teacher and her Senegalese father who is a doctor

(Rae, 2015). She articulated to a reporter her intention to center a TV series around representations of desirable, dark-skinned Black women (Hairston, 2016). In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Rae expressed a For Us By Us ethos: “In creating and writing the show, this is not *for* dudes. It's not for white people. It's the show that I imagined for *my* family and friends. That's what I think of when I'm writing the scenes” (Spanos, 2017). These public performances of pro-Black womaness conjure up the concept “woke,” a colloquialism associated with critical consciousness that challenges the hegemony of White supremacist neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchy (Ashlee et al., 2017). Rae’s celebrity and glamour added to the above public acts of pro-Black consciousness invoke #BlackGirlMagic.

#BlackGirlMagic purportedly applies to everyday women and girls, like Rae, who transcend insurmountable racist and sexist structures to secure a piece of the metaphoric American Pie. Such individual success, from the outlook of #BlackGirlMagic, signals a change in the material conditions of all Black women, what historian Manning Marable (1992) calls “symbolic representation.” *Flare*, Canada’s beauty and fashion magazine, provided a space for Rae to discuss how, after graduating from Stanford University, she struggled for ten years to become the executive producer, writer and star of an HBO televised series; in addition, the article called Rae’s contract with *Covergirl* “a total win for Black women everywhere” (Scott, 2017). In many ways, #BlackGirlMagic is a collective defense strategy deployed to counter discourses and practices that degrade Black women, while appropriating what Tanisha Ford (2015) calls their “soul style” that resulted from Black women’s effort to refashion their bodies as beautiful after centuries of systemic abuse. However, literary scholar Linda Chavers (2016) and Black feminist Janelle Hobson (2016) argue that #BlackGirlMagic has its shortcomings as it largely praises the commercial appeal of “respectable” Black women’s bodies, while displacing

purported undesirable images of Black women who are underprivileged, unattractive or disabled–in others words queer–to the margins of visual and social media.

In response to this demystification of #BlackGirlMagic, writer Ashley Ford (2016) claims that Chavers misunderstands the intent of CaShawn Thompson's #BlackGirlMagic, which is to reclaim and to celebrate Black women's dignity. Ford (2016) writes, "There's no limiting of humanity in the rhetoric here. In fact, [Thompson] gave us just the opposite." To support her claims, Ford invokes ableist, middle-class, cisgender, mainstream imagery of Julliard-trained actress Viola Davis's Emmy Award acceptance speech and Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace* protagonist–two representations of Black females who possess the cultural, social and physical abilities to excel in dominant spaces. It is this very meaning of magic that Chavers contests. In addition, Ford offers her childhood photo, which resembles Mary Hoffman's fictitious Grace to make the point that the "magic" in #BlackGirlMagic signifies Black girl's *ordinary* qualities.

Ford's critique illustrates several significant points. As Black feminist E. Frances White (2001) argues, counter discourses reinscribe many of the hegemonic elements they are constructed to disrupt. Second, a defense mechanism is unconscious. Although it was likely not Thompson's conscious intent to construct "limiting rhetoric," #BlackGirlMagic nonetheless affirms dominant norms. In addition, Ford makes clear what Barthes calls the duplicity of myth: "myth is a type of speech defined by its intention…and that in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen…the constituent ambiguity of mythical speech has two consequences for signification, which henceforth appears both like a notification and like a statement of fact" (2012, p. 124). In other words, mythic speech normalizes the meaning it distorts. Whereas Chavers politicizes #BlackGirlMagic and troubles is limited meaning, Ford naturalizes the middle-class, ableist significance as if it applies to all Black women and girls. Chavers point is

Black girls are human, and, as a mythic speech, #BlackGirlMagic robs them of their humanity. Though #BlackGirlMagic is deployed as a resistant message, in many ways, it is “renewal and modification” of ableist, capitalistic heteropatriarchal hegemony (Lull, 2011, p. 35).

The taken for granted bourgeois commercial appeal of #BlackGirlMagic is observable in who is lauded and who is positioned in the accusatory space. As *Essence.com* (2016) and *HuffingtonPost.com* (Blay, 2017) celebrate personae of visible and respectable Black women and girls such as Rae, Janelle Monáe, Teyonah Parris, Yara Shahidi and Johnetta Elzie with the #BlackGirlMagic, *The Washington Post* chronicles how a “‘village’ of mentors” worked to turn respectable the image of Rachel Jenteal (O’Neal Parker & Thompson, 2014). Jenteal, Trayvon Martin’s friend who testified in the criminal trial regarding his death, was vilified for her purported undesirable body and unpolished public performances. *The Washington Post* article acknowledges that respectability politics malign Black women whose mundane practices are rooted in Black vernacular culture. Despite this, the acts of Jenteal’s mentors recounted in the article constitute intramural policing. The article states, “The list of other advice, sometimes called ‘village teachings,’ was long: Eat something green. Don’t wear stiletto heels that strap up to your knees. Think about your future. Work harder. Shut down your Facebook page. Show some gratitude” (O’Neal Parker & Thompson, 2014). The piece represents how media accounts of the Black bourgeoisie do not celebrate the Jenteals of the world with #BlackGirlMagic. Instead, they subject them to the discourse of meritocracy, which shifts focus from systemic oppression and prejudice (Esposito, 2009) to policing individual acts of the Black underclass.

A recent *CBS This Morning* (2018) televised segment illustrates how popular discourses stratify the images of Black women and girls. In this segment, Oprah Winfrey interviews a Milwaukee trauma expert who states children raised in stressful, chaotic and violent

environments are "wired differently" and are "going to be at risk for almost any kind of physical health, mental health, social health problem that you can think of." It is a lingering belief from Moynihan's (1965) "Tangle of Pathology." Winfrey states this "hole in the soul" philosophy now informs her work at her South African school for girls. However, when Gail King states that while Winfrey endured trauma, she does not appear to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Winfrey emphatically states she does not have PTSD. According to Winfrey, she "found her place in school" where teachers and coaches told her "I believe in you, you're OK, things are going to be all right." Winfrey does not state that she recovered from PTSD. Rather, her argument is the development of a hole in her soul was foreclosed by acceptance from dominant institutions. Essentially, she is not a Rachel Jenteal; she represents #BlackGirlMagic. What goes unexamined when the *ordinary*, awkward Black girl like Rae who makes it in mainstream spaces is celebrated with #BlackGirlMagic are the star personae of Black women that normalize the positioning of queer Black women and girls in the accusatory space.

Colorblindness

The terms neoliberalism and colorblindness seem ideal, signaling the existence of a society that secures justice and economic equity for all individuals. However, neoliberal-colorblindness constitutes a system of beliefs that disregards the impact of systemic oppression and its material effects. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) explains that neoliberal-colorblindness is pernicious because it is covert. Blatant racism of the Jim Crow era rationalized the marginal social location of Black Americans as the result of intrinsic biological and psychological inferiority; however, colorblind racism constructs more complex arguments to defend systemic oppression. As a result, Whites attribute the enduring marginalization of racial minorities to an inability to capitalize on industrial gains and Blacks' purported cultural

inadequacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In a *Fresh Air* interview, Rae's responses define racism in neoliberal terms, as individual problems that one can overcome through respectable character traits and work ethic. For example when Terry Gross asks about the ability of Rae's father to relate to "the whole American thing about what it means to Black," Rae states: "I mean, he understood that there were obstacles Black people faced. But in his mind, those are - those are obstacles that you can overcome just by working hard and by doing the right thing" (Gross & Fresh Air, 2016). Her words appear to imply that obstacles minorities face are no longer structural forces but private problems, which points to the primacy of a post-racial meritocracy.

In an analysis of the television series *Ugly Betty*, educational policy scholar Jennifer Esposito notes the election of the first Black president helped to solidify the belief in the post-racial era, the idea that Americans have overcome systemic racism as indicated by the individual success of Barack Obama (Esposito, 2009). Meritocracy, the belief that the United States is a level-playing field where anyone willing to work hard can succeed, undergirds post-racial and colorblind ideologies. Communications scholar B. Lee Artz states the culture industry's representations of African Americans, specifically in the "buddy film" genre reinforce the view that social, political, economic and education disparities are the result of inferior culture not oppression (Artz, 1998). Similarly in the *Fresh Air* interview, Rae articulates a standpoint that aligns with meritocracy: "We've never really had conversations about race just because…he's also, like, his own success story. You know, he came from a family of, you know, seven kids, the oldest and came from Dakar, Senegal and is a successful doctor here" (Gross & Fresh Air, 2016). In this excerpt of the interview text, Rae constructs the view that her father's "own success story" negates the reality of widespread racial inequality and, consequently, forecloses the need to discuss race and racism.

More important, Rae states that what can be read as the neoliberal/colorblind perspective of her father shapes her worldview: "Like, I do refuse to see obstacles to a degree. And, you know, I acknowledge that they exist, but I refuse to kind of let them affect me. And I guess I'm just realizing that about him." Rae's comments express key aspects of neoliberal-colorblindness: conceptualizing racism as a private obstacle and not as societal oppression, avoiding conversations of race in terms of group struggles and prioritizing individual market success or capitalistic advancement over systemic inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Collins, 2000a; Gallagher, 2003; Giroux, 2003). Race is more than a description of phenotype, which one can simply ignore. Colorblind rhetoric sounds sophisticated, as it permits Blacks and "whites to define themselves a politically progressive" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 26). Nevertheless, colorblind rhetoric lacks grounding in global social, political and economic history. American studies scholar George Lipsitz (1998) explains race emerged to justify Anglo settlers enslavement of Native Americans and, later, Africans in the United States; since this time, race has served as a label used to stigmatize non-Whites in order to exclude them from federal programs such as the Social Security Act, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the Federal Housing Act of 1934, and other programs which enabled Whites to obtain economic gains over non-Whites. Naturalizing race as a biological trait denies its social "constructedness" and disallows the identification of racism as a fundamental organizing structure of US society.

Rae, in her memoir *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2015), revisits this colorblind perspective as she describes the outlook of several categories of "Blacks." Rae states "The Ambitious Black" views race as neither a hindrance nor concern; rather, "This black is a chameleon, able to turn it on and turn it off in any environment in the name of advancement. This black acknowledges his or her blackness to other blacks, but will quickly renounce race in

front of 'others'" (2015, pp. 50–51). Denying one's race for the sake of "advancement" aligns with colorblindness, which "acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchy by taking racially coded styles and products and reducing these symbols to commodities or experiences that whites and racial minorities can purchase and share"(Gallagher, 2003, p. 25). In her study of Tyra Banks's public persona, Joseph (2009, p. 246) calls this media strategy the "So-What" movement in which marginalized persons are encouraged to shrug off racism and prejudice as a form of empowerment. The "So-What" viewpoint reduces racism to a mere annoyance that a mature, rational person can handle.

In addition, Rae's memoir positions as problematic Black individuals who recognize systemic racism: "The Woe-Is-Me Black: These blacks will never shut the hell up about their plight. They are victims, tortured by their blackness. Every ailment, struggle, and mistreatment is directly correlated with the color of their skin and their entire lives are tragedies" (Rae, 2015, pp. 56–58). Activist scholar Angela Davis, possibly someone Rae would consider a Woe-Is-Me Black, notes that in the neoliberal era, colorblindness "results in the attribution of responsibility for the effects of racism to the individuals who are its casualties, thus further exacerbating the problem of failing to identify the economic, social, and ideological work of racism" (A. Y. Davis, 2012, p. 171). Sociologist Howard Winant (2001) explains neoliberalism emerged as a result of White anxiety toward global liberation movements in the United States, Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia. Given the origins of neoliberal colorblindness, it is remarkable that Rae's memoir, although the term neoliberal colorblindness is not employed, expresses a perspective consistent with the discourse. On the other hand, sociologist Karyn Lacy states middle-class Blacks have an "arsenal of resources" to counter discrimination (2007, p. 69). This

middle-class arsenal may have shaped Rae's lived experiences and informed her star persona regarding racial ideology.

Respectable Bodies and Ratchet Bodies

Rae's memoir constructs a clear divide between ostensibly respectable Black women personae like her and purportedly ratchet icons who populate reality television. On the one hand, Rae insists upon centering images of black women, which troubles the dominance of Whiteness fundamental to U.S. popular visual culture. On the other hand, Rae affirms dominant looking relations and the spectator positioning of queer Black women in the accusatory space. Similarly, Dyer (1997) notes the construction of identity premised upon the absence or negation of the other is central to the production of Whiteness. As Joseph (2016) notes in her study of Shonda Rhimes, Rae's memoir similarly suggests she created the awkward Black girl type–middle-class, educated at elite schools–in response "to negative portrayal of women in reality television" (Rae, 2015, p. 45). Rae describes feelings of discouragement when a television executive "suggested that actress/video girl/ Lil Wayne's baby's mother, Lauren London, would be a great fit for the title character of a cable version of Awkward Black Girl" (Rae, 2015, p. 46). For Rae, mundane details such as makeup application are sites to mark her difference from other classes of Black women: "We're trying to portray an everyday—but specific—Black girl. Given who she is, where she works and her age, she's not a Real Housewife that's going to look fly and glammed up all the time" (Scott, 2017). In this way, the visual medium is viewed as symbolic geography where bodies are ordered to specific spaces according to dominant ideals.

Whereas the embodied discourse of race women contested representations of Black women as exotic sexualized primitives, Rae erects visible markers to distance herself from such representations. Gender and sexuality scholars Marlon Bailey and Rashad Shabazz (2014, p.

318), writing about the marginalization of queer Black men in heteronormative, Black spaces documented in the film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, posit the concept "anti-black heterotopias – or the spaces around the corner." The notion centers how "so-called deviant subjects, the sexual labor they perform, as well as the hidden, placeless geographies in which these labors are undertaken are suppressed and demeaned, even while they supply discursive, social, sexual labor for those who have social privilege" (M. M. Bailey & Shabazz, 2014, p. 318). Anti-Black heterotopias describe spectator positioning of queer Black subjects in similar terms as Jones's accusatory space. Media accounts of Rae's descriptions of queer Black women's bodies display an acceptance of White stereotypical notions of Black womanhood.

