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“THE DEPTH WITHIN:”

Black Women, Creative Media & the Aesthetics of Interiority/ Taylor Smith

African and African American Studies/ Washington University in St. Louis

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS /3

INTRODUCTION /4

*GLORIA NAYLOR'S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE,
COLLECTIVE INTERIORITY AND THE OPRAH EFFECT*
/18

*ISSA'S IMPACT: AWKWARDNESS, INSECURITY, AND THE YOUTUBE
COME-UP*
/43

CODA: Expansion & Afterthoughts /62

BIBLIOGRAPHY / 66

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project began my sophomore year of college in the dusty, yet lively, hallways of McMillian Hall. It is there with my future mentor, Dr. Jonathan Fenderson, that my wayward ideas were refined and articulated into something recognizable. Though he has taught me much during the journey towards completing this thesis, he has yet to divulge the secret formula for how he was able to turn a series of rambling broad thoughts into a project I was able to learn and grow with for the last two years. Those initial efforts eventually lead to my acceptance into the 26th cohort of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship at Washington University in St. Louis. I will admit that I was initially apprehensive about the program and the idea of committing half of my undergraduate experience to a project. However, I would have not had the time nor access to the proper resources to complete this project without the program and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

First, thank you to my older sister, Alex Smith, as well as my cohort, Nya Hardaway, Amanda Everett, Amelle Zeroug, and Theaivin Gaber who constantly read drafts of this work at its varying degrees of completeness no matter how rough they were. Additionally, they have been the catalysts for my ability to embark on deeper and meaningful analysis acting as compassionate critics and supporters. I am grateful for them more than they realize, and I could have not picked a more supportive group to have gone through this experience with. Second, thank you to Drs. Rhaisa Williams, Reem Hilu, and Philip Maciak for their willingness to bring their expertise to my project and their frankness in our discussions on the direction of my work. Also, Drs. Williams and Hilu deserve additional thanks as they stuck with me to see this project to completion during a global pandemic and the hardest and most emotionally draining time of my college career. Lastly, thank you to Dr. Fenderson for his compassion, guidance, and relentless dedication to my maturation as a scholar and as an individual since my sophomore year. The confines of these acknowledgements are not enough space to articulate how much your mentorship has meant to me.

INTRODUCTION

As a kid, I could see the future. I mean, not really, but I believed I could. I remember zipping through the hallway to the smallest, oldest TV in the house to watch the adventures of young Black girl psychic, Raven Baxter. From the burgundy shag carpet of my grandmother's den floor, I fell in love. Though I am sad that I never got the psychic powers or more importantly the matching bedazzled jeans, Raven still sticks with me. She talked like me, her mother reminded me of mine, and retrospectively, many of her struggles as a Black female teen mirrored mine. Growing up in an intergenerational Black female household, I was given a substantial amount of freedom to search for my own forms of Black female creative works. The familial dynamics in my home allowed for my homeplace to also work as a sort of informal archive, where I was afforded insight into my sister and my mother's collections of materials and allowed to collect my own. Collectively these materials and experiences informed us as Black women. Moreover, this background remains important for this project because it serves as the foundation for my thinking on the "the Black Interior."

Keeping this background in mind, I decided to move away from a discussion of the deficits of representation of Black women, as well as the discourse that characterizes the products of Black female cultural production as "acts of resistance." Discourse of deficits and resistance have become so common in African American Studies (and Black Women's Studies) that they could almost be understood as dominant grand narratives. While both discourses remain important, part of my desire is to illuminate the continuous efforts that Black female creatives have made for centuries and continue to make; instead of prioritizing media that erases and enacts violence against Black female

characters, be they fictitious or real. I believe the danger in those discourses, particularly when they are expressed through cultural criticism, is that they often result in acts of comparison that find their basis in two detrimental dichotomies: authenticity and inauthenticity, and negative and positive. According to scholar Racquel Gates, “the concept of negativity postulates that meaning in certain types of disreputable texts is primarily construed via their relations to other texts that occupy privileged positions as far as cultural capital, critical regard, and scholarly discourse.” (16) In an attempt to break from this paradigm, I will utilize scholar Elizabeth Alexander’s concept of “the Black Interior” as an intellectual framework to prompt a severing of the ties of interracial anxiety and personal investment in the binary. This is imperative as we contend with the reality that such binaries are beneficial for no one. Instead they construct detrimental habits of generalization and forced exceptionalism, and most importantly hinder the totality, complexity and intertwined nature of Black women’s external and the internal lives, the latter of which remains the core focus of this research. My exploration of the Black Interior will seek to understand the complexities that arise when Black female creatives attempt to depict the inner-lives of Black women and transform those depictions into forms of art production for mass production

To accomplish this, I identify and analyze how representations of the “Black interior” play out across different registers and audiences. Scholar Elizabeth Alexander, who coined the term, defines it as the “inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t, or should be” (5). In these internal spaces, a different type of expression is possible, one that is not entirely protected from the expectations of public Black performance but is able to take shape in a way that is distinct from commonplace discursive tropes of Blackness and the burden of resisting. My aim is to add to Alexander’s concept by thinking of the gendered implications of this phenomenon. I will approach representations of the Black female interiority through a comparative study across multiple creative mediums—including

novels, television shows, and YouTube series. This will be accomplished through a mixed method process that includes close readings and textual analysis of literary texts, and visual and cultural analysis of film, and new digital media from Black female cultural producers. In doing so, I will be examining the depth of the Black Interior at the varying scales and levels in which they can be understood as operating on. I specifically focus on two levels- the domestic and the internal monologue. The former focuses on the presence and functionality of a shared or communal Black female interiority, an internal sense of self that is cultivated through participation in relationships with shared introspection. The latter is the private reflective dialogue.

More specifically, I explore the changes and continuities between Gloria Naylor's novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and the Harpo Productions' 1989 adapted television mini-series, as well as Issa Rae's *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011) and her ongoing HBO series, *Insecure* (2016). Additionally, each set of paired creations—Naylor's novel and the subsequent miniseries, as well as Rae's web series and the latter HBO series—will be analyzed through a specific intimate emotion in the lens of the Black Interior. In my discussion of *The Women of Brewster Place* specific attention is given to the emotions of love and lust in the work. In *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure*, examining instances of expressed feelings of insecurity and awkwardness will take prominence. However, before delving into the specific sites of analysis it is important to first take stock of the existing literature on Black women's engagement with images in the media and the emotional effects of dominant Black female media representation.

Literature Review

The literature relevant to this area of research can be divided into three general areas: defining the Black Interior, the history of the Black image in the media, and the politics of intimate and social emotions. These specific areas were selected to map the historical politics and to establish

a basis for the theoretical nature of tackling the aesthetics of internal intellectual space. The first section, defining the Black Interior, will further explore the articulation of the phenomena and key subsequent extensions by other Black scholars. The next section, the Black image in the media, will focus on the contemporary academic discourse around the imaging of Black people in television and film in the post-Civil Rights era. The last section, intimate and social emotions, seeks to understand the sociocultural influences and manifestations of emotions generally, emotion for Black women, and the particular emotions of importance to this research: love, insecurity, and awkwardness.

Defining the Black Interior

What is it about Black women's lives that makes issues of representation, public depiction, and concealment so important? In Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012), the author argues that Black people's innermost selves are in direct opposition to the public markers of Blackness which "privilege public expressiveness and resistance" (204). Black interiority is equally expressive as the public face of Black life, but according to Quashie does and should not operate publicly. Instead, it is personal, organic, and autonomous. Though Quashie's interpretations were the initial basis of my research, his work was informed by that of Elizabeth Alexander, specifically her 2004 collection of essays entitled *The Black Interior*. In this collection, Alexander characterizes the interior as the "inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be" (5). Since the subjects of this research will all be functioning in a public manner as they reproduce their internal experiences for some form of public consumption, my research breaks from Quashie's understanding. Hence my research will dialogue with the definition of the Black Interior as conceptualized by Alexander, because of its less restrictive definition. However, Quashie's interpretations still inform the manner in which conceptualizing the interior self is articulated. Both

scholars motivate us to ask, through what tactics and aesthetics do Black artists convey that which is supposed to be outside the purview of societal gaze?

As I work to understand those decisions, my usage of the Black Interior prioritizes Black women's inner-lives, which both Alexander and Quashie are less attentive to. This specific gendering of the concept aims to increase our understanding of Black women's choices in cultivating Black female interior experiences as reflections of their own and the Black female world around them. By doing so, it opens the room to conceptualize and apply this analysis to the ways Black female creatives depict the Black female interior through practices like writing and filmmaking across mediums.

Black Image in the Media

Sociologist Herman Gray's 1995 book, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, investigates the relevance and impact of portraying Blackness on television. Gray convincingly articulates how the medium of television has been used to convey, investigate, and understand various race centered triumphs and conflicts. But, due to the time between its initial publication and its re-release in 2004, *Watching Race* lacks an analysis of the contemporary moment, and instead heavily focuses on the 1980s and the early portion of the 1990s.

The chapter entitled "The Politics of Representation in Network Television" focuses on the formation of narratives centered around Blackness. The driving assertion is that "the conventions of television production serve to discipline, contain, and ultimately construct a point of view" rooted in whiteness (71). That coupled with the presence of a few, select Black people in production as directors, actors, and writers leads to the limited representations on television. However, Gray further complicates this analysis with the notion that the mere presence of Black creatives in the show's creation, does not guarantee accuracy or the omission of superficial stereotypical, portrayals of

Blackness. These Black creatives function within the framework of the television show, which aims to construct a point of view dictated by a white establishment. According to Gray, there are two categories of Black shows, those where “black themes and black cultural sensibilities” are central, produced by Black executives, while the other “traffic [heavily] in themes and representation about blacks, but that, by and large, operate under the creative control and direction of white studio and network executives” (71). The difference between the two could be understood as “shows about black people” and “black shows” (71). Within the former, the lack of Black leadership stifles the Black creatives’ abilities to authentically depict aspects of Black life such as vulnerability. Instead, the perspectives, situations, and other storytelling elements attend to validating and privileging the alleged normativity of middle-class white audiences, via the themes and viewership.

The Cosby Show serves as Gray’s major case study for the presence of many of the aforementioned phenomena. One of the most-watched sitcoms in television history, *The Cosby Show* follows the adventures of an upper-middle-class Black family headed by obstetrician Cliff Huxtable and lawyer Clair Huxtable as they parent their five children. For Gray, the show used the archetypal structure of the middle-class family in a situational comedy to present the diversity of Blackness and Black life. *The Cosby Show* functions as an antithesis to the Black working class and poor representations, like those in *Good Times* and *Sanford & Son*. *Good Times*, the first Black two-parent family television sitcom, starred the Evans family who struggled to survive in a Chicago housing project, where they endured racism, unemployment, and subsequent poverty. Similarly, in *Sanford & Son*, class and monetary problems were central to the narrative of junk dealer Fred G. Sanford and his son, Lamont. While the previously mentioned shows addressed, and even centered, the social and political issues of inequality and their effects for those institutional oppressed, the same cannot be said for *The Cosby Show*, which aimed to show Black people as moral and high achieving. *The Cosby Show* unintentionally creates a dichotomy of Black representation as one of poverty or of affluence

with little room for ambiguity. However, Gray commends Cosby's ability to gain mass viewership and investment in this Black upper-middle-class family. To further that claim, he cites sociologist Michael Eric Dyson, who argues that the show "presented a black universe as the norm" showcasing that Blackness can be an identifier but not the sole driving entity of one's being (82). However, Gray and Dyson both agree that Cosby's decision to forgo much of the race-related discourse overshadowed the presence of other Black narratives and ignored Black issues during its tenure. Key episodes in the series, as well as later works produced by Cosby, attempted to fill some of the holes of representation left in his critically acclaimed sitcom.

The chapter entitled "It's A Different World Where You Come From" focuses on the formation of *The Cosby Show* spinoff *A Different World* (*ADW*), which initially chronicled the collegiate experiences of middle child Denise Huxtable, as a Black television phenomenon. The driving assertion of this chapter is that "the presence and authority of black women permeated every aspect of this television production in the production offices, on the set, in the credits, in the theme song accompanying the opening montage, especially in the teleplays that found their way to small screen" (94). Described by Gray as a Black show, where "black themes and cultural sensibilities are centrally produced by Black executives," the show utilized commonplace major network narrative structures, specifically the standard plot structure, to craft six seasons, though Gray's chapter focuses more on the latter five seasons under Debbie Allen's direction (71). A show targeted towards Black youth in the latter portion of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, *ADW* had a focus on "characters [who] were attractive, pleasant, articulate, and smart" (94). This created the necessity of characters who had enough humanity to be relatable, but enough desirability to make audiences want to emulate them.

As a character designed to have a singular appearance, Whitley Marion Gilbert was arguably one of the most idolized characters of the show. She quickly became a fan favorite after her first

appearance, and a main cast member right before the show began full-time production. She gained the apex of her significance after the departure of the main character, Denise Huxtable (played by Lisa Bonet), and the show's "explicit turn toward blackness" (97). Within the show executives' efforts to establish a dynamic Black ensemble cast, specifically attempting to show variety within Black femininity, Gilbert was symbolic of a sheltered, upper-middle-class form of Blackness, the result of centuries of economic and color privilege allowed for class to become an important pivot in intraracial discourse. The other three Black women that helped compose the main cast were Kimberly Reese (played by Charlene Brown), Winifred "Freddie" Brooks (played by Cree Summer), and Jaleesa Vinson (played by Dawnn Lewis). Reese's narrative was often juxtaposed against Gilbert's story of affluence, as she worked multiple jobs, sought out financial assistance, and tirelessly worked to keep her grades up to secure her future as the first doctor in her family. She was symbolic of a working-class experience of Blackness, that teetered the line between economic stability and instability. Additionally, Vinson enrolled at Hillman College, the fictional setting, as a twenty-five-year-old divorcee. Her experiences on the show represent those of a nontraditional student, a Black woman who is attempting to remedy her youthful mistakes. Lastly, Brooks exemplifies the struggles of a biracial woman, who attempts to navigate being both white and Black at a Historically Black College. For each woman, the catalyst for their respective maturation on the show is the interactions with the other women, as they each serve as sources of disagreement or to comfort one another in times of distress. This phenomenon speaks to an aspect of Black female interiority that is also prevalent in both iterations of *Brewster Place*, *Misadventures*, and *Insecure*; that there is a level of collectivity apparent in the cultivation and the nourishment of the Black female interior. For example, as we will see in the case of *Misadventures*' J and *Insecure*'s Issa both characters heavily rely on internal awkward conversations as the initial sites of understanding their interiority, but later move to shared dialogue with their confidants. In contrast to Rae's more individualized

depictions, the actual physical building of Brewster Place can be understood as a different site of the Black Interior. The fictional site of Brewster Place becomes a tangible manifestation of its Black female tenants' attempts to contend with internal and external conflict by placing them within the protection of the collective which is forged by the very building itself.

Additionally, Gray presents his case effectively while leaving room for subsequent researchers to expand the topic. His exploration is almost entirely centered on the 1980s, an era of conservatism and white backlash against social movements for people of color and women, and the formative years of the 1990s. That timeframe, while valuable, limits his access to media platforms for analysis since many modern popular media outlets had not been created. His analysis is largely limited to the major networks: ABC, NBC, and CBS. Television stations like BET are minimally mentioned, while the likes of BET Her and STARZ, which now are home to a variety of Black shows, were nonexistent or just beginning. Another cultural development that has shifted the ways in which Black representation is presented is the addition of streaming services like Netflix, which have their own original content, as well as YouTube. Black creatives, specifically Issa Rae, have used platforms like YouTube in the genesis of their careers, allowing them to exercise more control and resist the structures and white emphasis of conventional television. The inclusion of Herman Gray's *Watching Rave* in my research is based on its dedication to the representation of Blackness on television. Gray's investigation and critical interpretation of representations offer a useful starting point. He asserts that the mere presence of Black people does not necessitate holistic or topical attention to Blackness and Black issues.

Intimate/Social Emotions

The emotions that my research will attempt to identify and interpret are shame, love/lust, insecurity, and awkwardness. These feelings were selected because they can be manifested externally as a result of an invisible, internal conflict. The ability to acknowledge and react to these sorts of emotions has often been denied to Black women or misconstrued because of the omnipresent nature of stereotypes and their subsequent dehumanization. In historian Darlene Clark Hine's article, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," she asserts that Black women have crafted a "culture of dissemblance," which she defines as "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (912). This behavior has been a survival mechanism for contemporary Black women to protect themselves from outsiders. At times, this requires them to sanitize their narratives when presenting to audiences that could include "oppressors." One way they are able to make these stories is by coding feelings, attitudes, and opinions in order to make it only truly accessible to other Black women. This analysis works to think through what that process may look like. Although I will be utilizing Alexander's definition of the Black Interior as the basis for the conceptual framework that is central to the analysis of the selected primary sources, Quashie's defining of "oneness" and the comparison of the terms, "individual" and "the self" are important. He argues that,

The concept of oneness is often used to characterize human essence, the energy of the inner life that constitutes a person's being. This idea is distinct from the notion of the individual, which is a modern classification based on the ideals of liberal humanism—for example democracy, mobility within the public sphere, access to property and human rights; as a term "individual" describes a person in relationship to political and social institutions. And oneness is also different from the idiom "the self," which often reflects subjectivity shaped by the awareness of another. Though all three words can be used synonymously, the concept of oneness is the name given to a person's spirit, that quality of existence which is not constrained by the limits of the social world. Oneness is the human being as a life force. (Quashie 119)

Quashie's words serve as a reminder to not generalize the emotions and narratives of the fictional Black women that are the subjects of this research. It is important to understand that while there are commonalities in the experiences of Black women, both a product of factors in and outside of their control, my analysis seeks to respect their individual beings. When approaching interpreting the outward, physical manifestations of these emotions, there will be significant focus on "the self," as the ways in which the presence of others, the other characters, as well as the audience, affect how these Black women express the emotions shame, love and lust, and insecurity and awkwardness. "Oneness" will be most prominent in scenes that are of internal monologues or third-person narration in the media.