Regarding the film *Precious,* Rae writes in her memoir, "But then I thought, is that was it takes to create a sympathetic black female lead character? I could imagine the boardroom meeting. She has to be obese! She has to be super poor. She has to be illiterate!" (2015, p. 39). One reading of Rae's articulated outlook confirms Chavers critique of #BlackGirlMagic: only normative raced and gendered bodies are celebrated, whereas non-normative bodies are regulated to accusatory spaces around the corner. Rae continues, "[Precious] has to have a baby with Down syndrome! Now we care about this lead character… Oh heavens, what a cautionary tale! Oh to be black and poor in the ghetto. No wonder they're so mad and defensive all the time" (Rae, 2015, p. 39). This excerpt speaks to Cooper's (2017) distinction between respectability and dignity. Rae's words do not interrogate dominant discourses that construct the Precious persona as deviant (Thompson, 2015) or contest the film's idealization of Whiteness (Griffin, 2014); instead, her words suggest the imagery is not dignified. Rae's viewpoint underscores the acceptance of European ideals by non-Whites and the naturalization of neoliberal representations of non-normative bodies as worthy of derision (Thompson, 2015).

Insecure builds the same spatial divide by placing Issa, the lead character, at odds with queer working-class students of color, whom recurring character Molly (Yvonne Orji) refers to as “middle school Crips.” Interestingly, the fictitious nonprofit where Issa works is committed to saving these students from their communities similar to *The Washington Post’s* description of “Project Rachel” (Jenteal) and her village of mentors (O’Neal Parker & Thompson, 2014). In addition, Rae’s interview dialogue reveals a parallel viewpoint. The text describes her matriculation at a predominately White school in Potomac, Maryland, as civil but portrays the adjustment to a majority Black and Latinx school in Los Angeles as conflict-ridden (*Fresh Air*, 2015): “People always said that I talked like a white girl and my hair wasn't–did not have the positive traits it had for being natural like it did when I was in Maryland.” Rae’s interview text highlights intra-racial conflict with non-White peers but does not signal inter-racial conflict with White students. In addition, Rae’s memoir and the *Fresh Air* interview suggest that Rae’s natural hair was more highly regarded by Whites than Blacks. Rae (2015) states: “I was taught this caste system by a trio of mean girls in middle school who found glee in taunting me. To them, my insistence on wearing my hair in an Afro puff made me an easy target…Middle school girls are cruel.” Rae calling her peers “cruel” is a missed opportunity to unpack Black hair and skin politics shaped by White supremacist patriarchy. Black feminist popular culture scholar Tricia Rose (2008, p. 179) states “the idea of very curly textured hair as ‘nappy’ hair, and its use as an insult, is one of many dehumanizing strategies devised during the Western enslavement of African people.” Rae’s representations of non-White spaces mirror imagery in White-produced “Black” shows such as *Sanford and Son,* 1972, and *Diff’rent Strokes*, 1978, which employ Blackness to signify deficiency (Means Coleman & Cavalcante, 2012, p. 43).

The focus of Rae's public persona on performing identity from a distinct class-based location is important to the Black middle-class (C. A. Harris, 2013; Lacy, 2007; Rema Reynolds, 2010). Lacy states middle-class Blacks "attempt to erect exclusionary boundaries against a bundle of stereotypes commonly associated with lower-class blacks" such as wearing oversized gold earrings, shaking their heads and behaving aggressively (2007, p. 72). Rae's memoir refers to lower-class Blacks as "The Ratchet Black: Previously known as 'The Ghetto Black' or 'The Hood rat Black,'" and states "these blacks are always pitted as black embarrassment. They are generally referred to as the Bottom-of-the-Barrel Blacks. Shaped by their environment, they are frequently feared and misunderstood" (Rae, 2015, p. 37). Accordingly, education scholars Rema Reynolds and sociologist Cherise A. Harris state Black middle-class parents advise their children against associating with so-called ratchet Black peers. Similarly, in an interview, Rae voices frustration with her mother's advice regarding her Black and Latinx classmates: "And everything that she told me to do would be - would cause me to stand out, like…if they're talking about the way that you're talking, then just say I'm smart…And it's like mom, no…I'm not trying to feel superior" (Gross & Fresh Air, 2016). Again, the pattern of marking one's distinction from purported bad Black–as opposed to interrogating the myth of bad Blacks–resurfaces.

The study of Rae's star persona makes clear that Black Americans are not a monolithic group. The Black middle-class boundary work represented in various texts that document Rae's standpoint underscore the salience of race, class, physical ability, sexuality and gender when constructing (anti) Black spaces (M. M. Bailey & Shabazz, 2014). Joseph acknowledges a similar pattern in Shonda Rhimes casting and narrative choices: "While Rhimes might not have explicitly addressed race in her show, her move to feature images of professional and successful African Americans, and her refusal to represent so-called disreputable characters spoke to a

particular performance of respectability" (Joseph, 2016, p. 310). Rae, unlike Rhimes, represents purported non-respectable Black women in the construction of the icons Rasheeda/Dada (Gail Bean) and Tasha (Dominique Perry). Using mundane traits such as tone of voice, size of earrings, "neck rolling," Rae encodes them as distinct from the recurring educated, middle-class Black women personae. As with Whiteness, Rae's texts suggest that the construction of her middle-class awkward Black girl star persona entails the projection of undesirable qualities onto queered raced and gendered bodies.

"Two Warring Ideals": One Awkward Body

A thread through Rae's text is ambiguity regarding race and racism. At times, Rae's performance is unapologetically woke. Through embodied discourse, Rae utilizes her lived experiences to voice the intersectional plight of Black women in the culture industry. At other points, Rae's star persona is strategically ambiguous, distancing herself from what Brooks (2017) calls the justifiable paranoia of wokeness. In an ambiguous moment during a Television Critics Association press tour, Rae states that *Insecure* "isn't a show exclusively about, like, the struggle of being black…It's just regular black people living life" (Framke, 2016). Similarly, a section in her memoir seemingly brushes off systemic racism and sexism as an outdated mindset: "I've decided to focus only on the positivity of being black, and especially of being a black woman. Am I supposed to feel oppressed? Because I don't" (Rae, 2015, p. 164). This quote from Rae's memoir speaks to Dyer's (1986) conclusion regarding his study of Paul Robeson's star persona. Robeson, according to Dyer, reached crossover status by maintaining a public image that was acceptable to White audiences (Beltrán, 2002; Dyer, 1986). Similarly, Rae appears to perform the Ambitious Black who denounces race with quotes such as this from her memoir: "Is racism supposed to hurt me? That's so 1950s. Should I feel marginalized? I prefer to think of myself as

belonging to an ‘exclusive’ club” (2015, p. 164). This racial/gender ambiguity emerges in *Insecure*’s representations, as Rae’s Issa Dee simultaneously interrogates the toxicity of microaggressions in her predominately White workspace and delivers jokes that perpetuate stereotypes of Arabs and excessive body hair. This strategy appears to work for Rae’s crossover appeal: *Insecure* was the only television series produced by a Black woman to attract majority White viewers (The Nielsen Company, 2017b). However, *Insecure* is not a top twenty show among Black women viewers according to The Nielsen Company (2017a).

Although her memoir acknowledges race while diminishing racism, Rae’s viewpoint on navigating Blackness by being a social “chameleon” shows signs of slippage. For example in dialogue with *Elle* magazine, Rae articulates a standpoint of racism and race relations that is rooted in an understanding of systemic oppression and inequality. Rae states (Tang, 2016):

> Professionally, I think that this is such an old boys’ club industry—people only hire their own in a way that's detrimental. Then other people can't make a living, and there’s always an excuse. They say, ‘Well, we tried but they didn't have experience,’ or ‘They're not applying.’ It's like, they don't have experience because you’re not giving them experience, and they’re not applying because you’re not actively looking for them. So, for me, it’s just about switching things up, and providing people opportunities who want them.

This statement counters Rae’s perspective expressed in the *Fresh Air* interview that she refuses to let obstacles affect her. On the contrary, this excerpt constructs racism and sexism as structural forces that shape material social conditions. Further, in *The Misadventures of*

Awkward Black Girl, Rae (2015) offers a critique of the how White supremacist capitalist patriarchy succeeds through two seemingly oppositional goals: Whiteness making itself invisible (naturalizing the advantages attached to it) while rendering visible (marking as inferior) non-Whites (Dyer, 1997). Rae writes:

> *Girls, New Girl, 2 Broke Girls*. What do they all have in common? The universal gender classification, "girl," is white. In all three of these successful series, a default girl (or two) is implied and she is white. That is the norm and that is what is acceptable. Anything else is niche (pp. 45-46).

In this way, Rae embodies the wokeness of race woman Fannie Barrier Williams and critical legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in making an intersectional claim regarding the privileged status of White women that depends upon the degraded status of Black women. Representation of Dubois's (1994, p. 2) "two warring ideals in one dark body" is evident, as Rae's memoir reverts back to racial apathy chapters later: "Even now, I feel obligated to write about race. It's as though it's expected of me to acknowledge what we all already know. The truth is, I slip in and out of my black consciousness, as if I'm in a racial coma" (Rae, 2015, p. 160). Despite instances when Rae performs a detached star persona, the quoted texts above show that racism and sexism are not mere inconveniences that one can dismiss with a "So-What" outlook. In fact, Rae states she uses her showrunner position as a form of activism to "switch things up" by providing marginalized persons with opportunities they otherwise would not receive in a racist and sexist industry. This woke, outsider within standpoint breaks from #BlackGirlMagic, which

views the success of one Black woman as symbolically representative (Marable, 1992) of advancement for all Black women. Instead, Rae uses her profession to bring about change.

Conclusion

Rae embodies #BlackGirlMagic, the resiliency of everyday Black women and girls who succeed *despite the odds*. However, counter discourses that celebrate respectable Black women, displace queer Black women and girls who cannot or do not achieve mainstream success to the accusatory space—unlike embodied discourse that seeks to center the bodies of all Black women. Examining discourses in texts that represent Rae's star persona brings to the surface the tensions inherent in a Black woman's standpoint that simultaneously engages the commonsense logic of neoliberal ideologies that reify dominant norms while performing a pro-Black woman persona. Also, the study shows that lived experience in the United States leads some Black women producers, as Rae states, to adopt dominant practices in order to advance, which underscores Lipsitz's position that anyone, regardless of race, can invest in Whiteness. In this way, the importance of utilizing an approach that analyzes lived experience is essential.

This reading of Rae's star persona, as represented in her memoir and interview texts, shows the primacy of neoliberal-colorblindness, respectability and ambiguity regarding racial ideology. Many of these same discourses are prevalent in the HBO series *Insecure*. Rae has a right to assert a Black woman's standpoint of her choosing, even one that supports dominant looking relations. The act of self-definition is in itself an act of political resistance (Collins, 2000a; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Omolade, 1994). However, it is important to recognize that neoliberalism and colorblindness do not produce social conditions and relations that are conducive to all Black women; rather they are hegemonic tools that seek to reframe the material effects of systemic oppression as individual failures of inferior persons. As Audre Lorde states,

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (1984, p. 112). Despite the colorblind rhetoric, Rae articulates how race and sex/gender structure the life chances of groups and expresses utilizing her privileged position as a showrunner to disrupt dominant images and job discrimination.

In many ways, Rae's public persona mirrors Joseph's characterization of Shonda Rhimes's image. Rae's public acts were not consistent. Rather, like Rhimes, the texts construct the notion that she gauges spaces to determine whether aggressive passive wokeness or wokeness as embodied discourse is suitable. The ability to adapt has resulted in Black women's survival across the African diaspora. Still, it is important to weigh the cost of renouncing racism and sexism as a White patriarchal comfort strategy against the gains of resisting for Black women's group advancement. More people of color occupying spaces in White supremacist capitalist patriarchy does not lead to the dismantling of Whiteness. It simply provides a few visible figures with crossover star status, while positioning queer/non-normative Black women in the accusatory space. In the same way that Black feminists interrogate Black men and White women for colluding with patriarchy and racism in order to advance; the same critique can reveal the privileged status of college-educated, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender Black women. Accordingly, the following chapter continues to explore this tension in Rae's constructions of middle-class respectable bodies against the production of working-class, queer bodies.

CHAPTER 3

MAPPING MAMMY 2.0: *INSECURE* AND THE MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK WOMAN'S BURDEN

Introduction

The work of ideological apparatuses is to mask unequal power relations, which positions subjects to accept current social conditions as natural (Althusser, 2014). In an interview with *Insecure*'s showrunner and star Issa Rae, *Vox* writer Caroline Framke (2016) states, "That's why I'm really into the Molly and Rashida [sic] storyline on *Insecure* [in which Molly tries to tell a new and younger black associate to tone herself down in front of their white colleagues], and that it keeps coming back." To this Rae responds, "It's like you either represent all, or you represent each other, so you want to make sure that other person is on your side. 'Let's not fuck it up for each other!'" (Framke, 2016). This exchange illuminates how the hegemonic White gaze shapes the subject-positions of not only Whites but also Black women who normalize the marginalization of queer Black women. As a result, this chapter argues *Insecure* reproduces dominant looking relations not by simply presenting negative images of Black women but by representing oppression as normal and, therefore, absent (Stam & Spence, 2009).

Seeing Black women as a monolithic group obscures how structural locations such as class produce intra-racial antagonisms that surface in visual culture. This chapter employs the politics of respectability to analyze such antagonistic interactions between the character Molly and her Black female colleague Rasheeda. The purpose of this analysis is to trouble the normalcy of representations that cast the purported everyday behaviors of so-called ghetto Black

women or sapphires as worthy of censure and ridicule. I discuss how *Insecure* makes use of specific conventions–a Black/White dichotomy, White Savior narrative, and postfeminist feedback-as-discipline–to construct a "Middle-Class Black Women's Burden." Building upon Patricia Hill Collin's (2000a) controlling images, this analysis establishes how the character Molly performs mammy 2.0. This icon is distinct from controlling images, as a Black woman cultural producer–not a White man–is its creator.