By acknowledging that Black women can and do partake in the secrecy that characterizes the "culture of dissemblance" while simultaneously functioning as distinct beings, one must work to craft a sense of how scholarship defines the emotion for all people and how Black women have conceptualized it when they personally classify the emotion as such. In "The Dressed Body," author and scholar Joanne Entwistle writes, "the individual feels a social and moral imperative to perform their identity in particular ways" (139). When the desired result is not reached it leads to a dissonance between who one is and who they feel they should be, thus producing the feeling of shame, an intimate and social experience where one perceives they are not acting in accordance with the expectations of the social world. Entwistle asserts that the fear of social alienation or punitive responses prompts people to perform their identities in a way that is in accordance with codified expectations of femininity and masculinity. This idea of self-regulation as necessary protection or self-preservation is compounded when someone has multiple identities that are the victims of many systems of oppression, as with Black women. Black female creatives such as Gloria Naylor and Issa Rae speak to this phenomenon, as well as scholars like Melissa V. Harris-Perry.

In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, political scientist Melissa V. Harris-Perry aims to understand the struggle for first-class citizenship experienced by Black women in the United States, because of the longstanding and omnipresent system of racial and gendered expression. Backed by ethnographic interviews and empirical data from Black women of various ages from key U.S. major cities, Harris claims that generally, Black women's citizenship is an experience of misrecognition by dominant societal institutions, caused by archetypal images of Black women perpetrated by white supremacy. Moreover, she argues that the power of those stereotypes is often more salient to society than the actual voices of Black women. These stereotypes are the mammy, jezebel, and welfare queen, as well as the trope of the strong black woman, which is in an attempt at empowerment that became impractical and burdensome.

Harris-Perry asserts that these negative stereotypes create a crooked room and the struggle to align oneself in these crooked rooms fosters internal dissonance between Black women's actual selves and the dominant prevalent image. In her chapter entitled "Shame," Harris-Perry sees Black women's experiences of shame as deriving from their general inability to have positive, self-affirming, realistic recognition be necessary or commonplace. There is a prevalent deemphasize of individualism for the sake of fostering Black fictive kinship in the Black community, and it makes "African American women especially vulnerable to this collective shame." Moreover, "stigmatizing shame such as that deployed against African-Americans affects not only those who directly encounter the social rejection but the entire class of citizens who share an identity trait" (116). This is because their public imaging by the media lacks recognition that affirms them as functioning citizens in society; instead, there is intentional misrecognition through the archetypal stereotypes, and the lack of opportunities they have to create accurate, affirming recognition. She claims that Black women can and frequently do reorient their room, not as acts of resistance per se, but as they recognize their crookedness. This recognition leads to tangible and abstract changes in their

interpretation and ability to archive their memories. Therefore, the process of archiving is one of the main four characteristics of this research's conceptual framework for understanding the Black Interior. Additionally, in each subsequent chapter, there will be an analysis and dialogue with relevant literature that is attentive to Black women's experiences of love, as well as insecurity and awkwardness.

Foundational texts for understanding the Black image in media are largely written by Black males. Additionally, they often lack the specificity of gender or sexuality in their discourse and when Black women are made distinct from the entity of Blackness, the discourse focuses on their intimate relationships with Black men. I intend to expand the canon of scholarship on Black media representation by interpreting the Black female image as an independent entity with a particular focus on relationships between Black women. By addressing platforms like YouTube that have become autonomous, creative platforms for Black women I bring the discourse up to the contemporary moment. My analysis attempts to illuminate the complexities of having to regulate one's physical manifestations of shame, love and lust, and insecurity and awkwardness when one has an intersectional experience.

While balancing the major scholarly areas of the Black Interior, Black images in the media and intimate/social emotions, the thesis is broken into two chapters. Chapter 1 examines the late Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and the aesthetic difference between it and the subsequent miniseries. Through this discussion, I contend with how the politics of adaptation and the possibilities afforded by the form of the miniseries are animated not only by Naylor's interwoven narrative but Oprah Winfrey's star power as a famous icon and executive producer. The second chapter works to understand the process of reimagining that occurs when shifting from the fairly autonomous media platform, YouTube, or at least it was at the time of Issa Rae's *The Misadventures of Black Girl* to the normative sheen of a highly funded HBO series like *Insecure*. My research aims to

explore this question by examining the means in which Black girls and women conceptualize and contextualize themselves intimately and socially in the realms of literature, film, and new online digital media platforms. I identify and analyze how representations of the Black interiority play out across different registers and audiences.

***GLORIA NAYLOR'S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER
PLACE,
COLLECTIVE INTERIORITY AND THE OPRAH
EFFECT***

A syrupy colored hand throws yellow corn feed to a group of multicolored chickens, as a voice can be heard repeating, "Chick, Chick, Chicky." The camera pans out revealing a young Black woman (Mattie Michael played by Oprah Winfrey), the owner of said hand, dressed in a soft Blue colored dress with splotches of pinks and green completed with a white apron and a shiny, silver cross. Her clean dress seems to contrast with her surroundings as big ash trees tower above her and the chickens. A man's voice is heard calling out to her before he is seen, "hey, gal." His tone is neither menacing nor commanding, but almost curious. His white button-down is rolled up to his elbows as his hands rest in the pockets of his light washed denim overalls and his brown shoe covered feet strut down the dust-covered path to the young woman. Upon him repeating his pseudo-greeting, we come to know that she has been ignoring him, she replies "I heard you the first time" going back to calling the chickens. He asks her this time, "gal, you coming over here or not?" To which she replies, without even the slightest turn of her head, "I do have a name, Butch Fuller." A close-up allows us to see all of his tan-colored face, his brows scrunching together as he teases her for her attitude. His teasing and olden voice he puts on sparks a giggle and a turn from Mattie. "Now I done did all that, I hope I get what I'd done come fab" Butch slyly states.

The realm of literature, including but not limited to poetry, short stories, and novels, is one of the first tangible places in which one sees Black female creatives begin the articulation of their

interiority. The idea of articulation is distinct from simply the act of acknowledging an interiority or engaging in the acts of introspection that solidify one's inner-life. By articulation, I mean the act of communication. Black female bodies in the colonial empire were initially unable to access this form of communication, but as early as the late 1700s we see the development of a Black American female literary tradition beginning with the likes of poet Phillis Wheatley and continuing into the next century with the work of Harriet Jacobs and other formerly enslaved Black women. As one of the first mediums in which these experiences become stored and available for not only acts of individual memory, but collective memory as well, one must engage in some literary analysis in order to understand the politics of translation from the interior to the socially tangible.

To get at the politics of translation from the interior to the socially tangible, the work that will be utilized in this chapter is *The Women of Brewster Place*, by the late Black female author, Gloria Naylor. The novelist, a native of New Yorker, was born into her own familial narrative of migration as her parents had moved during the Great Migration to escape the ills of the segregated South and sharecropping in Robinsonville, Mississippi. In a 1977 issue of the literary journal, *Callaloo*, Naylor tells editor Charles H. Rowell, "I was shy as an adolescent. There was a lot I wanted to articulate that just never made its way up out of my mouth, because I found it difficult to say what I was really thinking... And so the things that most troubled me in my home life or at school, I would write those things out." She continues, "And indeed that made me feel complete for the simple reason that it is unnatural for one to just tramp down feelings. And that's what I was doing a great deal" (Rowell 179). Naylor characterizes the tool of the written word as her means of expressing what she felt could not be expressed through her own voice. Through writing, Naylor found her voice. An act which she describes as being essential to her maturation as an autonomous individual. In a like manner, Naylor has been able to take this approach of using writing to prioritize agency in her depictions of Black women in her literary works. The debut novel of her literary quartet, *The Women*

of *Brewster Place*, and the subsequent Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Production produced miniseries will be the focus of this chapter.

The Women of Brewster Place is a novel that examines the lives of seven women living in the neglected Brewster Place. An ambiguous housing project in an unnamed community, Brewster Place is afforded a malleability that allows for it to function as a site of communal conceptualization of the Black Interior. The interwoven narratives of these women work to craft a portrayal of an intergenerational Black sisterhood that is forced to contend with the ills of urban life for the Black female body, including but not limited to societal, communal, and intimate abandonment, as well as violence. But also, one could argue most importantly, a sisterhood that offers both physical and metaphysical sites for vulnerability and protection. This chapter focuses on the fictive and stylistic decisions that Naylor made in depicting the "inner" lives of these women, as well as those same aspects in Oprah Winfrey's adaptation of the work. My examination of these elements will be strengthened by utilizing Alexander's concept of "the Black Interior," while paying specific attention to the emotion of love within these works. This chapter will ask: how does the depiction of the Black interiority change when Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is recreated by and stars Black female media maven Oprah Winfrey? Throughout this chapter, I will approach Naylor and Harpo Productions' representations of Black female interiority through the juxtaposition of close readings of the novel and the televisual counterparts of said scenes. To accomplish this, I will begin by establishing a foundational basis for understanding the processes of literary adaptation that take *The Women of Brewster Place* from the written to the televisual, as well as that translation's chosen format, the television miniseries. Then, I will move to a discussion of Gloria Naylor and Oprah Winfrey, the two Black female creatives that animate these fictional depictions of the Black female interior. Additionally, as Naylor's work follows the journey of seven women, I have chosen to narrow my analysis in order to show greater care to those individual yet connected experiences of Black

interiority. Therefore, this analysis will focus on three main portrayals of love in the Black interior, the reactionary love of a young Black woman raised under the thumb of the Black religious patriarchy, the caring, even maternal, love that derives from protective homosocial relationships, and a Black lesbian love forced into silence.

Understanding Literary Adaptation & The Rise of the Television Miniseries

Embarking on this type of comparative analysis requires an engagement with the study of literary adaptations, addressing not only their broader history but also the specific context in which the ABC miniseries was produced and broadcasted. The scholarship on adaptation asks a vitally important question, “what is the function of literary adaptation?” In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), Hutcheon investigates the impact of the adaptation phenomenon in popular culture in films, on the big screen and television, as well as other visual formats such as video games. Her examination crisscrosses multiple texts allowing for an analysis of the process of adaptation, its popularity, and the audience’s engagement with them.

Hutcheon’s work begins with a discussion of the earlier forms of literary adaptation, emphasizing that in the moment of her writing, modern-day adaptations were seen as a lesser form. This is particularly apparent in the case of the rendering of literature to the visual. A notion that is seemingly rooted in the belief of literature’s alleged superiority, because of its longevity and the usage of colonial languages in much of the work produced. One of the most common forms of adaptations is from the written to the visual, a tradition in which *The Women of Brewster Place* is a part of, as Naylor’s acts of telling the women’s narratives are then shown in the successive miniseries. An overly simplistic analysis of adaptation would claim that the total act of duplication is unnecessary. A notion that Hutcheon pushes us to reject, instead she insists that shifts in the

methodology used to present a story are not explicitly acts of weakening the quality of the work. The quality of the methods used to execute adaptation is what determines that comparative strength or weakness. Hutcheon writes, “An adaptation’s double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis” (6).

Building off this point, the analysis we are embarking on in this chapter is not an effort to persuade the reader towards a preference of a specific medium, but instead to further push a dialogue on replications of the Black female interior across mediums. As a result, in our positioning of the two works, I will not solely focus on the comparative, resisting the polarity of a solely literary analysis. Instead, my analysis will be accomplished through a foregrounding of description and imagery.

This prioritizing of the visual, both told in the novel and shown in the series, requires setting the parameters for a preliminary understanding of adaptation. For the purposes of the entirety of this research, Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation will be utilized. According to Hutcheon, an adaptation can be characterized by three aspects: “acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging, [and] an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (8). Thus, works of adaptation operate in/at the nexus of attempting to be autonomous endeavors, while declaring an informing predecessor. This ambiguous proximity means “an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative- a work that is second without being secondary” (9). In that association is where the paramount feelings of the audiences are derived. As acts of intertextuality, different audience members hold varying proximity to the texts. For example, an audience member who reads the novel has a different experience than one who never reads the novel or who reads it after viewing the visual adaptation. A “successful” adaptation would attend to the needs of these different viewers and offer a pleasurable experience for all. In the case of Naylor’s novel, the medium in which the work was translated was the television miniseries originally airing on ABC on March 19 and 20, 1989 as a four-part series.

In order to engage in a rich dialogue of the novel, the miniseries, and their relationship as depictions in the same, or one could argue analogous, forms of the Black interior one must begin with a preliminary understanding of the miniseries. The presence of the television miniseries for an American audience is a certain type of translation in itself, as the major three networks of the late 1960s and the 1970s: ABC, CBS, and NBC worked to capitalize on the international success of British miniseries, which are named “serials” in the U.K. Serials are narratives that expand across a number of episodes that eventually work towards a culminating conclusion. In particular, the rise of the miniseries coincides with the downfall of the “single play,” or “one-off” drama that begins with a single episode” (Creeber 8). Consequently, serials and their American version, the miniseries, are seen as the bridges between the “single play” and the series, as they share key characteristics with both. Miniseries are seen as offering the audience the ability to “get to know the characters and the story...[giving] a sense of becoming a part of the lives and actions of the characters they see,” while offering the finite length that traditional “single plays” offer (9). For that reason, scholars like Creeber, assert that the television serial becomes seen as the “best” for financial and structural reasons of reflecting the type of nuance and worldbuilding that is seen as integral to literary adaptation.

Furthermore, this method of Americanizing the miniseries was essential to making it marketable to the maturing American television audience. According to scholars John De Vito and Frank Tropea, the development of the American miniseries was rooted in a desire and nurturing of what he refers to as the “epic miniseries” characterized by its “largeness,” through the size of their production and the quality they were able to achieve. These “epic miniseries,” were allocated the resources to be expansive hosting “enormous casts (often numbering well into the thousands); fullness or density of reference; lush, high-end production values; superb atmospherics of place” (De Vito 2). The grandeur of the marketing and the production created a groundwork for the

necessity and the ability to market the broadcasting of these miniseries as their own television events. Ones in which television schedules were reconfigured to attract attention for these special events, shifting normally scheduled programming or setting recurring blocks in programming schedules for these types of programs. These techniques were utilized to maximize the alleged desirability that the synergistic miniseries afforded because as David Lloyd Wolper, an American television and film producer who produced the historical melodrama *Roots*, put it “American television is ‘middle-brow’, and I wanted to make a subject that was important in a middle-brow way so a large audience could appreciate it, understand it and get something out of it.” He continues, “I mean, people actually turned off basketball games in bars around America and put on *Roots* because they wanted to learn and they wanted to learn on their own terms- they wanted terrific drama, entertainment and stars” (Creeber 26). Thus, though both the praise and popularity of the television miniseries have waned since the genre’s Golden Age from 1974-1989, the rise of the miniseries must be understood as a way to simultaneously entertain and educate, making works like Naylor’s popular source materials. Therefore, it prompts one to wonder, what does it mean for the novel of *The Women of Brewster Place* to not only be adapted but to be adapted into a miniseries during the height of the genre? What type of decisions are made in these processes of entertainment and education? I believe that some of the initial insights into answering these questions can be found by inquiring “by whom” these acts were being enacted.

Naylor’s Vision and the Woman Who Took It On

What the exploration of the behind the scenes, especially in the instance of the ABC miniseries, offers is an entry point in understanding how the depictions of Black interiority change as a result of the introduction of new creators and the perceived desires of their audience. Thinking back to the words of Wolper, a captivating television advertisement prompts the “middle-brow”

viewer to want to engage with the program. An audience, which one can understand as most of the American viewing public, the “everyday man” is the one that they attempt to captivate. Additionally, with Creeber’s analysis, one can see how the wider audience of television prompts networks, executives, and creators to contend with the practices of consumption for a larger population in a way that literature is not always expected to do. Often those efforts are part of a never-ending oscillation between attempts to portray what could be interpreted as “uncomfortable subject matter,” in the case of *The Women of Brewster Place* and the preceding *Roots*, and hooking a large audience. The individual that took on this task of navigating these two poles was Oprah Winfrey, who at the time was a budding media maven just starting her production studio. She had just started her daytime television program a few years earlier in 1986 and starred as an actress who made her film debut in the 1985 cinematic adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Therefore, Winfrey’s developing brand was establishing roots as one built on portraying her interpretation of the Black women’s experience.

As in the case of many other Black female creatives, Naylor’s Black female characters are reflections of her own experience. In reference to *The Women of Brewster Place*, she states “I decided that, if I had one book in me, I wanted it to be all about me, and the me, in this case, was a multifaceted me. So that’s how *Brewster Place* began, and the structure of it as I said, came about because of my being a novice at that time. My thinking was this: well I don’t know if I can write a whole novel, but I can write a story. That’s sort of how it happened” (Rowell 186). In this quotation, Naylor reveals that she has been engaging in an intentional act of translating aspects of her own narrative into her characters. This admittance authenticates the methods of crafting these characters as a part of a real Black female interior experience, her own. For example, much like Mattie Michael, one of the main protagonists in the novel, Naylor’s narrative is marked by the physical journey from the South to the North. In an interview with author Angels Carabi, she states, “in spite of living in

the North, I grew up in a Southern home. A month after my parents moved, they were still Southerners. The food, the language I grew up with was from the South...People change their geographical location but they don't really change" (24). The lives of *The Women of Brewster Place* are an agglomeration of Naylor and the personalities and realities of the women that informed her own narrative. Thus, Naylor sought to craft a place to explore the complexities of Black women's experiences, using a smaller scale that allowed her to grapple with these nuances, yet produce content that remained relatable.