Respectability and Popular Culture

The woman writer's rationalization of Rasheeda's spectator positioning in the accusatory space, quoted in the Vox interview, is representative of the normalized place of modern-day respectability politics within popular culture. Chris Rock's infamous 1996 comedy performance that revolved around the joke, "There's like a civil war going on with Black people and there's two sides…It's Black people and there's niggas…And niggas have got to go" exemplifies the ease with which Black audiences and cultural producers adopt and circulate anti-Black images. Commenting on Rock's routine, writer Mychal Denzel Smith states respectability politics affirm the rights of people of color who perform identities associated with White, middle-class ideals, while conveying the message that Black individuals whose acts align with vernacular culture "deserve open contempt and ridicule" (M. D. Smith, 2014). In a Brown University lecture, scholar Tricia Rose (2016) singled-out African American actress and former co-host of *The View*, Raven-Symoné Pearman for her routine performances of respectability politics. On a televised segment of *The View*, Pearman stated she would not hire a Black person with a "black-sounding name" such as "Watermelondrea," claiming such an act is not racist but "discriminatory" (Grinberg, 2015).

Respectability and popular culture merged earlier in 2002 when commentators deemed the Black girl at the center of R&B singer R Kelly's sex tape criminal trial outside the protection of the law because her private acts were considered not proper for a fourteen year-old (M. Bailey, 2016; Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013). Most recently, the Black Lives Matter Movement waged a critique of respectability politics across multiple mass media and social media platforms, as prominent media personalities of color such as Geraldo Rivera and Don Lemon attributed the extra-judicial deaths of several unarmed Black individuals to mundane acts such as walking while wearing a hoodie at night and wearing sagging pants (Obasogie & Newman, 2016; Richmond, 2015). The preoccupation with routine performances in order to mark an ethnic/racial group's difference (and often inferiority) speaks to cultural scholar Ju Yon Kim's (2015) notion of the racial mundane.

The racial mundane is the practice of taking the ordinary, anonymous acts of marginalized groups and placing them under public scrutiny (Kim, 2015). Although Kim's focus is Asian American performance of the mundane in novels, plays and on screen, the racial mundane is applicable to the Black experience. The aforementioned examples show the assumed habits of African American vernacular ways of performing identity–from socializing in public spaces to naming offspring to purchasing athletic attire–are consistently set against mainstream (Anglo) American performances as an indicator of the unassimilably of the elusive Black underclass. The weight of the mundane for Black racial formation in the United States is evident in the remixed connotation and deployment of terms such as "ghetto," "street" and "hood," which signify inferior Black culture (F. C. Harris, 2014). The import of the racial mundane does not rest in dominant society marking the daily actions of racialized groups as bad or good. Rather, "the racial mundane is always charged with spectacle–whether on the stage, in a

magazine, or in a government report–and only gives the illusion of representing the quotidian experiences of those who are racialized" (Kim, 2015, p. 13). The modern-day collisions of the racial mundane, respectability politics and popular visual culture reveal a strange interplay between socio-economic class, vernacular expression, criminality, sexuality, and Blackness as a measurement of citizenship. Despite the recent predominance of respectability politics, it is a discourse in response to the racial mundane and the accusatory space that hails from nineteenth century Black feminist reformers.

In the seminal text *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, historian Evelyn Higginbotham (1993) first employed the term "politics of respectability" to describe the Black Baptist Women's Convention's (WC) resistance to racist-sexist popular and scholarly discourses that constructed all Black women as immoral, unclean, disorderly, and ignorant–in the accusatory space. By performing behaviors consistent with White, middle-class values, the WC strove to subvert scientific notions that the aforementioned traits are the biological properties of African Americans (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 188). African American literary scholar Ann duCille stresses the importance of placing respectability politics in its proper social, economic and historical context. In reference to Black feminists reformers, specifically writers Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper, duCille notes that respectability was motivated not "by an accommodationist desire to assimilate the Victorian values of white society but by a profoundly political, feminist urge to rewrite those patriarchal strictures" (1993, p. 32). The early Black feminist respectability politics may not have been accommodationist in intent, but the discourse was problematic.

According to Black feminist scholar E. Francis White, the Black clubwomen's respectability politics were "Janus-faced and contested" counterdiscourses, sanctioning the

surveillance of poor Black bodies in order to resist White racism and sexism (2001, p. 37). Higginbotham notes the “WC’s enormous concern for white’s perceptions of black behavior regularly prompted scathing critiques against nonconformity to ‘proper’ values” (1993, p. 194). In addition, Black elites used popular print media to discipline poor Black readers, shaming their lack of decorum (Rhodes, 2016; Stewart, 2003, p. 664). However, the WC’s preoccupation with the White gaze was rooted in a desire to confront Jim Crow discrimination, attempted to protect Black women’s bodies from sexual exploitation, and “called for united leadership that would ‘neither compromise nor sell out’” (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 226).

Brutal racism and sexism constricted the possibilities of being for all people of color. Jim Crow did not take into consideration the class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or skin complexion of African Americans. As a result, the Black middle classes were subjected to the same oppressive treatment as working class Blacks. Higginbotham describes how a train conductor ejected a Black U.S. Congressman from a segregated train car (1992, p. 260), and historian Elsa Barkley Brown details how the White community of Richmond, Virginia sabotaged the success of the Order of Saint Luke’s department store helmed by Maggie Lena Walker (1989, p. 624). As a result, Black clubwomen turned to the politics of respectability not to delineate middle class Blacks from the working classes but to defend the moral integrity of all Black women (Giddings, 1985, p. 81). The position of Black women as an entire group in the accusatory space produced a collective sense of identity and modes of resistance.

Respectability politics as employed in regards to *Insecure* refers to the modern-day phenomenon scholars call intramural policing (Collins-White et al., 2016; Gray, 2016). Respectability in this sense functions as an intra-group ideology that holds individual people of color responsible for mitigating the material effects of structural oppression by managing actions

such as sartorial choices, paraverbal and nonverbal communication styles and decorum (Obasogie & Newman, 2016). In contrast to nineteenth and twentieth century respectability, the focus of modern respectability is not to challenge dominant stereotypes of marginalized groups but to censure individuals for failing to assimilate into a purported colorblind, post-racial U.S. society. For this reason, political scientist Fredrick C. Harris (F. C. Harris, 2014) describes the rise of neoliberal, post-civil rights era respectability politics as the shift from "lift as we climb" to "lift thyself up."

With integration and affirmative action, some Blacks no longer challenge controlling images as a whole, but uphold the position of certain Blacks, usually the so-called Black underclass, in the accusatory space. Accordingly, Smith (2014) notes the "chastisement of 'bad blacks'" by mainstream Black figures is a profitable endeavor. The circulation of such discourses by Black persons for individual economic gain is central to neoliberal, post-civil rights era, respectability politics. However, unprincipled, individualistic, capitalistic endeavors contradict the WC's discourses of respectability politics rooted in collective uplift. Instead, Black clubwomen recognized the power of bad Black myths that dehumanized people of color across class, skin complexion, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. As a result, the group campaigned against such racist-sexist representations and looking relations in "in literature, film, school textbooks, newspapers, and on the stage" (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 223). The WC's respectability challenged power relations at individual and institutional levels, whereas neoliberal intramural policing normalizes the racial mundane and contributes to the notion that systemic oppression is obsolete.

It is important to note the modern-day understanding of transhistorical "bad blacks" as unassimilated and ignorant "niggas" that undergirds modern-day respectability is a retrojection.

The bad blacks of White patriarchal imagination were not simply the masses of illiterate, formerly enslaved people of color, for lack of education made them amenable to exploitation and to domination; thus, the beloved tropes of the Uncle Tom and mammy persisted (Guerrero, 1993). On the contrary, imagery in cultural productions such as *The Birth of a Nation* reveal the uppity, educated, supposed power-hungry zip coon and mulatta who dared to seek "social, moral, and intellectual equality" with Whites represented the "horrors of 'Negro Rule'" (Morton, 1991, p. 19). Both the mundane acts of so-called mammies and Uncle Tom's such as working for White families and the everyday actions of the small Black elite (editing a newspaper for instance) were exaggerated and performed in minstrelsy. With the racial mundane, determining whether racist-sexist representations match the habits of actual marginalized people is not the focus; rather, the ways that racialization color what is perceived as normal behaviors of minoritized groups is key (Kim, 2015, p. 37).

White Savior and Salvific Wish

Controlling images constitute iconography that marks Black women's bodies as pathological. Sociologist Patricia Hill-Collins (2004, p. 139) explains how working-class versions of controlling images "become texts of what not to be" and serves as the impetus for Black women to reject working class ties for respectability politics in order to gain the acceptance and stability of mainstream White society. Similarly, Rae, in the interview with *Vox,* constructs Molly as the good Black woman who attempts to rehabilitate her bad Black woman co-worker (Framke, 2016). This attempt at rehabilitation is what Black feminist scholar Candace Jenkins (2007, p. 14) calls "the salvific wish," which is "a longing to protect or save black women, and black communities more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial

pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arena of sexuality and domesticity."

Similarly, Hollywood cinema employs a common narrative trope in which a virtuous westerner civilizes and saves an exotic primitive. The plot of such films utilize the racial mundane in order to make visible the narrative arc of racialized characters. Films such as *Freedom Writers*, 2007; *Finding Forrester*, 2000; and *Sunset Park*, 1996 that feature a self-sacrificing White teacher who helps at-risk, minority youth to integrate into mainstream society are recent manifestations of White savior films (Hughey, 2010, p. 475). *The Blind Side*, 2009, produces the White savior as a White mother who adopts a homeless African American teen (Ash, 2015). Rooted in cultural racism, these White savior films promote the view that it is not the race of colonized persons that renders them inferior but their cultures (Blaut, 1992). On the surface, this perspective seems progressive and consistent with critical race theory's social construction thesis (Haney López, 1998). However, Eurocentrism is fundamentally racist, although persons who subscribe to this belief system view it as just (Blaut, 1993, p. 9). Because the inferiority of non-Whites is located in culture and not race, it is understood that "inequality will disappear in the course of time. But in the meantime, discrimination is perfectly justified" (Blaut, 1992).

Cultural racism relates closely to sociologist Joe Feagin's White racial frame, which is an "overarching worldview" that is learned through "everyday socialization processes" (2010, pp. 3, 93). The White racial frame is an unspoken system of beliefs that sense Whites as more "moral, intelligent, rational, attractive, or hardworking than other racial groups," which justifies systemic oppression (Feagin, 2010, p. 96). Accordingly, racist-sexist stereotypes of non-Whites, including Black women, are integral to this frame (Feagin, 2010, p. 107). It is critical to note

one need not be White to adopt a Eurocentric or White racial frame; lived experiences in the United States is all that is required (Daniels, 2009; Lipsitz, 1998). The White savior narrative and the White racial frame do not sense Whites as oppressors but as virtuous and superior, naturally at the top of the human hierarchy (Feagin, 2010, p. 39). The belief in White virtuosity contributes to colorblind racism: "Colorblindness does not deny the existence of race" (Giroux, 2003, p. 198). Rather, colorblindness insists the United States is a meritocracy where individual character flaws, not racism, produce widespread inequality (Gallagher, 2003; Giroux, 2003).

Film scholar Gwendolyn Aubrey Foster explains the early film industry into the 1930's Hays Office Code era became "spaces of whiteface," where newly arrived immigrants relinquished supposed individual flaws–ethnic claims and laboring class identities–to be authentically White (2003, p. 51). Similarly, as Black Southerners relocated north during the Great Migration, many Black elites in various cities adopted respectability politics to urge supposed unpolished migrants to abandon their racialized habits (Rhodes, 2016; Stewart, 2003). Cultural studies scholar Richard Dyer (1997) argues the migration of White ethnics to the United States and African Americans to Northern cities fueled Hollywood's "respectabilisation" seen in filmic celebrations of ideal White femininity with stars such as Mary Pickford. In this regard, both whiteface and respectability politics function as a performance of Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class identity that must be perfected to secure one's position as a suitable citizen. This performance is the salvific wish to transcend the accusatory space.

Mapping Mammy 2.0

In the following sections, I examine all eight episodes of HBO's *Insecure* season one. The drama-comedy series consist of approximately 30-minute long episodes that portray the life of middle-class, Los Angeles native Issa (Issa Rae), who works for a nonprofit boss (Catherine

Curtin), whom she does not like, and struggles in a relationship with her unemployed, Georgetown-educated boyfriend Lawrence (Jay Ellis), and gains support from her best friend Molly (Yvonne Orji). The textual analysis focuses on interactions between characters Molly and Rasheeda, which span episodes three through four in order to examine how discourses of Whiteness and respectability produce "mammy 2.0."

Insecure's representations of intra-racial class differences are discursively and historically significant. Since Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's 1892 novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*, "representing the relation of black intellectuals to the folk" has been a theme of Black women's writing (Carby, 1987, p. 63). Similarly, Rae's fictitious characters Issa, Molly and Lawrence exemplify "Buppies, BAPs, and Bohos" that "have come of age since the end of the struggle against blatant segregation…attended predominately white schools and took their access to mainstream opportunities for granted" (Nelson, 2008, p. 201). The salvific wish shapes relationships between Issa and her working-class students and between Molly, a modern clubwoman, and Rasheeda, "the folk." For example, in episode seven, Issa's injunction to her working-class students "to study hard and act right" to achieve upward mobility represents the embrace of intramural policing as normal in popular culture. This "beyond race" rhetoric (Winant, 2001, p. 107) that evades discussions of structural oppression in favor of instructions in proper deportment represents post-racial respectability politics that register as commonsense knowledge.

The subtle respectability discourses shaping *Insecure* align with media scholar Ralina Joseph's (2016) notion of "strategic ambiguity" from her study of showrunner Shonda Rhimes. Strategic ambiguity is a representation of "21st-century Black respectability politics" that is "sometimes conflicted" and "always post-racial Black feminist resistance" (Joseph, 2016, p.

304). Accordingly, Rhimes's middle-class Black women personae reject "the folk" by shunning relationships with Black women (Joseph, 2016, p. 304). Similarly, Rae disavows the folk by creating a dichotomy between what she terms "The Ambitious Black" and "The Ratchet Black" (2015, p. 50,56). Such televisual imagery supports colorblind racism "by dichotomizing African Americans into two socioeconomic categories" (Busselle & Crandall, 2002, p. 266). *Insecure*'s circulation of discourses of Whiteness speaks to how repudiating poor, Black bodies is normalized in Black popular culture.