I believe this sense of relatability can be interpreted as a necessary strategy for the overarching aim to illuminate the fullness of the Black community, specifically the gendered spaces within it. When prompted to elaborate on her decision to set the novel in a Black community, Naylor told Carabi, "that is a trend you can find when you look at black female literature in general...And I think it's a gender fact. Men have a need to somehow confront the world, to flex their muscles, if you will. The female confronts what is around her. Personally, I knew that there was so much richness to be found within the black community. I'm not concerned with the reaction of white Americans to me" (27). By placing the focus on the world around the women, Naylor established a place where the Black women in the community can participate in dually functioning introspection, in their community and within themselves. *The Women of Brewster Place* is a collection curated and presented by a Black woman about other Black women that does not prioritize a white audience. However, I must acknowledge that despite her vision for her work, the public accessibility of a novel still makes her and her characters vulnerable to an invasive gaze. Yet and still, I believe that Naylor ultimately relied on her perceived lack of interracial popularity as a strength, which can be understood as a sharp contrast to Winfrey.

Like Naylor's southern-born protagonist and family, Oprah Gail Winfrey was born in January of 1954 in Kosciusko, Mississippi to an impoverished teenage single mother. The life of

Winfrey has been well documented, as she is dubbed “Queen of All Media” has been the focus of not only countless journalistic works but scholarship as well. The expansive dialogue around the “queen” can exist because of her involvement in virtually all forms of media from television to film, writing and publishing to radio, and even most recently digital content. Indeed, her widespread interests prompt a significant amount of dialogue, but also the constant recounting of her own narrative. In *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery*, scholar Eva Illouz writes, “What marks the stardom of Oprah Winfrey is one salient fact: it is the outcome not of her beauty or performance in famous movies but rather of the relentless public telling and marketing of her own and others’ personal biographies” (17). The Oprah persona is based on an allegedly authentic sense of transparency, in which she not only seeks to show the audience the experience of who she is displaying but also divulging enough of her own personal life that the audience feels a sense of connection. The Oprah of today is fairly omnipresent, a testament to the effort she placed in developing a marketable and memorable persona. A persona that through its public displays of Oprah and others’ “truths” can be relatable.

In like manner, scholar Kathryn Lofton claims that Oprah is a virtually inescapable star simultaneously fusing the roles of a moral leader, celebrity, and a trustworthy peer consumer. An ability that can be interpreted as contingent on that previously mentioned manufactured transparency. She can hold such significance for a large audience because Oprah on television has been made “real” for them. Lofton states, “Oprah establishes the aesthetic that balances her diversity on our behalf. She has become famous as a result of her universality, because she accepts individuals as they are refracted through her paradigm, not as they are infected by history or race or denomination” (120). Oprah becomes the entity that she is through the portrayal of an every person narrative, she was poor, she is female, she is Black. Yet her approach to her own depiction and others ensures that a viewer who is none of those things can feel a connection to her. Instead of

these qualities functioning as the grounds for ostracization they heighten her appeal. Oprah's development of a seemingly personal and relatable self-construction works to self-commodify her narrative through a constant blurring of her private and public persona. For many, this can mean that the Oprah that one sees on television, no matter the format, is just as much the real Oprah as the Oprah one would find in her daily private life. I am not attempting to argue that these acts of obscuring the persona and the person are inherently bad or detrimental to the creative works that the Oprah star power meets. Instead, I am looking to understand how by doing so, the media attached to Oprah's name is affected, namely by seeming as somewhat reflective of her. This tension is in its earliest and most frequent display on her television show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, a site for the genesis of this identity fusion and her cultural capital.

The Oprah Winfrey Show is a syndicated daytime show that aired for twenty-five years from September 8, 1986 to May 25, 2011. In a 1998 *Time* magazine article, journalist Deborah Tannen claims *The Oprah Winfrey Show* "transformed the format [of 'report-talk] into what [she] call[s] 'rapport-talk,'" citing this as an improvement of the style of television started by Phil Donahue ("OPRAH WINFREY: The TV Host"). Through distinguishing between report and rapport, Tannen illuminates what she believes to be Winfrey's ability to garner a sense of intimacy in a medium, where the actor and the spectator could be virtually any distance from each other. Likewise, *Ebony* magazine once claimed that "from the beginning, her show has captured the American television psyche like nothing the industry has seen before or since. The fact is, since her show went national in 1986, it has remained head and shoulders above the others. All of them" (2). Through both, the descriptions afforded by *Time* and *Ebony*, Oprah's mass appeal is exemplified as both publications--though aimed at different reading audiences--praise her for an innovative approach to the commonplace talk show formula. Indeed, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was popular amongst a large racially diverse, and even gendered, demographic. However, even though she is

often characterized as a famous character that transcends race, she frequently works to remind her viewer of her race. Those reminders take many forms ranging from adding jokes about “what Black people do or do not do” to starring in predominantly Black films.

Her simultaneous desire to align herself with Blackness and be universal works to give Oprah a peculiar, yet lucrative, positionality. As much as she is for everyone, a disturber of the everyday person’s narrative, she utilizes her Blackness to distinguish her achievements from others. Through such an approach Oprah’s brand of Blackness becomes legitimate both racially and gendered for much of her audience regardless of their own identities. By bringing in this myriad of viewers into her own experience and performance of Black femininity, she crafts what Lofton recounts as the race of “Oprah people,” a racial utopia based on the exchangeability of colorless human pain” (122). Thus, as not only a celebrity but the shepherd of a set of consumers. Oprah is seen as being able to bring in a loyal and dependable audience, making her optimal to be a part of the backing of a television event like *The Women of Brewster Place* miniseries. Oprah’s very presence pushes viewers to feel that the miniseries deserves their attention. Additionally, though Oprah is the recipient of a significant amount of intraracial criticism—because of her platform and the perception of her as a Black leader—making Oprah the face of a work brings in a Black audience; rather that be the result of admiration or the desire to critique. Additionally, her race and gender place her persona in conversation with archetypes of Black femininity, particularly the trope of “the strong black woman,” which Oprah arguably fits. Especially since her presentation of Blackness is built on this narrative of struggling, overcoming, and culminating success. Thus, she illustrates a linear progression of actualization from weak to strong from dependent to empowered.

This personal trajectory worked to give Winfrey the mainstream legitimacy to get the miniseries on to primetime television. In an effort that has been described in articles in both *Ebony* and *Vulture* as “tumultuous,” Winfrey had to pitch the project herself as networks felt that “it was

too womanish” (Gaillot). Interestingly enough, the woman that was central to this “womanish” narrative that was ultimately praised, in contrast to the criticism the novel garnered, was entirely absent from the miniseries’ development. Naylor is said to not have participated in any manner of the production of the miniseries, an almost ridiculous reality considering the personal nature of the novel. Additionally, the late author even expressed skepticism to *Ebony* about Winfrey’s actual involvement, stating “I’ve met Oprah and I think she has the sensitivity to treat the story well, if she really had a hand in the production work” (“The Women of Brewster Place - Made-for-TV Movie”). Regardless of the validity of that statement, Winfrey’s influence in the narrative is heightened as she becomes the Black woman solely responsible for the adaptation of the work into the miniseries.

The Women of Brewster Place, Love & the Black Interior

In both the literary and televisual forms of *The Women of Brewster Place*, a paramount aspect of each woman’s narrative is their navigation of the emotional experience of love. Earlier I described the relationship between the Black women of Brewster Place as being one of a sisterhood. The catalyst for said sisterhood is their varying and frequently tumultuous experiences with the acquisition of love outside of their relationships in this Black female community. This desire to be loved and gain the perceived residual effects of love such as security, companionship and social acceptance are the dreams that shape the identities of *The Women of Brewster Place*. Naylor’s usage of Langston Hughes’ “Harlem” as the opening of this work establishes the fact that these dreams are “deferred.” Her subsequent characterization of the women places significant focus on the confusion that love can foster as vulnerability and intimacy it necessitates are complicated and diminished through both racial and gendered means. However, the cultivation of a Black interiority both individually and collectively for the women allows the evolution of love beyond the incomplete and

unrealized, as she utilizes Black women's authenticity, afforded by the communal network of Brewster Place, to prompt a more multifaceted version of love.

The first type of love that the audience is introduced to is through Mattie Michael, played by Oprah Winfrey in the miniseries, whose conceptualization of love is influenced by familial dynamics and beliefs, as well as geography. Mattie's roots began in the South like Naylor and Winfrey, where the religious rhetoric of gendered chastity and dependence constructed a cautious approach to love. Scholar Barbara Welter describes this system of beliefs as part of the "cult of true womanhood," an ideology that identified *appropriate* standards for women. However, as an ideal to emulate, Black women have been excluded from full participation in this system and consequently womanhood. This is because their historic sexualization contradicts the main tenets of piety, submissiveness, domesticity, and purity. The sexualization of Blackness extends back to chattel slavery when discursive tropes were used as justification for unimpeded white access to Black bodies. Thus, there has been a long-standing struggle to find a balance between more fluid, expressive, and agency-filled performances of sexuality, while also combating the historical over-sexualization of the Black female body. As scholar Tamara Lomax claims the marker of Blackness, inscribes a letter of innate promiscuity much like a scarlet-colored "A." Consequently, as discussed in the introduction of this work some Black girls and women partake in intentional strategies of silence to avoid the negativity, presenting personas of asexuality, or even purity. Indeed, combatting these perceptions meant for many Blacks an aspiration to strive to attain respect through making the discussion of sexuality and sex in the public sphere taboo or forcing sexuality behind closed doors. This meant that Black female sexuality was not only placed under scrutiny in an interracial context but intraracially as well.