Black/White Dichotomy

The cinematic technique of "clear black-white binarism," employed in D.W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation,* signifies White is the norm and Black is deviant (Dyer, 1988, p. 48). *Insecure* uses the same visual practice to mark race and class differences. Episode one, titled "Insecure as F**k," introduces protagonist Issa Dee, a youth liaison for a fictitious nonprofit named We Got Y'all. In a colorful and cluttered classroom, minority students "from the hood" "fire away" at Issa with dialogue such as "Why you talk like a White girl," "What's up with your hair," "Why ain't you married…My dad said ain't nobody checkin' for bitter ass Black women anymore?" In response, Issa establishes her middle-class status: "I came from a great family…I have a college degree…I work in the nonprofit world because I like to give back." When a student ridicules Issa's wardrobe, the scene concludes with the minority students from the hood *laughing at her*. The audience is positioned to emphasize with Rae, whereas the working class youth assume the accusatory space of loud ghetto icons.

The scene is about class binarism as expressed through the mundane. A normal work routine for middle-class Issa stands in contrast to the daily acts of students of color. To visually communicate this, the camera breaks the rule of thirds and films Issa center frame rather than on

a "sweet spot" that is used "to create visually harmonious compositions" (Mercado, 2010, p. 7). The scene positions the main character's middle-class Black woman status in opposition to that of lower-class minority adolescents. On a narrative level, it is one of many scenes establishing Issa's outsider-within position in various social spaces, including her predominately White, nonprofit office.

For contrast, Issa introduces her best friend Molly Carter through voice over. Issa asks, "How different would my life be if I actually went after what I wanted? Maybe I'd be more like my best friend Molly" whom she describes as the "Will Smith of Corporate." The camera pans to find Molly, a Black woman, standing in an orderly corporate boardroom of muted tones before nearly all White professionals. It is the opposite of Issa's colorful and disorderly classroom of minority students. Molly jokes, "They want us to be more environmentally responsible, but it's like seriously who needs trees?" The scene ends with her corporate colleagues *laughing with her*, and the spectator is positioned to identity with Molly, the active agent, and through voice over, Issa declares, "White people love Molly."

Issa continues in voice over, "Black people love Molly," and the camera finds Molly in an area that resembles a basement with cinderblock walls. She plays dominoes with three, minority security guards at a table cluttered with beer bottles and chip wrappers. Again, disorder and working class status equal Black. The juxtaposition of these scenes shows Issa's environment of working-class minority students is opposite of Molly's majority White, corporate law firm. Issa's world is chaotic. Molly's world is orderly. Whiteness is bourgeois. Blackness is underclass. In *Mapping The Language Of Racism* scholars Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter explain that "Categorizations of social groups, assumptions about natural divisions between people, the assignment of traits and theories of the origins of group differences are

central to racist discourse" (1992, p. 14). It also illustrates what sociologist Cherise A. Harris describes as the Black middle-class "in-group/out-group comparison" that characterizes lower income Blacks as deficient (2013, p. 50). Connecting social class to specific racial groups is a pattern in season one of *Insecure*.

Molly as Black Lady

In episode three entitled, "Racist as F**k," the narrative continues the pattern of Black-White binarism in Molly's workplace. The racial mundane is at play in a manner that critical race theorists Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati (1999) call "working identity," which acknowledges that discrimination involving racial conduct is not a simple matter of phenotype but how racialized employees perform identity in the workplace. According to Carbado and Gulati's working identity concept, members of marginalized communities are aware of the racialized meanings attributed to their everyday actions. Therefore, employees engage various strategies such as comforting/assimilation to put the insider group at ease with one's difference or the discomfort strategy, which involves highlighting how the racial mundane disadvantages marginalized persons. In *Insecure*, the performances of Molly and Rasheeda represent both ends of the spectrum.

Similar to dominant media productions, *Insecure* makes use of the mundane to mark the respectability of Molly and Rasheeda. Strolling through her law firm, Molly chats with a White male colleague and notices another Black woman in a conference room. They, the active agents, gaze at a silenced Rasheeda, objectified spectacle, through glass. Molly expresses excitement at getting a new Black law intern. Her white male colleague quips, "I don't see color. I just see someone who's going to fetch me coffee." Molly dismisses this comment with a laugh, performing the proper, colorblind Black lady who accepts hierarchal power relations as normal.

Molly's accommodation is a comfort strategy that speaks to sociologist Adia Harvey Wingfield's study that finds "white employers may prefer Black women because their gender makes them more easily controlled through sexist put-downs…" (2007, p. 199). Molly introduces herself as "one of the third year associates" to the new Black law intern who replies, "I like seeing us in high places, girl." Molly offers to help the intern get acclimated. The intern thanks Molly, who asks for her name. The new intern states, "Rasheeda, but you can call me DaDa, Girl." On the surface the dialogue and interaction do not appear problematic. A closer reading of the scene reveals a contrast in how the characters Molly and Rasheeda perform Black identity.

Imagistic choices speak to societal values, practices and dominant discourses. Psychologists Jaclyn Ronquillo et al. find that Whites prefer lighter-skinned Blacks and as skin completion diverges "from the White Eurocentric norm, negative outcomes increase" (2007, p. 42). As a result, it is important to note Molly's straightened hair. Changing her dark skin tone would prove difficult, which rules out "strategic passing" as a strategy (Carbado & Gulati, 1999, p. 1300); therefore, Molly's hair choice signifies her knowledge of White normative expectations and conformity to those standards. Such ideals have been adopted by Black institutions such as the Black press that established White, middle-class norms as the standard for Black women's beauty (Gooden, 2011; Lindsey, 2011). Accordingly, many Black women embrace straightened and European hairstyles to appear "more feminine" and to confirm their place "in the social hierarchy" (Russell, Hall, & Wilson, 1992, p. 82). In this way, Molly performs the Black lady, "middle-class professional Black women who represent a modern version of the politics of respectability" (Collins, 2000a, p. 80). Molly signifies Whiteness and courts the dominant gaze.

On the contrary, Rasheeda wears African braids, which marks her as Black. The camera does not take Rasheeda's point of view, but her body remains the spectacle. Eurocentric views

concerning "black and white developed around their dualistic beliefs: black, the opposite of white, had become the negation of white" (Hodge, Struckmann, & Trost, 1975, p. 55). Legal scholar D. Wendy Green details employers' history of court-sanctioned "hyper-regulation" of Black women's bodies and mundane hairstyling choices by implementing alleged race neutral policies banning locks, dreads, and other styles associated with Black cultures (2016, p. 1021). Rasheeda's African hairstyle signifies her ignorance or rejection of raced-gendered expectations and foreshadows her unwillingness to "switch things up" in a later scene.

Unlike Molly, Rasheeda does not practice code switching in White spaces. Her dialogue can be read as "blackspeak" (Everett, 1995, p. 30), which is "loud talk sprinkled-with-vulgarity" (Artz, 1998, p. 72). Media scholars Anna Everett (1995) and B. Lee Artz (1998) identify blackspeak as a White cinematic device that signifies the failure or refusal of Black people to meet normative expectations. Even the characters' names imply contrast: "Molly" is European (read: American), and "Rasheeda" is Arabic/African (read: un-American). And "DaDa" is ghetto (read: not-respectable). *Insecure* continues the cinematic practice of creating binaries, making Black analogous to crudeness and white analogous to culture.

Molly as Mammy

This black equals wrong /white equals right dichotomy continues to distinguish Molly and Rasheeda. In a later scene in episode three, Molly works in her office and overhears Rasheeda who chats with a male colleague in tones louder than the office's typical muted conversational tones. Again, the camera's gaze reproduces Molly's, and Rasheeda is the objectified spectacle. To illustrate Rasheeda's crude nature, she jokes about committing sexual harassment. Molly quickly rises from her desk and asks Rasheeda into her office. This scene

confirms Rasheeda is the cultural other, sapphire, “a social menace that must be contained” (Gray, 1989, p. 378).

It is important to mention that Molly and Rasheeda share similar socio-economic backgrounds. In episode two “Messy as F**k,” Molly states, “I was a hood rat. All I knew was Florence and Crenshaw.” This dialogue signifies that Molly links race and socioeconomic status to character traits. The BAP figure from humble beginnings who resents her past draws from similar Black woman personae as Régine Hunter in *Living Single*, Toni Childs in *Girlfriends* and Dr. Lisa Hudson in *Being Mary Jane*. In this way, Molly represents the logic of the formerly underprivileged comedian Chris Rock’s joke that there are Black people and there are niggas. *Insecure* uses Rasheeda, the ghetto Black girl trope, to mark Molly as the reasonable Black who chooses the right routes to mainstream success.

Molly’s description of herself as a reformed “hood rat” is consistent with Eurocentric beliefs that exotic primitives can be civilized. The fact that hood rat is a common phrase in Black popular culture does not negate the fact that it is rooted in colonial associations: Whites possessed economic power and citizenship rights, whereas Black people were dehumanized as chattel. According to Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, believing in one’s inferiority is a prerequisite to domination: “For cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. Since everything has its opposite, if those who are invaded consider themselves inferior, they must necessarily recognize the superiority of the invaders” (Freire, 2000, p. 153). Logically, Molly perceives Rasheeda as a hood rat because she sees her past self. As Audre Lorde describes in *Eye to Eye*, “For if I take the white world's estimation of me as Black-woman-synonymous-with-garbage to heart, then deep down inside myself I will always believe that I am truly good for nothing… It is easier to

see you as good for nothing because you are like me" (Lorde, 1984, p. 168). The Rasheeda figure resonates with viewers because it taps into dominant discourses of the unassimilable Black underclass. Accepting the myth of "supposedly more mature, evolved, rational character of Europeans" (Blaut, 1992), Molly appears committed to imitating Whiteness and erasing her otherness–Rasheeda.

In this way, Molly represents a corporate mammy who protects White interests. Mammies in texts such as *Gone with the Wind* maintain the racial and gender order out of loyalty to Whites (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 77). Black feminist sociologist Barbara Omolade in *The Rising Song of African American Women* contrast the "New mammy" mindset with the material conditions of oppressed domestic servants who identified racism as the problem "and used that knowledge and experience to help create organizations and communities in opposition to racism and the white social order" (Omolade, 1994, p. 55). Instead, Molly uses her knowledge to serve as a Whiteness tutor, assuring Rasheeda that "I just want to make sure no one gets the wrong impression of you." This can be read as Molly's attempt at post-racial uplift.

The representation of the talk Molly has with Rasheeda is considered a form of cultural capital in some minority communities. It epitomizes paternalistic lessons inculcated by adults that simultaneously include warnings of abusive practices of the dominant group and messages to endure suffering that is a considered a part of the power game (C. A. Harris, 2013, pp. 29–68). In this exchange, *Insecure* constructs Molly as benevolent. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire warns, "All domination involves invasion—at times physical and overt, at times camouflaged, with the invader assuming the role of a helping friend" (2000, p. 153). Molly explains, "Girl, you know how these White people are. If you want to be successful here, you got to know how

to switch it up a little bit." Molly does not challenge Whiteness. Constrained by the ideology of intramural policing, the narrative normalizes an exploitative system.

Consistent with the salvific wish, Molly works to change Rasheeda, the exotic primitive. Again Freire writes, "The more invasion is accentuated and those invaded are alienated from the spirit of their own culture and from themselves, the more the latter want to be like the invaders: to walk like them, dress like them, talk like them" (Freire, 2000, p. 153). Rasheeda responds, "I appreciate your feedback, but I didn't switch it up in my interview with the senior partners. And I didn't switch it up when I was named editor of the law review, so I don't think I need to switch it up now. But thank you so much." Rasheeda performs the discomfort strategy (Carbado & Gulati, 1999) by highlighting the unfairness in Molly's privileging of the racial mundane over her competence, which leaves Molly perplexed as to why her anti-Black respectability politics were rejected. This representation shows *Insecure* constructs Rasheeda as a subordinate, who should give to Molly gratitude and deference in return. Media historian Jane Rhodes (2016, p. 203) explains performances of deference to authority were constitutive of respectability politics. In addition, Molly's insistence on deference underscores her performance as mammy. Regarding White employers interactions with Black domestic workers, Collins (2000a, p. 56) says deference was central, and Black women who "played the role of obedient servant were more highly valued by their employers, regardless of the quality of the work performed." Rasheeda's competency is irrelevant and her refusal to show deference leads to discipline.

Molly as Mammy 2.0

The Molly icon illustrates an embrace of racist-sexist ideologies, as with Black lady and mammy images. What distinguishes the Black lady, mammy, and mammy 2.0 is postfeminist feedback-as-discipline. Like respectability, postfeminist discourses construct the individual self

as a site for surveillance and transformation to resolve modern-day structural problems (Gill, 2007, p. 263; Obasogie & Newman, 2016, p. 547). Feminist scholar Amanda Rossie (2015) distinguishes commentary from feedback. Rossie explains feedback possesses the "intent to do something to the girls…or to make them feel something…This is feedback meant to enact some kind of change upon the girls themselves. Put differently, this is feedback rather than commentary because it has disciplinary intent" (Rossie, 2015, p. 233). Molly as mammy 2.0 provides to lesser others unsolicited feedback, which is meant as a directive to conform to White norms. Further, Rossie (2015) explains the feedback in her study is contradictory. In episode four, Molly states she is not "the Black translator here to tell the colored folks when master think they done wrong." Nonetheless, she voluntarily counsels Rasheeda for exactly that reason.

This feedback-as-discipline continues in episode four, as discourses of Whiteness shape Molly as a figure that endorses power as domination. Collins (2000a, p. 144) explains power as domination includes negating one's personhood and reducing an individual to the state of animal/nature to exploit "or to treat them condescendingly as pets." In this way, Molly takes on a role usually reserved for White men in visual culture: the White savior. Like White savior films, *Insecure* portrays the mundane habits of Rasheeda as deficient, justifying intervention. In this "narcissistic fantasy," Molly performs the messianic figure (Vera & Gordon, 2003, p. 33). *Insecure*, as with Hollywood White savior cinema, fails to problematize Whiteness. Instead people of color play either the villains or "faithful helpers of white men" (Vera & Gordon, 2003, p. 36). Similar to modern respectability politics, the message to the exotic primitive is assimilate or be annihilated. Through Molly, *Insecure* articulates a "Middle-class, Black Women's Burden," in which a Black woman trades places with a White man to maintain White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

Molly has an opportunity to challenge Whiteness when her White female senior partner–who subscribes to cultural racism–explicitly tells Molly that Rasheeda is “not quite adjusting to the culture here” in episode four. However discourses of Whiteness and respectability politics shape the narrative. Because Rasheeda rejects Molly’s paternalistic advice, Molly chooses to be complicit in Rasheeda’s termination to discipline her for failing to perform White comfort strategies. *Insecure* shows choice and meritocracy are valid only when it conforms to White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Molly’s hostility toward Rasheeda is captured in Frantz Fanon’s words: “The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people” (2004, p. 52). As a result, she aids a White institution in discriminating against another Black woman. In colorblind fashion, *Insecure* frames Molly’s complicity in Rasheeda’s firing as a case of individual failure–not of racism because color-blindness eradicates the notion of White supremacy from private and public spheres (Gallagher, 2003, p. 26). Molly’s exchange with Rasheeda is a White savior narrative with a Black façade. The extermination of Rasheeda, the violence of the salvific wish, “represents the disastrous consequences of countering one kind of dehumanizing repression with another, more rigid one, this version self-imposed” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 35). Accordingly, a mammy 2.0 is more committed to protecting symbols of Whiteness by disciplining Blacks who do not conform to White supremacist capitalistic patriarchal ideals than to resisting oppression.

Conclusion

Employing the politics of respectability, this chapter examined the relationship between two Black working women personae to show how *Insecure* normalizes Whiteness through the middle-class imagery of Molly set against the otherness of the Rasheeda icon that represents the folk. In this way, *Insecure* season one does not demystify bad Black women myths; rather, the

series combines multiple controlling images, the mammy, sapphire, and the Black lady, with postfeminist feedback-as-discipline to construct a modern controlling image, mammy 2.0. With Molly, the discursive production of mammy 2.0 involves a Black lady icon moving from betraying Black men to assisting Whites in the discrimination of Black women by means of intramural policing. Accordingly, *Insecure* casts a Black woman as the active agent in the retelling of the White savior narrative. Such dominant-encoded narratives featuring Black personae still uphold White supremacist capitalist patriarchal looking relations, despite centering Black women's bodies.

Insecure legitimates classist, sexist and racist ideologies by positioning as disorderly and combative–in the accusatory space–Black women whose public performances are rooted in vernacular culture. The construction of Rasheeda is accomplished by means of the racial mundane, removing daily actions such as hair choices and type of speech from anonymity and placing them under public scrutiny as raced-gendered spectacles. In this way, *Insecure* produces Rasheeda as the representative ghetto Black girl. As stated in the introduction, the marginalization of Black bodies, specifically non-normative/queer Black women's bodies is routine. Routine to the point where it goes unexamined. In this episode only Rasheeda's performances are marked as the deviant object of the spectator's scopophilia, whereas attributes associated with Whiteness such as order, muted tones, detachment and straightened hair are invisible–ordinary. Consequently, the excision of Rasheeda and her glaring ethnic and class ties appears logical to achieve normalcy, which is the work of the White savior.

The work of cultural ideals and practices reflect and produce material consequences. The erasure of Rasheeda is not mere comedy. Sandra Bland, an educated Black woman, refused to show deference to White authority and lost her life in a jail cell after the commonplace act of

asking why she was stopped by police. A question to consider is to what extent the concept of the Sapphire operates when real Black women navigate society? There in lies the problem of conflating icon with referent, the problem with the "There *are* hoes and bitches" argument. Seeing individuals through the prism of racist, sexist, and classist ideologies does the work of rationalizing the violence of oppression. As a result, Black feminist thought and critical Black female spectatorship are indispensible to the project of deconstructing Whiteness. A critical reading of the Molly and Rasheeda interaction illuminates Black women's dual role as victim (passive object) and perpetuator (active agent) in White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. In this way, Black women can become "agents of exploitation" that Philosopher Louis Althusser described by taking on the so-called sensible attitudes and practices of ideological apparatuses that seem independently chosen (2014, pp. 251; 259).

On the contrary, the oppositional gaze de-centers Eurocentric looking relations, challenging the tendency to sense interlocking oppressions as ordinary. And it disrupts the normalcy of disparities in material conditions by interrogating the production of two distinct classes of Black women: respectable Black women and ratchet Black women, which are two sides of the same myth. A common thread with Rae and *Insecure*'s representations is the acceptance of racist-sexist notions of Black womanhood. While this chapter centered socio-economic class, the next chapter of this Black feminist critique interrogates the adoption by *Insecure* of externally defined meanings, stereotypes and discourses that naturalize Whiteness at the intersections of gender and sexuality.

CHAPTER 4

DECOLONIZING THE SUFFERING BLACK GIRL DISCOURSE IN *INSECURE*

Introduction

In an interview with Issa Rae regarding the television series *Insecure*, *Splinter.com*'s Tahirah Hairston ask, "Issa's best friend Molly is a 30-year-old black woman who is super successful and can't find a man. It sounds like a stereotype—how did you defy that on *Insecure?* Rae's response does not challenge the stereotype. Rather, Rae naturalizes the trope: "Stereotype or not, there's some element of truth that it comes from…I also have a lot of friends who are single and who feel like they are worth more. So to dismiss it as a stereotype is also kind of unfair" (Hairston, 2016). Rae makes the realist claim that *Insecure*'s representations refer to actual lives of humans. It is the "There *are* bitches and hoes" argument discussed in the literature review. However, White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy produces the "Single Black Woman." Marriage, Black and woman are social constructs used to mark deviance and normalcy. Naturalizing such tropes as "truth" and Black women's positioning in the accusatory space as ordinary mask the work of hegemony, which normalizes the White gaze.

In *Black-eyed Susans*, literary scholar Mary Helen Washington argues representations of Black women by Black women writers avoid tropes "as the super sex object, or the domineering matriarch, or the evil black bitch" (1975, p. xi). Washington makes a seemingly essentialist claim about the intersections of race and gender that is largely supported by the cultural artifacts of Black women writers since the nineteenth century. Texts from Black women such as Pauline Hopkins, Nella Larson and Toni Morrison construct Black women personae who confront

societal oppression and produce narratives rooted in awareness that "to lose control of the body is to be hostage to insufferable circumstances" (Spillers, 1984, p. 93). Accordingly, scholars such as Hazel Carby (1987), Ann duCille (1993) and Candace Jenkins (2007), among others, examine how Black women cultural producers, rooted in a Black feminist/womanist standpoint, interrogate the assumed rightness and naturalness of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family. Consequently, they question Black women's presumed sexual deviance and spectator positioning in the accusatory space.

This chapter examines the social relations and conditions that produced the commonsense acceptance of representations of Black women in the accusatory space in Black women's texts such as *Insecure*. Feminist philosopher María Lugones's decolonial feminism is a standpoint "that enables us to see what is hidden from our understandings of both race and gender and the relations of each to normative heterosexuality" (Lugones, 2010, p. 742). From this standpoint, this chapter reviews Black feminist criticism to show changes in Black women personae in novels, poems and films. Then, it maps the suffering Black girl discourse from *Waiting to Exhale* to cultural productions produced by Black women into the new millennium. The chapter ends with a close reading of *Insecure* to illustrate how the suffering Black girl remains a dominant discourse and to show, despite Rae's identity, Black sexuality is painted deviant.

From Black Feminist Subject in 1892 to Suffering Black Girl in 1992

Placing *Insecure*'s representations of gender and sexuality within a larger context of Black women personae illuminates Washington's point that Black women cultural producers have largely countered the position of Black women icons in the accusatory space. The narrative structure of Black feminist texts situates the protagonist in the midst of struggle at the intersections of race, gender, class and, often, sexuality. This struggle serves as the impetus for

the protagonist's shift from a Eurocentric epistemological perspective (hooks, 1992) to a self-defined Black feminist standpoint (Gibson-Hudson, 1994). In this way, Black feminist cultural products have rejected the narrative function of Black as the sign of White deviance. The following section charts the change in representations of Black women fictional subjects from the mulatta to the homely dark woman to the suffering Black girl.

Early Black women's writing employed the "mulatta" figure in order to interrogate White supremacy, patriarchy and classism. In 1892, Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* becomes the first published novel written by a Black woman. Cultural studies scholar Hazel Carby (1987, p. 89) states Harper's use of a mulatta protagonist is a convention that permits a critique of the cult of True Womanhood, which excluded women of color; also, the mulatta figure enables an exploration of the gap between the privileged White society and the brutality of Black life. In the late 1920's, Nella Larsen publishes *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Larsen centers mulatta heroines, introduces the first sexual Black woman protagonist, and critiques Black middle-class respectability politics and White society's exotic fixation with Black women (Carby, 1987, pp. 163–175). Literary scholar Valerie Smith (1994, p. 380) credits Larson's works with exploring the constraints of misogyny and patriarchy in Black women's domestic lives. In a close reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, writer Lorraine Bethel states Zora Neale Hurston represented centuries of oppression and its impact upon Black women in the relationship of Nanny and Janie, another mulatta (Bethel, 1982). Nanny's knowledge that "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world" causes her to protect Janie through violence and forced marriage; however, Janie rejects this definition and struggles to experience erotic love that society denies Black women (Bethel, 1982, p. 182). The Black women protagonists and narratives of these texts challenge limitations placed on Black womanhood by popular and scholarly discourses.

The figure of the Black woman in the texts of Black women begins to challenge how the Black community's beliefs, practices and rituals have been shaped by middle-class White discourses of femininity, beauty, class and the family. Literary scholar Sondra O'Neale (1986, p. 152) describes Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha,* published in 1953, as the first novel to communicate "the pain that society can inflict on the 'unlovely' black woman." Similarly, literary scholar Arthur P. Davis (1962) located, in Brooks's poetry, a "Black and Tan Motif," which represents the societal plight of dark-skinned Black women who face intra-racial bias due to colorism. To illustrate the extensive nature of colorism, in the novella *Maud Martha*, Brooks maps the effects of colorism upon the protagonist as a child in her family, as a wife in a marriage, and as a Black woman in her Black community.

In 1982 Alice Walker continues this focus on the unlovely dark woman and the critique of Black communities emulating middle-class White heteropatriarchy. Speaking of *The Color Purple*, writer and critic Jewel Gomez (1999) notes the relationship between Shug and Celie challenged widespread societal myths that defined lesbianism as a contemporary, White women's choice. In the midst of the violence caused by double patriarchy, Shug Avery's unabashed, self-defined sexuality "implies the power and validity of black women's desire as no heterosexual love story has ever done" (Gomez, 1999, p. 34). Historian and writer Andrea Stuart states *The Color Purple* is a story of a Black woman who endures oppression by coming to love herself, to forgive Black men and to accept the Black community once she "learns to 'chase that old white man out of [her] head'"(Stuart, 1988, p. 67). Regarding the film *The Color Purple*, Black feminist cultural scholar Jacqueline Bobo notes the womanist meaning of the text was lost, as director Stephen Spielberg sought to construct the film as a modern version of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Consequently, the film simplifies resilient and complex Black women narratives to

"standard negative images" (Bobo, 1995, p. 68). It is important to note how the mainstream incorporation of *The Color Purple* weakened Black feminist/womanist personae and narratives in the film adaptation in order to position it for a universal (White) gaze.

Whereas Spielberg's take on *The Color Purple* lessened its womanist meaning, Terry McMillian's 1992 text *Waiting to Exhale* produced Black woman personae distinct from Black feminist/womanist precursors. Like *The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale* was adapted to screen and released by Twentieth Century Fox in 1995. Cultural critic bell hooks (1996) responds with a swift critique, stating the Hollywood machine commodified and capitalized Black women's suffering. In addition, hooks criticizes the film's representations of Black women as "wild, irrational, castrating bitch goddesses" and of Black men as irresponsible and uninterested in Black women beyond sex (1996, p. 72). Although hooks states the novel was not feminist, she notes the filmic version of *Waiting to Exhale* reduces the complex representations in the novel to racist-sexist tropes that a mainstream film audience would find more palatable. Furthermore, hooks implicates Terri McMillian and Black women viewers in what she considers their complicity in "cultural genocide… messages of self-loathing and disempowerment brought to them by four beautiful black female 'stars'"(hooks, 1996, p. 73).

Several Black feminist scholars consider the emergence of *Waiting to Exhale* a significant moment in Black women's popular culture for various reasons. Film scholar Norma Manatu begins her book *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema* with a critique of the film's portrayal of sexually obsessed Black women (Manatu, 2003, p. 9). On the contrary, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins states *Waiting to Exhale*, the novel, is an example of emergent Black woman subjectivity and strong Black woman friendships (Collins, 2000a, p. 103). Because the film *Waiting to Exhale* was number one at the box office, grossing over 11 million

dollars in its first week (Dutka, 1995), Bobo (1995, p. 20) concludes its success resulted in a formula that other Black woman media makers would have to follow to receive mainstream backing. The merger of the dominant cinematic apparatus and Black women's stories as represented in the filmic adaptation of *Waiting to Exhale* marks a shift in the post-civil rights era of Black women dramatis personae from Black feminist subject to neoliberal Suffering Black girl icon that embraces the accusatory space.

Mapping the Suffering Black Girl Discourse

Elite discourses, social, political, and economic factors shape and reflect dominant beliefs (Dijk, 2002) regarding Black women's sexuality. The filmic version of *Waiting to Exhale* constructs a narrative that portrays resentment of professional Black women icons rejected by Black men characters that prefer as mates anyone except Black women. Collins (2004) points to elements of the national cultural context that would produce mainstream audiences who welcome this narrative: Two dominant discourses fashioned representations of Black women as either the socially unacceptable, crazy Black woman or the palatable neoliberal-colorblind modern mammy, which converged to construct the suffering Black girl subject–phallocentric, heterosexual and neoliberal. Speaking of misogynistic texts directed by Black men that emerged in 1991, Jacquie Jones (1992, p. 96) in "The Accusatory Space" states, "The news became the factory for Black mass media imagery in cautious, conservative times." Likewise, news discourses helped produced the suffering Black girl.