This investment in the surveillance and suppression of Black female sexuality by the Black population is a result of what Lomax describes as "black cultural spaces...not only reappropriat[ing] but...possess[ing]" patriarchal and capitalist rhetoric on the utility of Black female reproductivity

(36). I argue that through her collection of Black female characters, Naylor works to develop a fictitious space, a communal interiority, that encompasses those contradicting elements of silence, autonomy, and desire that characterize the experience of Black female sexuality. In a similar fashion, the ABC miniseries seeks to inscribe the visual with an analogous sense of hardship, conflict, and solidarity.

As the most prominent character in the work, it is through Mattie's relocation to the building, that the audience is first introduced to not only the backstory of the narrative but the community of Brewster Place. Therefore, it seems fitting that Mattie is also the basis for a discourse of intimacy in the work. In both the novel and the miniseries, this pivotal scene is an act of characterization through flashbacks when a much older, hardened Mattie reflects on what brought her to her current position in the rundown Brewster Place. Through the contrast in this visual form, the audience is shown what Naylor tells the reader in the novel is the "beginning of her long, winding journey to Brewster" (8). As seen in the scene description that opens this chapter, the Mattie of the flashback is cautious, yet curious, playfully teasing Butch and his advances. Her softly colored floral dress seems to scream her innocence and naivety as she tries to ignore his flattery. This exemplifies her insufficiencies in navigating certain aspects of love, namely sexuality, as her most immediate, and we find out later unsuccessful, responses adhere to commonplace responses that young Black girls and women are taught—namely silence and ignoring said advances. Butch, an older and more sexually experienced peer, embodies the confidence that seems to be lacking in Mattie's responses. Thus, the audience is privy to these contrast in gendered differences in this intraracial context. This illustrates the gendered inequities in the cultivations of autonomous understandings of love and sexuality, as Butch takes on the role of actor and Mattie as reactor. Additionally, this juxtaposition between the old and young forms of Mattie is most apparent in the miniseries as the nature of the format necessitates not only a visual relocation from Brewster Place

to her childhood home but also a change in her physical appearance. The compact, angularity of the nonspecific buildings of Brewster Place seems polar to the wide opening fields of green grass and the stretches of dirt road.

Likewise, in the scene that precedes this, when the older Mattie is seen conversing with Ben, Brewster Place's super, she looks and is different. The area around Mattie's eyes has been darkened to an almost unrealistic state, paired with her permanent downturned mouth, this Mattie is tired. Indeed, her soft colored dress has been replaced with a heavy forest green coat that comes to almost her neck. In Naylor's novel, she writes "[Mattie] refused to pity herself and to think that she, too, would have to die here on this crowded street because there just wasn't enough life left for her to do it all again" (7). Naylor's Mattie expresses a feeling of regret, which one can infer is attached to this sense of incompleteness, as she views her present self as having little time and must disappointingly spend it in the "crowded" and lifeless Brewster Place. The differences between these two Matties, the young and the old, shape the conversation around love, specifically regarding sexuality and intimacy, that occur in the work. Mattie's sexual and romantic desire and satisfaction are what doom her, as the resulting unexpected pregnancy and the fallout are what lead her to Brewster Place.

In like manner, scholar Trimiko Melancon claims that "sexuality is interwoven both overtly and in nuanced ways into the tapestry of the larger narrative" (44). As Mattie remains central to the network of solidarity that sustains Brewster Place, her experience navigating love is integral to the solidarity between the women in Brewster Place. Put another way, her experience appears to either simply influence or directly inform other women's experience. By having Mattie's journey be prime and consistent, she is the basis for comparison and understanding of these women. If Mattie is the viewer's guide through Brewster Place, her early characterization suggests that Brewster Place and sites of abandonment like it, are places where one goes to end something. Consequently, this

prompts one to inquire what informs Mattie's performance of love and lust and her intimate manifestations of said emotions.

Mattie is portrayed as the byproduct of the system which Lomax explains is codified through the belief that "black women and girls [should be read] in terms of sexual deviance, excess, accessibility, and pursuance--the activity of literal and ongoing pursuit, approach, availability, access, and entry" (xi). The diffusion of this belief and the upholding of its message was carried about by Mattie's father, Sam, who simultaneously represents the views of the Black Church and the Black subset of the patriarchy, which one can argue are interchangeable or at least overlapping. This can be seen when Naylor writes, "Mattie jumped at the unaccustomed sound of his voice. She was finally being summoned across the vacuum, and her spirit rose instinctively to obey, but she held it back in fear of what might meet there. She looked pleadingly at her mother for help in this dilemma, and the older woman patted her shoulder and whispered in her ear, 'Go on now, I told you he'd come round. That man lives and breathes for you'" (20). In this quotation, the power that Mattie's father has over her and her sense of self is apparent. The language used to describe her reaction to her father wanting to talk to her after his silent reaction to her pregnancy invokes biblical imagery. The act of being "summoned," her rising spirit, and the reminder that he "lives and breathes" for her showcase the gravity of repercussions of her decision. Through this narration, it is more than just her single Black father that seems disappointed in her, but the Black Church as well. His reaction to her pregnancy, initially silence, and then the subsequent anger when her baby's father is revealed is her trial, where she is deemed guilty.

In the miniseries, Oprah's Mattie bashfully and fearfully steps through the door's threshold to come face to face with her father. The aesthetically serene nature of the lush green background and wide sitting porch are coupled with the faint, yet, constant sounds of her father's rocking chair. As she comes to stand before him, he remains seated and Mattie turns to face him, greeting him

with a soft “Yes, Papa.” The dialogue in this scene greatly mirrors that in the novel as Sam initially works to remind Mattie that he is a benevolent and caring father and insists that he is ready to forgive her. A sharp turn in the conversation occurs when Mattie refuses to reveal exactly who is the father of her baby. Conversely, the composition of the scene on screen speaks to this twist before it happens. By sitting Sam in a chair facing out towards the front yard and Mattie placed in front of her, Mattie is visually confined by both him and the white-painted fence that wraps around the porch. This sort of visual confinement invokes a sense of helplessness on behalf of Mattie. It is as if she is on trial, her father as both her guardian and a disciple of the Black Church is ready to forgive her until she denies him access to her. That is when he stands, not to comfort her but to strike her. By denying Sam the knowledge of her baby’s father, she defies his control and works to keep something for herself. This act of defiance pushes Mattie to her interior to salvage some sense of autonomy. It is in this instance we are privy to seeing the first step of Mattie’s maturation away from a simply reactionary form of love. Earlier the audience is denied access to her and Butch having sex, seemingly her first act of defiance. In this refusal, a strengthened sense of self is illustrated as she chooses to keep something inside, something for herself. Additionally, it is her mother, played here by Mary Alice, who saves her. She crashes through the door with a shotgun, firing a warning shot right above Sam’s head and states, “Sweet Jesus, you hit my child again and I’ll meet you in hell.” The sole act of sacrifice in this scene is carried out by her mother. One that is interestingly enough only given gravity when coupled with violence. This sets the tone that the care and love in its totality will be cultivated and dispensed by Black Women to other Black women. Through this process, Mattie is transformed into the figure that the audience meets at the beginning of a novel, an exhausted caregiver.

The role of a caregiver or homemaker is often seen as essential to the Black female experience in both fictional (and fictitious) works and reality. Far too often the Black woman’s place

in the community is determined and legitimized through social sacrifice. However, Mattie's decision to take a place as a mother, the most salient performance of this duty, is ridiculed. It is through this dissonance, the expectation of mothering and the appropriate acts of obtaining this role that Mattie is stuck between. This internal tension is what pushes Mattie towards the illusory comfort of 'strong Black woman.' Harris-Perry analyzes this phenomenon in her claim "I believe that the construct of the strong black women does not arise from empirical observation of who black women actually are. Instead, it is a racial and political construct emanating from the expectations of African American communities and from the needs of the nation that frame black women in very narrow ways... the strong black woman myth is misrecognition of African American women" (21). Mattie's adoption of 'the strong black woman' myth is her response to her feelings of abandonment and betrayal by her family, yet it is also the result of a greater sexualized racial and gendered 'misrecognition.' Mattie is supposed to be a communal caretaker because those are the perceived roles of Black women. The usage of Winfrey in this role works to authenticate Mattie's "strong black woman" persona as Winfrey herself is seen as exemplary of this role. Her career has been dependent on developing a sense of legitimacy through her bootstrap narrative and her constant reiteration of her accomplishments as exemplary because of her race and gender. Additionally, her rapport style talk show has positioned her as a social authority. That perceived credibility extends beyond the confines of the show in many cases making her a popular brand ambassador, but also works in *The Women of Brewster Place* to authenticate Mattie's role as a leader among the women. Thus, the miniseries Mattie is as much Naylor's words as she is Winfrey's star power.