Erotomania

In 1991, U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearings of Anita Hill's sexual harassment allegations against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas claimed national attention. In that same year, *The New York Times* journalist Felicity Barringer solicited opinions from White

mental health experts regarding the psychological states of Hill and Thomas (Barringer, 1991). Barringer framed this historical event as a "drama" and used the term "protagonists" to describe the non-fictive Hill and Thomas (Barringer, 1991). Consistent with the framing of this historical event as spectacle, a clinician suggested that a reasonable explanation for Anita Hill's allegation was erotomania (Barringer, 1991):

> "Erotomania" is the psychiatric term for a condition in which otherwise competent and rational people harbor a fixed romantic delusion. The hallmark of this disorder is that the romantic delusion is plausible, although wrong, and the person's behavior is not otherwise odd or bizarre… When the object of the romantic fantasy does not reciprocate, love can turn to bitterness and anger.

At this time, Hill was an accomplished legal scholar. Her status as a childless, dark-skinned Black woman outside the protection of heterosexual marriage and the prevailing discourses of irrational and oversexed Black womanhood coalesced to reduce Hill's complexity as a human being to the representation of a crazy Black woman (Collins, 2004, p. 146). Collins (2004), legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1992), and Black studies scholar Wahneema Lubiano (1992) explain charactering Hill as a scorned Black woman intent on taking a Black man down constructs the notion that Black women's betrayal, not systemic racism, is the ultimate obstacle to Black men's success. Collins goes on to critique the reproduction of this myth in the cultural products of Black men auteurs, as in the films *Boomerang*, released in 1992, and *Booty Call*, released in 1997. However, Collins neglects to examine the articulation of this narrative in the texts of Black women cultural producers.

The Ideology of Black Middle-Class Individualism

The prominence of another unmarried, childless, dark-skinned, professional Black woman enabled American Broadcasting Company (ABC) to represent mainstream beliefs as purported authentic Black narratives. After Oprah Winfrey's Oscar-nominated performance in *The Color Purple*, ABC re-launched *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on a national scale in 1986 (Higgins, 2011). The show explored race without an explicit discussion of racism, which, for one expert, "empowered" Black people (Gill, 2007, p. 174). NPR says this approach allowed White audiences to see "just Oprah" and not a Black talk show host (NPR Staff, 2016). Rae agrees with this method in her memoir and states an ambitious black person "is a chameleon" who turns race on and off "in any environment in the name of advancement" (Rae, 2015, p. 50). Attempting to wash the black off bodies in preparation for a European market was a practice of Portuguese colonizers (Hobson, 2005, p. 25). In recent times, marketing race as a "benign cultural marker" and avoiding public discussions of White supremacy is considered neoliberal colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gallagher, 2003, p. 26).

Black feminist Michele Wallace opposes this colorblind perspective and describes the emergence of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as the mainstream appropriation and commodification of Black feminism minus a Black feminist commitment to widespread social change (Wallace, 1993, p. 122). In addition, Wallace states Winfrey constructs a "superficially 'feminist' agenda" that offers the neoliberal solution of "Don't worry, be rich." Collins also critiques Winfrey's ideology of Black middle-class individualism, which "stops far short of linking such individual changes to the actual resources and opportunities that are needed to escape from poverty, stop an abusive spouse from battering, or avoid job discrimination" (Collins, 2004, p. 143). Similarly, cultural scholar Herman Gray states Winfrey's ubiquity represents the "ideology of American

racial openness” (Gray, 1989, p. 366). Winfrey’s admiration and procurement of several Black feminist texts demonstrate her awareness of this counter-discourse (Wallace, 1993, pp. 122–123). However, prominent Black feminists criticisms of neoliberal discourses shaping Winfrey’s star persona and star vehicles support the view that Black feminist standpoint is not the bodily property of all Black women.

Series of Suffering Black Girls

The reification of the crazy Black woman and middle-class individualist Black woman merged to solidify the suffering Black girl discourse. Whereas Brooks’s “Black and Tan Motif” explores intra-racial bias dark-skinned Black women face due to ideologies rooted in White supremacy, suffering Black girl discourse locates the misfortune Black women experience in heterosexual relations not in terms of systemic oppression, but in terms of what sociologists Marcyliena Morgan and Dionne Bennett call “no-goodness” of Black men (2006, p. 490). The suffering Black girl discourse produces–in neoliberal fashion–Black women who blame themselves for supposed choices that caused their personal suffering. Accordingly, the suffering Black girl seeks to solve these individual problems through betrayal of Black men and/or through capitalistic consumption. In suffering Black girl discourse, “so-called deviant social and sexual behavior,” not “structural vulnerabilities” (M. M. Bailey & Stallings, 2017, pp. 617–618) produces widespread inequity. Hence, it is a middle-class articulation of the angry Black woman myth, which accompanies representations of a no-good Black man (Morgan & Bennett, 2006).

The scorned Black woman image has been a staple of contemporary, mainstream television series written by, produced by, and starring Black women for over twenty years. The 1990’s Twentieth Century Fox situation comedy *Living Single*–which Rae cites as a major source of inspiration in her memoir (Rae, 2015) and honors by singing the theme song in the

premiere episode of season two–introduces the character Maxine Shaw. Maxine, a successful, single, childless attorney and the darkest Black woman of the cast, delivers a diatribe about an ex-lover, who leaves once her career flourishes when his does not…but she ain't bitter. This story functions as a rhyme throughout the season. *Living Single*'s executive producer Yvette Lee Bowser acknowledged Twentieth Century Fox requested she incorporate the "desperation theme" of *Waiting to Exhale* into the series: "Contrary to Bowser's intentions, the show went from being a slice-of-life comedy about girlfriends to a narrative about the 'male quest,' or 'Fight for Mr. Right' as one two-part episode was dubbed" (Zook, 1999, pp. 65–67). In addition, Rae pays homage to the Viacom/CW television sitcom *Girlfriends* in her memoir and, also, honors in the pilot episode of *Insecure* by singing the theme song. *Girlfriends,* which credits Mara Brock Akil as executive producer, aired in 1999. The series presents the character Toni Childs, who like Maxine Shaw, is also the darkest Black woman of the cast and is a single, successful, childless, luxury real estate agent. Toni is in a relationship with an alleged no-good Black man Greg, whom the series portrays as a starving artist who financially depends upon Toni. Establishing the suffering Black girl discourse in the era of postfeminist media culture, Toni betrays Greg by sleeping with a successful Black male doctor. Through inter-textuality, Rae bonds meaning found in these earlier televisual narratives to *Insecure*.

This suffering Black girl discourse continues into the new millennium. ABC's *Scandal*, which premiered in 2012, introduces the single, childless, successful attorney Olivia Pope, who engages in an affair with the fictional married president of the United States. The no-good Black man is implied in his absence as a suitable mate, and Pope represents erotomania in her pursuit of her superior who is married to a White woman. In 2013, Viacom/BET airs another Akil production, *Being Mary Jane*. The single, childless, successful journalist and eponymous

heroine, Mary Jane, is in an affair with a married man. Simultaneously, the first three seasons follows Mary Jane's pursuit of another ex-lover, who is involved with a White woman. Mary Jane also supported this ex-boyfriend David but betrayed him by ending the relationship before his software company prospered. What is interesting is *Insecure's* no-good Black man Lawrence is also an unemployed software developer who shares the same alma mater, Georgetown, as Mary Jane's David. These are not mere coincidences. The co-showrunner of *Insecure* Prentice Penny was a writer for the Akil production *Girlfriends* (O'Connell, 2017), and Rae was in a development deal with Shonda Rhimes's Shondaland at the time Rae's memoir was published (Rae, 2015, p. 201; Wortham, 2015).

The suffering Black girl discourse produces an array of consumer products such as Steve Harvey's book *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*, which was adapted into a Sony Pictures' Screen Gems movie franchise, and Iyanla Vanzant's *Peace from Broken Pieces* and subsequent OWN television series *Iyanla, Fix My Life.* This book-to-screen formula, drawing from the success of *The Color Purple* and *Waiting to Exhale,* possibly contributed to Rae publishing *The New York Times* Bestseller *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* in 2015 ahead of the mainstream television adaptation. In addition, ABC's *Nightline* produced a special segment proclaiming a national crisis: "Forty-two percent of U.S. black women have never been married" (L. Davis & Karar, 2009). In 2012, these words came across the screen of the pilot episode of Akil's *Being Mary Jane*. Consumerism drives the suffering Black girl discourse, which produces a flawed Black woman subject, icon and spectator, and ideology of individual choice. However, the interlocking systems of heteropatriarchy, racism, and classism inherent in this dominant discourse remain unchallenged. An unexamined question here is why is heterosexual marriage constructed as the only option for Black people and its infrequency labeled a problem?

The suffering Black girl discourse is not an "out of the blue" product of the culture industry. Black feminist scholar Brittany Cooper (2017, p. 102) states the topic of "Why Negro Girls Stay Single" has been a contentious issue for Black cultural producers. Slavery, Jim Crow, lynch law, rape, the prison industrial complex, and discrimination in jobs, housing and education have rendered the maintenance of heteronormative marriage unattainable and/or undesirable for many heterosexual Blacks (Collins, 2004; B. C. Cooper, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; DuCille, 1993; Jenkins, 2007). Essentially, White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy constructs Black sexuality and family relations as deviant to establish Whiteness as normal. Whereas the novels *The Color Purple* and *Waiting to Exhale* explore Black women navigating the material effects of oppression and rejecting the constraints of heteropatriarchy, the commodification of Black women's pain by the culture industry lacks such complexity. Accordingly, the suffering Black girl discourse is neoliberal, post-racial and postfeminist in its construction of individual subjects with individual problems.

Further, the implications of the suffering Black girl discourse is evident when compared to White postfeminist imagery. Dominant looking relations, structured in White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, produce White men as active agent and White Woman as glamorized spectacle. In *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*–also print turned to screen vehicles–the self-conscious, self-monitoring White woman seeks her *right* (White, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender) man figure that represents the purported stability of the nuclear family (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2005). As Blackness represents sexual and social deviance, the cinematic apparatus constructs Black couples as the opposite of this so-called normal order: Black man is passive object and Black woman is active agent. While White postfeminist imagery reinforces the Cinderella icon, the Black postfeminist suffering Black girl fortifies the Sapphire image.

The Suffering Black Girl Discourse in *Insecure*

Comedy-drama series consist of misunderstandings, tropes, and irrational behavior (Nelson, 1998, p. 79), and *Insecure* remains true to this formula. Viewers follow the life of Issa Dee (Issa Rae), a typical postfeminist subject of the HBO variety, who is consumed with self-surveillance, self-disclosure and self-blame (McRobbie, 2005). Issa struggles to commit to her job and boss Joanne (Catherine Curtin) and to support her unemployed boyfriend Lawrence (Jay Ellis). She manages single life with the support of her best friend Molly Carter (Yvonne Orji). Popular culture scholar Angela M.S. Nelson explains the nature of television politics, structured in White supremacist patriarchy, dictated that Black actors portray familiar roles from minstrel shows in the early days of television such as Sapphire and George “Kingfish” Stevens of *The Amos ‘n’ Andy Show* (Nelson, 1998, pp. 81–83). Consequently, comedy series represent images for dominant visual pleasure, constructing Black men as “lazy and unintelligent and female characters as boisterous and mean” (Ramasubramanian, 2010, p. 104). *Insecure* draws from these conventions positioning the construction of Black sexuality in the accusatory space.

Despite such television politics, Rae is not without agency. In an interview with *IndieWire*, Rae states she honed her voice, knows the story she wants to tell, and appreciates HBO for its “writer-friendly” policy (Schneider, 2017). According to Rae (Framke, 2016; Hairston, 2016), *Insecure* is rooted in autobiographical accounts of Black women’s lives. Nevertheless, the central narratives are updated, middle-class versions of old conventions “staged for a white subject position” that have shaped Black visual culture (Gray, 1995, p. 75). This point is not intended to construct Rae as a mindless imitator of prior cultural products. Rather, the point is dominant ideologies and discourses shape lived experiences, practices, rituals and beliefs of both non-White and White subjects.

No-Good Black Man.

Accordingly, *Insecure* quickly establishes lead character Issa as a suffering Black girl. About three minutes into the pilot episode, Issa raps into the mirror (camera), one of the many conventions used to externalize Issa thoughts, to express she is "feeling sorry" for herself. The camera cuts to Issa loading the Facebook page of a Black man whose name is Daniel, and a message appears, "Happy Birthday. I miss you." The soundtrack brings in a clip of rhythm and blues artist Rafael Sadiqq's "Still Ray" as he sings, "Good runs all though you. I can't help myself. You found my weakest spot," as a montage of shots builds the meaning that Daniel is attractive, a successful music producer, and single. Again, the scene transitions to Issa rapping in the mirror to reveal that she and Daniel were romantically involved. Issa messages Daniel, but her boyfriend Lawrence stirs while sleeping in bed in the middle of the day. This causes Issa to flee from the room.

The narrative returns to the issue of Issa's suffering a second time a little over seven minutes into the 28-minute pilot. Molly, Issa's best friend who is suffering because she is single, encourages Issa to engage in birthday coital with Lawrence, but Issa verbalizes her desire to end her relationship with Lawrence because she "doesn't have time for the bullshit anymore." Issa's suffering mirrors what media scholar Suzanne Leonard (2007) calls boredom in postfeminist media culture of White women protagonists who find themselves stuck in both bland jobs and relationships; likewise, *Insecure* resorts to the adultery trope as used in such films.

With Issa's suffering evident, the narrative turns to establishing Lawrence's no-goodness. Issa arrives home to find Lawrence lying on the couch, watching television. After she inquires why he is not dressed for her birthday outing, he confides that he bungled another job interview. His inability to land a job is framed as personal incompetence. He states he "just got

nervous…started staying stuff that didn't make any sense" and that he "didn't talk about anything he could bring to the table." If one is not convinced of his incompetence, he adds that he spit on his prospective employer and "spilled coffee all over his desk." This portrayal of Lawrence draws from the Zip Coon trope, the "urbanized" Black man who "could never succeed on his own" (Nelson, 2008, p. 188). To leave no doubts that Lawrence is a no-good Black man, he asks Issa to skip her birthday dinner. The meaningful dialogue in this scene comes not from Issa, who utters very few words, but through mise–en–abyme structure–a fitness television episode within the television episode *Insecure*. On screen, two Black men bodybuilders give advice. Body Builder One states, "You want pecks. You want abs? It takes fuckin' discipline." Body Builder Two adds, "So stop making excuses and do 'em." Body Builder One chimes in, "Make it happen. It's not gonna happen by sitting on your ass."

This dialogue marks a major point in terms of narrative. Issa describes herself in voiceover earlier in the show as "aggressively passive." Therefore, the bodybuilders dialogue externalizes Issa's unvoiced sentiments. Through this convention, one learns Issa believes Lawrence lacks discipline, sits on his ass and makes excuses. All of these phrases imply personal choice, which is the bedrock of middle-class individualism. The message is clear: Dismiss societal issues such as the fact that unemployment rates amongst Blacks exceed Whites, regardless of education (Wilson, 2015). Lawrence is simply lazy. At this narrative juncture, Issa secretly messages Daniel. The body builder's voice, the externalization of Issa's thoughts, ends the scene: "I wish I could come through that screen and choke the fuck out yo lazy ass." This dialogue constructs the meaning that because Lawrence is no-good, Issa has a right to punish him with betrayal. Betrayal is a premise of the suffering Black girl discourse.

In this way, *Insecure* articulates a modern version of the emasculating Sapphire and links Lawrence's lack of a job to normative notions of masculinity. For example, in a scene within the pilot episode, Issa's dialogue reveals Lawrence has been unemployed for four years, and she is tired of waiting on him "to get his shit together." In episode three, Issa expresses to her best friend Molly that she carries "the emotional weight" and " the financial weight" of the relationship because Lawrence fails to "man up" (episode two). This is the principal representation of Black women in dominant media–masculinized women who possess "economic power" over their mate (Manatu, 2003, p. 132). Unemployed Lawrence represents the 17 percent of Black men whom reportedly many Black women find unacceptable (L. Davis & Karar, 2009). This firmly establishes Lawrence as the lazy, Black man who is content to live off others. Black stereotypes, the bossy washerwomen getting the no-good Black husbands in line in *Coon Town Suffragettes* (Bogle, 1989, p. 9) and in subsequent White commercial television productions, resurface in the representations of Issa and Lawrence. However, the updated suffering Black girl discourse offers the adultery trope as the logical solution to Black woman's suffering. As a result, this discourse not only incorporates the sapphire controlling image but also, in the words of film scholar Anna Everett, makes use of the "cinematic construction" of the "unprincipled black 'ho'" (Everett, 1995, p. 34).

The synergy of both controlling images is clear as the narrative progresses. In response to Issa's discontent, Lawrence accepts a job at Best Buy "to handle his shit" for the both of them, although he is a Georgetown-educated software developer (episode three). A bank teller expresses romantic interest in Lawrence, but he rejects her, informing her that he has a girlfriend (episode five). In spite of Lawrence's efforts, Issa has an affair with Daniel. The juxtaposition of Issa's unprincipled sexuality to Lawrence's loyalty represents what Lubiano calls "the

betrayal-narrative economy of the Black lady overachiever" (Lubiano, 1992, p. 333). After Issa has sex with Daniel, she discards him for Lawrence. When Daniel demands to know why Issa mistreats him, she tells him he was "just an itch she needed to scratch." In episode six, Lawrence lands a professional position at a tech firm, but ends the relationship with Issa when he discovers the betrayal. Issa's irrational decision-making results in the betrayal of two Black men. The representation of Issa can be read as meaning Black women are "incapable of fidelity," driven by passion, and rebuff Black men's attempts at legitimate relationships (Manatu, 2003, p. 129).

Molly's Broken Pussy

The sapphire and jezebel tropes represent the ever-looming fear that Black women are doomed to remain single and lonely–or to become lesbians. Critical race theorist Dorothy Roberts (2014) explains such racist-sexist-heterosexist myths function as part of a larger apparatus to police the supposed problematic sexuality and reproduction of non-White women. *Insecure* does not challenge this colonial logic. Instead, it represents and reaffirms it in another lead character, Molly, who is Issa's best friend. The audience meets Molly, a successful, unmarried, childless Black woman attorney in the image of Anita Hill. Molly's narrative aligns closely with what media scholar Rosalind Gill calls the postfeminist media culture makeover paradigm (Gill, 2007, pp. 262–264). The name stems from the makeover craze popularized by talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Media productions rooted in the makeover paradigm begin with the humiliation of the subject in some area such as dating; similarly, *Insecure's* pilot shames Molly to construct the meaning that her "life is lacking or flawed in some way and secondly, that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design, or lifestyle experts, and practicing appropriately modified

consumption habits" (Gill, 2007, pp. 262–264). In the next paragraphs, I outline *Insecure's* construction of Molly as a flawed neoliberal subject.

Initially, the pilot presents Molly's ordinary world as perfect. Issa's voice-over tells the audience that everyone "loves Molly." When Dianne, Molly's Asian female colleague, compliments her performance on a case, it conveys the message that Molly is a skilled attorney. After this, a series of humiliating circumstances, which center around the fact of her being a romantically undesirable Black woman, plague Molly. First, Molly brags to her colleague that she chooses to date an Arab man because Black men are not "checking for her." Although Molly is a lead character, the narrative establishes Molly as Dianne's foil. The audience learns that Dianne is in a relationship with a Black man named Jamal. To which Molly replies, "Niggas love Asians, Latinas and Indians, White chicks and Mixed Chicks." When Molly's Arab suitor communicates that he wants only friendship, Molly is humiliated and hides this information from her colleague. In a dinner scene, Molly confides to Issa that her Arab beau Hasan rejected her. Molly then explains how none of her efforts at love results in a committed relationship. To this, Issa announces in a crowded Ethiopian restaurant that Molly's pussy is broken.

This dialogue seems to invoke Brooks's Black and Tan Motif's focus on colorism, the plight of the unlovely dark woman. However, the lack of a wider context is what distinguishes the Black and Tan Motif and the suffering Black girl discourse. Brooks shows Maud Martha is not deceived that societal denigration of Blackness causes the suffering in her family, in her marriage and within the Black community. In addition, colorism is a global phenomenon as the result of worldwide European domination (Wing, 2002, p. 164). Black feminist writer Audre Lorde wrote that her light-skinned, Grenadian mother viewed Audre as "bad," "untidy," and "rowdy" because her skin was darker than her two sisters (Lorde, 1984, p. 149). However,

Insecure's phallocentric plot limits this issue to Black men and romantic, heterosexual relationships and engages in a neoliberal colorblind framing that avoids directly naming White supremacist norms as the problem. Decontextualized, the humiliation of Molly appears as an individual problem. She returns to work to discover that Dianne, her Asian woman colleague, is now engaged to her Black boyfriend Jamal. Molly flees to the restroom, where she voices her suffering as a Black girl on the phone with Issa. Molly says "Dianne got engaged." Issa responds, "To her Black boyfriend?" Indignant, Molly replies, "Yes!" Issa quips, "Damn. They wife others up with the quickness." Molly questions why Dianne "deserves to get married," but she does not. The word "deserve" denotes *doing* something or *performing* talents that merit reward. Again, *Insecure* constructs meaning associated with Black middle-class ideology of personal choice.

The final "toxic shaming" (Gill, 2007, p. 263) of Molly replicates the same narrative structure as the first scene of humiliation. Jared, an attractive, Black man accosts Molly and they connect, which constructs the idea that maybe Molly is not broken after all. Once again, the significant dialogue of this scene does not come from the Molly, Issa, or Jared. As the camera shows Jared and Molly forming a connection, the camera repeatedly cuts to a rapper performing on stage. The rapper states, "Crying on the bathroom. Floor full of tears. My baby mama left me said I couldn't face my fears…Ay yo. You a bitch…she got an iceberg heart. She just sunk my ship." The rapper's words express the suffering Black girl discourse. Given the placement in the narrative, the rap is a warning of Molly's impending treatment of Jared. As Jared and Molly bond, Daniel connects with Issa, and convinces her to freestyle on stage. Once again, *Insecure* employs mise-en-abyme narrative structure, with a performance within a performance. Issa raps on stage: "Love Rookie. She give 'em all her cookies. By cookies, I mean pussy. This girl is

kinda loosie. Dudes take her off the shelf and put her on credit. Thirty days later they return it and regret it. Used like a dishrag. Dumped like a hashtag…Nobody wants you 'cuz you got a broken pussy…" Invoking Molly's muse Anita Hill, these lyrics can be read as Issa acknowledging Molly is delusional when it comes to romance. Molly's broken pussy is erotomania.

As with the mise-en-abyme employed earlier, Molly realizes she has been symbolically dragged into the fictitious narrative that Issa raps on stage. In *Insecure*, as in the web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, rapping functions as Issa's diary. Molly knows Issa's rap represents unexpressed judgments. This knowledge is made clear when Molly states, "Oh my God. She's talking about me." At this moment, Jared abandons her, and the camera pushes in for the dramatic close up of Molly. This public betrayal is the impetus that propels Molly to makeover her life through "modified consumption habits" (Gill, 2007, p. 263). In episode two, Molly pays to join an elite-dating club for professionals only, and she has a "Molly Maintenance Day" which includes a vaginal rejuvenation session. The representation of the makeover paradigm is achieved when, in episode seven, Issa suggests Molly seek professional advice from a therapist for her unnamed case of erotomania.

Bitches and Hoes: The Accusatory space

This chapter uses the specific term jezebel to describe sexual patterns of Black women represented in *Insecure* because the word connotes condemnation of alleged immorality. In *Insecure,* women characters police other dramatis personae for their failure to maintain monogamous, heterosexual relationships. For example, in episode eight, Molly expresses a standpoint that embraces "explicit sexual behavior" (Lindsey, 2013, p. 24). However, recurring Black woman characters Kelli and Tiffany chastise her. Tiffany states, "So New Molly

sabotages her life on purpose." To which Kelli quips, "New Molly chooses for niggas to walk up out her life." Also, Issa's White colleague, Frieda confirms the suffering Black girl discourse in a daydream sequence in the pilot episode. Frieda states, "Educated Black women are highly unlikely to get married the more education they have, but look on the bright side: Many Black woman are work-focused and find happiness in their careers…But then there is a small percentage of pathetic women who have neither. They are purposeless." To this, Issa yells, "You're wrong," which brings the narrative back to scene. However, season one of *Insecure* ends with Issa and Molly consoling each other because their portrayed irrational choices and unprincipled sexuality lead to their rejection by the Black men in their lives. The pronouncement made by Frieda, who embodies the White, middle-class, feminine norm, comes to fruition. As a result, *Insecure* manages to construct Black women personae as "being too attainable (whores)" and as bitches "causing unmendable rifts between Black men" (Jones, 1992, p. 97).

Images in *Insecure* draw from a regime of representation and spectator positioning of Black women in the accusatory space. Although it can be argued that season one of *Insecure* constructs the humor of the everyday lives of Black people, this essay does not contest the humor or pleasure derived from viewing *Insecure*. As Wallace (1992, p. 131) concludes in her criticism of *Boyz N the Hood*, visual media are enjoyable because they make use of familiar hegemonic codes that make it possible for Black women spectators "to enjoy one's own symbolic decimation." Similarly, the suffering Black girl discourse makes use of codes that signal Black women are pathological, which is consistent with Moynihan's matriarchy thesis. As a result, representations in *Insecure* constitute a change in the outward content of Black representations without a shift in underlying meaning: The sexuality of Black women outside marriage remains a problem.

This problematic sexuality is underscored by *Insecure's* representation of Tiffany DuBois, the only light skinned Black woman recurring cast mate, who is married to a light skinned, professional Black man character that announces in episode three "Maybe that's why y'all [Black women] are still single because you're too damn difficult." Thus, *Insecure* rearticulates dominant racist, sexist and heterosexist myths and constructs a divide, seemingly based on skin color, of Black women who are marriage material and those who are not. It is consistent with colonial logic to normalize and justify the discipline of gendered and raced bodies. However, Black feminist texts such as *Sula* and *Watermelon Woman* challenge heteropatriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, as it is only imposed upon women of all races and non-White men to police reproduction (Clarke, 2015; Lugones, 2016; Staples, 1981, p. 10).

All the Middle-Class Blacks are Straight

The suffering Black girl discourse restricts Black women to heterosexual relations. As a result, the ridicule of non-heterosexual subjects is central to this theme. It is not accidental; rather, this strict adherence to dominant heteropatriarchal norms in hopes of earning the rights of citizenship is what Jenkins (2007) calls the "salvific wish." The lack of Black writers who represent same sex bonding in a holistic way has been an issue according to historian E. Francis White (2001). Thus, Black feminist Cheryl Clarke (2000), in the essay "The Failure to Transform," criticizes homophobia in the Black community, specifically Black nationalists and heterosexual Black feminists. Clarke attributes the rejection of gender and sexual minorities to the Black community's adoption of White middle-class values (Clarke, 2000). Black feminist scholars Johnnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall explain that Blacks adopted European scientific notions that Africans are too primitive "to practice homosexuality" (Cole & Guy-

Sheftall, 2003, pp. 165–166). *Insecure* demonstrates the heterosexual, middle-class dyad remains ideal through various conventions that position queer subjects in the accusatory space.

Insecure's representation of Jared positions him as the foil for the middle-class, heterosexual, Black masculine norm. In episode three, Molly's educated friends mock Jared's class standing as a non-college educated, working-class man, so she terminates the relationship. Molly proceeds to date elite, Black men in The League, the dating group to which she paid to gain access. Staying true to the narrative rooted in erotomania, Molly's pursuit of professional Black men is filled with what *Insecure* portrays as delusions. As a result, they reject her. She goes back to Jared in episode six, and they commence a relationship until he shares he once accepted oral sex from a man. When Molly expresses disapproval, Jared denies that he received pleasure from the act and insists it was a one-time fluke. To *Insecure's* credit, Issa challenges Molly's homophobic response. Still, Molly ends the relationship with Jared. In episode seven, Molly attempts to apologize to Jared but tells him she "should have just lowered [her] standards." This narrative treatment fetishizes Jared, as when *Friends* briefly cast Gabriel Union as Ross's Black girlfriend to appear progressive, while never integrating the program or challenging racism beyond employing Union as a prop. Similarly, *Insecure* had its anti-homophobia moment and returned to its heteronormative narratives.