I believe that Mattie's rehabilitation of Ciel Turner is exemplary of her journey through the complexities of 'the strong black woman' ideal, which shape her physical engagement with love. That scene demonstrates the role Black women can occupy in *Brewster Place* for themselves and others. I argue that Mattie engages in "feeding," not through providing food, but through the act of

maternal healing. An act Mattie is only able to complete for Ciel as she herself reaches inwards to provide Ciel with the tangible physical manifestations of care and intimacy that the love in their friendship has cultivated. Having once associated her relationship with love as one with failure, both as a lover and a mother, Mattie moves her efforts towards doing the same for the women that live in Brewster Place. In this pivotal scene, Mattie saves Ciel from deteriorating, following the accidental electrocution of her child, and thus succeeds in her internal desire to enact and share in a fulfilling reciprocal love.

Mattie enters Ciel's apartment to find her thin and overheating. Instinctively Mattie "rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back into the Womb, to the nadir of hurt, and they found it—a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled...and [the splinter] left a huge hole, which was a starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal" (103-104). In the miniseries' visualization of the scene, Lynn Whitfield's Ciel is illuminated by a strip of soft whitish light that shines through her open window. Through this spotlight, her sunken eyes, dry lips, and dazed expression seem more sorrowful. Her soft floral nightgown seems out of place given her condition. Winfrey's Mattie, previously dressed in a Black gown for the funeral, returns to Ciel's room after seeing her condition in a similar light-colored house dress. Now both clad in their home attire, Mattie begins to soothe Ciel rocking her vigorously, lifting her up a little as she does so. Eventually, lifting her to bathe her. Through the rough process of providing comfort and affirmation, she provides Ciel with the cornerstone characteristics of a home, what the material structure of Brewster Place cannot provide her or the other women. Additionally, by physically surrounding her as an act of rejuvenation, Mattie returns her "back into the Womb," allowing for Ciel to be rebirthed, through which Mattie's being becomes a spiritual and metaphysical home for the renewed Ciel. Her intimacy becomes a form of labor itself, simultaneously reproductive and affective. Therefore, this description of the attention

and concern Mattie provides Ciel, enters the reader or viewer into these communal acts of love and social reproduction. This space is exemplary of the glimpse that one receives through Naylor's portrayal of these characters. The interior experience of grief, which here is the result of the absence of the recipient of all-encompassing love, a mother's child, is illustrated in its debilitating complexity for both Ciel, whose child has died, and Mattie, whose child has gone astray.

While the characters embodied these cyclical feelings of love and grief, Winfrey permits her physical form to act as the vessel for Mattie's expression of this experience. In the story, Mattie's body holds unfathomable strength and wisdom, so much so that her body at times feels burdened by it. Descriptions of her body reveal that she feels the weight of her womanhood "the moist gray air was as heavy as the sigh that lay on her full bosom," but recognizes its power as she uses it to "rock [Ciel] back into the womb...and pulled...it [until] it would heal" (Naylor 7, 104). This power and her eventual acceptance of its utility is contextualized in the body of Winfrey as she performs it. Therefore, the visual performance of Mattie's interiority is animated by Winfrey's already established performance of it. In the previous section on Winfrey, I asserted that her perceived public transparency is what legitimizes her role as social expert and widens her influence. Lofton reaffirms this, arguing, "she is the queen of the human buffet, counseling a disposition of sensibly monitored free will. You make your world, you make your beauty, you make your accessories, and you make your composite self" (126). Mattie and Winfrey both fulfill the roles of nurturer, healer, and companion; the latter through her public characterization which audiences are privy to. It is in those similarities that one can note Mattie and Winfrey's shared nature, as well as speculate on how potentially unrevealed aspects of Winfrey's constructed interiority could have informed the inner lives of other fictional women depicted in the miniseries. One can attribute part of the longevity of the popular speculation around Winfrey as coming from the type of depictions she presents in roles like Mattie. For example, the "womanish" nature of the work, as well as its depiction of a Black

lesbian storyline, an uncommon occurrence during that time, work towards the imagining of Winfrey as dominant, independent, and arguably even queer as her star power informs more than just her immediate role.

Contrastingly, while Mattie's narrative, and arguably even Oprah's both before and after the production, gained investment and empathy through its central position and frequency, it is also informed by a seeming universality. In contrast, Lorraine and Theresa are forced into silence and surveilled, because they are seen as other, outside of the universal or the norm. They attempt to resist either through strategies of assimilation like those adopted by Lorraine, who tries to appear as heterosexual and read as "normal" to the other inhabitants of Brewster Place, or through separation, like in the case of Theresa who desires residence in the queer social community. Some scholars like Kevin Quashie assert that Black interiority though expressive in its own right is distinguishable from the external, and arguably more powerful, because it does not operate publicly. However, Naylor's depiction of Lorraine and Theresa showcase the limitations of removing aspects of the external, namely community, from one's inner life. As Black lesbians they are not afforded the pseudo-luxuries that adherence to acceptable Black female sexuality can and should offer. Their efforts to remain quiet, appear void of pleasure, and outwardly heterosexual are not rewarded, but constantly inspected. This denial of privacy reveals a paramount advantage of interiority, the ability to choose. I believe the aspect of choice is essential to understanding the Black Interior for Black women. It is not through ostracization that the Black interiority is deepened, but through meaningful and autonomous acts of chosen access and sharing like that of admitting one's sexuality. The story of Lorraine and Theresa illuminates the need for choice as denying it to them blocks their total access to what Brewster Place offers, while also leaving them socially vulnerable. As Melancon writes, "Theresa and Lorraine not only transgress convention...but also challenge the narrow confines of female sexuality." She continues, "Theresa and Lorraine's narrative is the only one in which the

chapter is not titled after the name of its main characters; instead, it is entitled “The Two” (175).

This omission of their names from the title works to illuminate the sense of secrecy and the perceived taboo nature of their union. I believe this can also be understood as representing intentional acts of protection to omit their identity from repercussions. Their names are also not stated throughout the chapter, instead, Naylor heightens the knowledge of the narrator by opting for an omniscient spectator.

In “The Two,” Lorraine and Theresa are the focus of a judgmental communal gaze magnified by their gender identity. Their positions as Black women in the community place them under a sort of racialized and gender scrutiny. In the narrative, Miss Sophie’s character not only participates in the community gossip but leads the surveillance of Lorraine and Theresa. Eventually, seeking to build support for her efforts to shun Lorraine and Theresa for their sexuality. Upon witnessing a seemingly innocent interaction between Lorraine and Theresa while sitting on the porch with Mattie and Etta Mae, Miss Sophie tells them that seeing Lorraine and Theresa almost brings her to throw up. I believe that this admittance of a visceral disgust to their relationship and existence can be seen as an expression of the self-regulation being enacted by not only the community, but Lorraine as well, as her desire to be socially accepted illustrates an internalization of homophobia. Homosexuality is seen as detrimental to larger attempts of progress as it represents a “backward” form of Black female sexuality.

In a description of the acts that substantiate the communities’ claims of their sexuality, Naylor writes, “Sophie and a few other women sniffed at the spot and then, perplexed, silently looked at each other. Where had they seen that before? They had often laughed and touched each other-held each other in joy or its dark twin- but where had they seen that before?” She continues, “It came to them as the scent drifted down the steps and entered their nostrils on the way to their inner mouths. They had seen that-done that-with their men. That shared moment of invisible

communion reserved for two and hidden from the rest of the world behind laughter or tears or a touch...that began to cling to the bricks on Brewster” (130-131). The relationship between Lorraine and Theresa can only be understood through comparison to a heterosexual union. Additionally, the focus on their bodies and the erasure of their voices acts as evidence in their lack of agency in the depiction of their relationship. Their most intimate moments, what they attempt to hide from the world, have spread through Brewster Place. The investment in heteronormativity by other Black women in the community forces Lorraine and Theresa outwards but also burdens them with the ostracizing and dangerous nature of secrecy. Though not the most salient instance of social stifling, the community women’s adherence to the system of heteronormative dominance makes Lorraine vulnerable. In doing so, Lorraine and Theresa are blocked from the collective protection of Brewster Place, pushing them out. In the end, the subsequent rape of Lorraine serves as a seemingly ultimate method to silence a Black woman’s voice as she is forced to submit to her rapist. A lack of security characterized by the inability to make one’s own decisions, and the suppression of one’s truth is what creates the lack of security, internally and externally, which becomes dangerous.

Conclusion

Though Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* garnered harsh criticism for its portrayal of Black men, it is in this critique that the strength and impact of Naylor’s focus on gendered spaces and female homosocial relationships is made most apparent. This prioritization of the Black female experience by a Black female creative substantiates the need for a gender analysis of the Black Interior as Naylor and her characters cultivate autonomous inner lives through their bonds with the other women. It is those relationships that inform and nurture individual and collective maturation. Through analysis of this work, one can engage with both the tangible and fictitious methods that

Black women have utilized to build internal spaces and senses of self when no apparent or true guidelines exist.

In like manner, I feel the inclusion of the miniseries into this analysis allows one to question what it really means to embark on the processes of adaptation, both in the sense of shifting medium, but also in transforming the intimacy of interiority that occurs when making a work more commercially lucrative and widely acceptable. While the novel and the film do not differ drastically in their narrative arc, the reality is that Oprah Winfrey's previously obtained star power and social credibility was the driving force for the development of the miniseries. Thus, through the miniseries we can see how the adoption of other women's interior experiences, even those we feel connected to because of shared identifies like race, gender, and even geographical origin, can inform performances of seemingly analogous, or arguably even identical, performances of gendered Blackness and the intimate self.