Insecure utilizes other diegetic conventions to fetishize sexual minorities via mise-en-abyme. In the series *Insecure*, the characters watch a series called *Conjugal Visits*. In this show, incarcerated Black women discuss same-sex bonding. A woman inmate states, "I fucks men and women. I got two bitches waiting on me outside. And two counts of murder on my hands…that they know about. I ain't sorry." With this depiction, *Insecure* conflates sexual minorities, race and gender with criminality. The scenes are coded as humorous. In this way,

Insecure utilizes sexual minorities in the same way that White productions use raced bodies. Media scholar Cedric Clark states marginalized groups proceed through three stages of media representation: "In Stage Two, groups formerly non-recognized are 'taken-into-account' by television at the price of being ridiculed" (Clark, 1969, p. 19). Linking representations of non-heterosexual performances to deviance is consistent with colonial logic.

Insecure's representations demonstrate a need for "a black feminist praxis that articulates the ways in which invisibility, otherness, and stigma are produced and re-produced on black women's bodies" (E. M. Hammonds, 1997, p. 182). Scholar-activists such as Angela Davis and Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the three activists who mobilized the Black Lives Matter movement, work to make clear the interconnection of neocolonial multinational corporations, increased policing and state-sanctioned violence of racial-gender and sexual minorities and the prison industrial complex. As a result, it is important to consider the implications of Black women cultural producers creating visual texts that ridicule oppressive conditions for mainstream success.

Conclusion

As Claire Johnston (1999) states, the cinematic apparatus is not neutral; it is produced by and reproduces ideology. For this reason, it is not enough to simply place a Black woman-led cast and crew behind a camera to create a Black feminist picture. In her essay, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," hooks (1992) notes that often Black women cultural producers consider their incorporation in the culture industry empowering and trailblazing, although such representations reinscribe controlling images. As a result, this chapter asks a fundamental question: do all Black women possess a Black feminist/decolonial feminist standpoint that challenges the accusatory space?

Black woman narratives produced by Black women have challenged dominant stereotypes for decades, which contributes to the belief that an image-maker's Blackness and womaness produce that resistance. However, this chapter argues that an oppositional standpoint is the product of Black feminist/womanist consciousness rooted in the struggle against oppression. This oppositional tradition largely remained in tact, as the culture industry neglected Black women's stories. However, the mainstream adaptation by Stephen Spielberg of *The Color Purple* epistolary novel marked the reduction of a Black feminist standpoint to Hollywood tropes. Given the discourses of erotomania and middle-class individualism, *Waiting to Exhale*, the book and film, ushered in the shift from a Black feminist subject and to a neoliberal suffering Black girl. The mainstream crossover appeal of consumption-savvy, middle-class, phallocentric Black women who fail to inspire the admiration and devotion of Black men codified the suffering Black girl, leading to successive Black television shows that reproduced this formula beginning with *Living Single* to *Insecure*. More important, the suffering Black girl discourse normalizes Black women's spectator positioning in the accusatory space.

Similarly, season one of *Insecure* is a conventional televisual postfeminist production, which reduces complex narratives to stereotypes that can be explored in a 30-minute format. *Insecure*'*s* characters are assimilated, college-educated professionals, as are most figures of postfeminist media culture. Underneath this bourgeois veneer, the meanings of Black sexual deviance remain unchallenged. This speaks to the resilience of signs and codes, which are a part of the Hollywood apparatus. To "queer Black patriarchy" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 93) as Alice Walker accomplishes with *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison with *Sula*, requires consciousness of the White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal beliefs, practices and rituals that structure looking relations and willingness to disrupt them. Otherwise, the devil will remain painted black.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A QUEER BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM

One reading of *Insecure* may suggest that showrunner Issa Rae produces a space for the exploration of Black narratives of ordinary successful Black characters portrayed by Black actors. It can be argued that through *Insecure,* which is executive produced, written and filmed by a Black cast and crew, Rae represents #BlackGirlMagic. However, this thesis is concerned with whether images produced by Black women challenge or reinforce the prevailing concept of bad Black women. Rather than accept the category of the ordinary, successful Black girl as natural and positive, this thesis probes how the ideological and discursive production of a purported normal elite ultimately depends upon the production of a deviant, non-elite. Claims that there are bad Black women who need to assimilate, that there are bitches and hoes and no good Black men who fail at heterosexual coupling and that *Insecure* simply captures *real* life fail to problematize how dominant ideologies, discourses, beliefs, practices and rituals construct the conceptual deviant Black or what Patricia Hill Collins calls controlling images.

Accordingly, the purpose of this thesis was not to measure the correctness of a Black woman's standpoint, to determine if artistic expression accurately reflects life or to evaluate whether *Insecure*'s representations are positive or negative. The purpose was to examine how social relations, conditions and practices, specifically the cinematic apparatus, produce imagistic disparity and to probe how Black women cultural producers navigate disparities in representation. Intersectional analyses have been employed to

reveal how White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy privileges Black men and White women, at the expense of Black women. Fusing Cohen's queer Black feminist politics with an intersectional study reveals asymmetric power relations within the group called Black women, illuminating how middle-class, college educated, heterosexual, cisgender Black women are positioned as normal at the expense of non-normative/queer Black women (poor, non-college educated, sexual and gender minorities).

Jones's accusatory space conceptualizes dominant looking relations from a Black feminist standpoint. Mulvey posits the cinematic apparatus, constituted in phallocentrism, produces an active male/passive female structure with man as the holder of the look and woman objectified as glamorized spectacle to assuage castration anxiety. As a result, the patriarchal order appears ordinary. Similarly, Jones complicates the gender binary with an intersectional perspective showing how the accusatory space makes the White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal order appear normal. According to Jones, Black men directors, influenced by dominant spectator positioning, have constructed cultural products in which the Black male icon and spectator identify with the active male agent, but the position of Black women personae is not reproduced as White woman as image. Rather, Jones explains, Black male directors whom she critiqued constructed Black women as the object of derision, the controlling image, to accommodate a dominant racist-sexist gaze, which secured them a degree of mainstream success. Jones's analysis revealed that as Black men were celebrated for decentering the normalcy of Whiteness, the position of Black women in the accusatory space remained unexamined. This thesis employs Jones's accusatory space to question whether Black women's cultural products challenge the status quo or reproduce the accusatory space to attain the same crossover appeal.

Specifically, this queer Black feminist critique examines if the emergence of Black women as showrunners in the culture industry has led to a change in representations of Black women, who historically have been portrayed as exotic primitives. Using Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework and Black feminist criticism, pioneered by Barbara Smith, the thesis revealed that *Insecure* imitates Hollywood filmic conventions and looking relations. As a result, *Insecure* simultaneously disrupts Whiteness by centering a Black cast and crew and reinforces White supremacist neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchy in its marginalization of queer Black images. In this way, *Insecure* diverges from the U.S. Black women's oppositional cultural practice of challenging Black woman's position in the accusatory space. Instead, it reproduces imagery rooted in dominant ideologies that legitimate Black women's oppression, although a Black woman oversees creative processes.

The mainstream success of Black women public figures is premised upon a strategy of affirmation, rejection or ambiguity regarding controlling images and the accusatory space. Chapter two explored how celebrations of imagery of privileged Black girls like Rae who succeed in dominant spaces with #BlackGirlMagic normalize the marginalization of non-privileged/queer Black women and girls to the accusatory space. Accordingly, this chapter examined the interconnection of stardom and dominant discourses in the construction of Rae's star persona. A close reading of various media texts–interviews and Rae's memoir, which construct her lived experiences and standpoint in her own words–reveals the primacy of colorblindness, politics of respectability and ambiguity regarding race and gender ideologies. By examining discourses that produce Rae's star persona, this chapter brings to the surface tensions inherent in a Black woman's public persona that

simultaneously engages the commonsense logic of neoliberal discourses that reify dominant norms and involves the performance of pro-Black woman imagery.

Along with the accusatory space and controlling images, respectability was the concern of chapter three. The chapter interrogated the normalcy of representations that construct purported ghetto Black women or sapphires as worthy of censure and derision. The textual analysis reveals how *Insecure* makes use of specific conventions, a Black/White dichotomy, White Savior narrative, and post-feminist feedback-as-discipline, to construct a "Middle-Class Black Women's Burden." Building upon Collin's (2000a) controlling images, this analysis argues the character Molly performs mammy 2.0, an icon that is distinct from controlling images, as a Black woman cultural producer–not a White man–is its creator. Despite its Black woman genesis, *Insecure* circulates discourses of Whiteness that normalize the symbolic annihilation of Black women, specifically personae that do not conform to middle-class notions of respectability.

Before 1990, Black feminist criticism celebrated the oppositional tradition of U.S. Black women writers since the 19th century. However, this neoliberal, post-civil rights and postfeminist age has produced texts by Black women cultural producers that reproduce dominant looking relations and stereotypes of Black womanhood. For this reason, chapter four situates season one of HBO television series *Insecure*–which names a Black woman as the creator, co-executive producer, and writer of the series–within a larger tradition of U.S. Black women writers. I draw upon decolonial feminism, a framework advanced by philosopher María Lugones, to analyze representations of Black sexuality and to reveal the text's colonial gaze. The analysis shows *Insecure* circulates the prevailing suffering Black girl discourse, which represents the purported misfortune Black women experience in

heterosexual relations as the result of Black men's "no-goodness" and Black women's irrationality. Accordingly, *Insecure* reproduces ideologies rooted in Black pathology and sexual deviance, normalizing the position of Black sexuality in the accusatory space.

The emergence of the accusatory space and controlling images in commercial productions Black women challenges the notion that a cultural producer's social situatedness alone automatically leads to a critical interrogation of dominant ideologies, discourses, practices and rituals. The Black feminist position of cultural producers and their artifacts is not a byproduct of their Blackness and womaness; rather it is standpoint (hooks, 1992, p. 58). Feminist philosopher Allison Bailey describes standpoint as an "epistemic shift," which "is a political position achieved through collective struggle" (1998, p. 32). Similarly, critical race theorist Mari J. Matsuda calls multiple consciousness "a deliberate choice to see the world from the standpoint of the oppressed" (1989, p. 9). In addition to the gender consciousness of feminism, a womanist standpoint integrates "racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations" says literary scholar Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985, p. 64). The Combahee River Collective (1982, p. 13) expressed the Black feminist standpoint as the struggle against enmeshed systems of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexuality. Consequently, the accusatory space in Black women's texts may signal, as media scholar Janelle Hobson (2016) has suggested, a change in the meaning of Black feminism as a result of its incorporation in this neoliberal era.

The accusatory space in Black women's texts also speaks to its normalcy. Contrary to popular rhetoric, Black women are not magical. Institutions that socialize every U.S. resident–churches, schools, government agencies, media–also shapes the subject positions of Black women. Daily bombardments of dominant ideals and social sanctions for

challenging established norms constrain opportunities for Black women to develop resilient counter-discourses. Sociologist Joe Feagin states, "The subtle or overt goal of many whites with influence in the media, schools and other white-controlled institutions is to reduce the resistance to persisting racial inequalities and discrimination by Americans of color, especially by getting them to internalize important elements of the dominant white racial framing" (2010, p. 189). *Insecure's* Black controlled writers' room's reproduction of dominant myths supports Feagin's statement.

Taking a "So What" approach (Joseph, 2009) to the accusatory space and controlling images does not make for an easy displacement for middle-class, Black women cultural producers and spectators. As Black feminist historian Tricia Rose (2008) notes the corollary to the "There are bitches and hoes" argument is the response of Black women who state, "They are not talking about me." However, the duplicity of controlling images is these concepts have no flesh and blood referent. Thus, the instability of the controlling image, the conceptual Bad Black woman, is evident in stereotypical characterizations of Michelle Obama as Barack Obama's baby mama and as an angry Black woman (Meyers & Goman, 2017) and in a White House press secretary's scolding of veteran journalist April Ryan to stop shaking her head (Grynbaum, 2017). The middle-class, college-educated, assimilated status of these prominent Black women figures, their respectability, could not disrupt mainstream attacks on their dignity. The key point here is the production of positive imagery ultimately depends upon the reinforcement, not disruption, of so-called negative concepts of Black womanhood.

Borrowing from queer Black feminist Moya Bailey (2016), deconstructing the accusatory space requires building a queer Black feminist praxis around an ethic of care

that moves away from dualistic accusations of right and wrong, positive and negative, and returns to valuing humanity. This approach acknowledges the ways Black women are complicit in a White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal system that simultaneously oppresses them, for the separation of good Black women from purported ghetto hood rats is the principal mechanism that enables interlocking oppressions to appear normal (Rose, 2008, p. 173). Thus, a queer Black feminist praxis requires the courage to recognize that Whiteness produces Black subjects across the African diaspora who incur psychic benefits by constructing certain Blacks, usually poor and working-class women, as the other.

Black feminist scholar Sherri Williams (2017) wrote in *Elle* magazine, "…if black women can tell their authentic stories using their own voices, that will bring us closer to the truth: that they deserve justice, just like everyone else." In addition, the culture industry needs Black women who have divested of White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Cooper's (2017) description of Black feminist reformers' practice of embodied discourse–which has been adopted in the past by Walker, Dash, Morrison and presently by media makers Ava DuVernay and Ryan Coogler–that writes and speaks the lived experiences of all Black women into texts in order to affirm their dignity, rather than respectability–is the kind of queer Black feminist praxis that demonstrates all Black women "deserve justice, just like everyone else." DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* and Coogler's *Black Panther* show that disrupting the accusatory space and market success are not mutually exclusive. It is essential that queer Black feminist criticism interrogate the oppressor within (Freire, 2000) if the Combahee River Collective's (1982) belief in the inherent value of Black women and the commitment to challenging imagistic disparity are to survive this neoliberal era that privileges market success over all other considerations.

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