ISSA'S IMPACT: AWKWARDNESS, INSECURITY, AND THE YOUTUBE COME-UP

Clad in a kente cloth hat, gold door knockers, and a black trash bag, J—Issa Rae's character in The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl—hangs up the phone. Her first Halloween with White Jay, one of her love interests, trick or treating, had run longer than she expected with their going door to door and horse playing in the leaves. Her trance is broken by the disappointment in her best friend and coworker, CeCe's voice, over J skipping the Halloween party. Choosing White Jay, over CeCe and the party, the euphoria of the date halts when someone interrupts them. It is White Jay's ex-girlfriend. J is forced into the role of spectator as she watches their conversation unfold, neither acknowledging her presence though she is just steps away. The two women's costumes are visually juxtaposed, J's homemade and ill-fitting, and the ex's store-bought and fitted. J asks herself "What's with her costume is she treatin' and trickin'?" As Jay and the woman's conversation continues, she updates him on her getting her Ph.D. at UCLA. Finally acknowledging J, White Jay stumbles trying to remember her name forcing J to introduce herself. The scene closes with a stream of J's internally questions, "What's happening? Does he like her? Who is this pretty bitch?"

Black female creatives, as seen in the earlier discussion of Naylor, have sought increased agency in the creation, transmission, and the circulation of their creative works in the areas of literature, television, and other artistic realms. The growth of these efforts has been affected by technological advancements, particularly the development of the internet and digital media. Artists locked out of the mainstream, dominant creative platforms—like network television, studio-produced films, and publishing companies—looked to the internet for refuge from this

ostracization. One of those creatives is Jo-Issa Rae Diop, more widely known as Issa Rae. The actress, writer, and director was born in Los Angeles, California to a Senegalese father and an African American mother. Having lived in Potomac, Maryland, Inglewood, California, and Dakar, Senegal, Rae grew up struggling to establish a solid sense of self. This was especially true of her sense of a Black identity as she dealt with being the only Black child in affluent white spaces, as well as not being seen as Black enough in Black spaces. Rae often cites her time at Stanford University as integral to her development as a Black creative, as she majored in African and African American studies and wrote and directed various plays during her time there. At Stanford, she encountered other burgeoning Black artists including Nigerian American rapper Jidenna Theodore Mobisson, better known by his stage name Jidenna. In 2007 upon graduating from Stanford, Rae created a channel on YouTube, a video-sharing site that functions as a digital space for independent content creators to craft and distribute original content. On this YouTube channel--which she created just two years after the platform launched--Rae uploaded original skits that she wrote, produced, and acted in with some of her friends including actress and writer Tracy Oliver, who stars as Nina, the main antagonist on *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. Both Rae and Oliver were recipients of a theater fellowship at The Public Theater in New York City. Eventually, Rae gained significant media attention for her YouTube series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011-2013) leading to a deal with HBO and an original television series, *Insecure* (2016) both of which will be the focus of this chapter.

More specifically, the chapter examines the narrative and aesthetic differences in the depictions of insecurity and awkwardness for the main Black female characters in Rae's YouTube and HBO series, J in the former and Issa and Molly in the latter. This chapter asks: In what ways do the different platforms of YouTube and HBO affect the intimate nature of consumption for audiences and influence aesthetics shifts like changes in character's name? Over the course of this

chapter, I will approach representations of Black female interiority through a comparative study of dialogue and narrative arcs of both series, culminating in the examination of composition in key selected scenes utilizing tenets of visual analysis and Black cultural studies. Ultimately the point is to broaden the conversation about the politics and aesthetics of Black female representation on burgeoning modern digital platforms, like YouTube, as they have become avenues for Black female creatives to retain agency in production, grow an audience, and mature creatively despite their restricted access to traditional filmmaking resources.

Developing a YouTube Series

As discussed in the introduction, sociologist Herman Gray in his 2004 book, *Watching Race*, articulates how the medium of television has been used to convey, investigate, and understand various race centered triumphs and conflicts. A driving assertion of his chapter entitled “The Politics of Representation in Network Television” is that “the conventions of television production serve to discipline, contain, and ultimately construct a point of view” rooted in whiteness (71). Racism and sexism have led to unequal access for Black female creatives to star in or develop their own television shows. This phenomenon is compounded when they express an unwillingness to adhere to the commonplace practices of mainstream television. At the same time, the oscillating stability of network television has opened the market to streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. When taken together, these two phenomena have opened up space for Black female creatives to be more willing to utilize burgeoning digital media platforms like YouTube to curate and distribute web programs that follow and defy the traditions of episodic television. Thus, YouTube and analogous platforms act as spaces where representations of identity can be reimagined and explored for Black women and other creatives.

Scholar and media producer Aymar Jean Christian examines the continuities and changes in television as the dominant form of entertainment, and the future of the internet as a developing alternative. According to Christian, the establishment of video streaming and video sharing sites incites “Internet entrepreneurs to imagine themselves creating a more open, diffuse and niche-driven form of television” (The Web as Television Reimagined 344). Creatives like Rae defy the confines of network and cable television by blurring the divisions between television viewer and content creator. Instead of occupying distinctly separate roles, a vast amount of web series developers are fans that are seeking to rectify their perceived problems with identity representation on mainstream television. The straightforward nature of making a YouTube channel, a free guided process for anyone 13 or older, gives disgruntled or inspired fans the opportunity to craft independent, original content.

In developing this content, creators use the new medium of the Internet to craft content for specific audiences while still “relying on television models for programming to facilitate audience engagement and advertiser interest” (344). Rae’s content is designed to produce nuanced portrayals of the Black female experience, including showcasing Black women who are awkward and insecure, characteristics not often associated with Black female characters. Even as fictional Black male characters like Steve Urkel in *Family Matters* and Dwayne Wayne of *A Different World* have been built on expressing, overcoming, and at times, accepting their social inadequacies. By depicting her characters in this manner, she relates to an audience through the audience’s identification with a particular Black subjectivity.

On the YouTube site, the audience for a video is counted by the number of views, which are integral in determining the video’s reach, as well as the subsequent funds a creator earns from ad

revenue.¹ While the view counter is a tangible numerical representation of the video's popularity, the comment section is the place for greater interaction between YouTube users and content creators. In his 2010 book, *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*, communication scholar Michael Strangelove, writes "YouTube is not merely an archive of moving images. It is much more than a fast-growing collection of millions of home-made videos. It is an intensely emotional experience. YouTube is a social space" (4). Through the comment section, video viewers have direct access to provide the creator with their praise and/or disdain and their feedback for every episode of the series, thus forging an interactive online community. Many well-known modern network television series have attempted to replicate this type of online community by live-tweeting.² Notably Black female television and film writer and producer Shonda Rhimes' "Thank God It's Thursday" lineup and Rae's *Insecure*, have actors and creators live tweet with audience members. If you were to scroll through the #insecurehbo hashtag, you would see audience members are drawn to the cringe-worthy moments Rae is able to depict; her audience, predominantly young women, seem to identify heavily with these moments. The intense connection young women have to the show is rooted in the show's design.

¹ Once a YouTuber's videos have acquired roughly a 1,000 views, they are eligible to opt into AdSense. Through AdSense, advertisements are placed at the beginning or during a creator's YouTube video. For roughly every thousand impressions, which include views and ad clicks, creators will be paid a certain amount of money. However, with the increased popularity of YouTube, this option has become less lucrative as YouTube, the platform, takes larger portions of the overall ad revenue. Additionally, creators may partner with specific brands to produce advertisement content that speaks directly to their viewership. For channels that require more money to produce videos, such as scripted and comedy-based channels, many creators turn to Patreon. On Patreon, viewers can opt into monthly donations or donate once to their preferred channel, starting at as low as a \$1/per month. As a perk of their donation, viewers are often given exclusive or early access to content.

² Live-tweeting means to post comments about an event on the social media app Twitter while the event is taking place.

Communal Expectations and the Relatability of 'Failure'

In the article, "Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics," scholar Rebecca Wanzo places Rae's work alongside the work of Lena Dunham, the creator of another HBO series, *Girls*, into a subcategory of comedy that uses shame and abjection for their female protagonists as a basis for a relationship between them and their audience members. Wanzo asserts that "Awkward Black Girl humorously blends the historical weight of black abjection with other kinds of abjection, so that the abjection J, the main character of the web series, uses to define herself is not one determined by the history of white supremacy. The term awkward becomes a synonym for abjection and also a modification of it," thus crafting a space where "a black girl may resist or play with Western constructions of abjection" (30). Abjection, for the purposes of my research, can be understood simply as the act of humiliation. However, Black abjection characterizes the humiliation of being Black, as well as the shame for not adhering to performative expressions of Blackness deemed "authentic" by dominant, discursive tropes of Blackness. Unlike the female protagonists of *Girls* and *Broad City*, another "precarious girl comedy" that developed out of a web series of the same name, Wanzo claims that through connecting abjection and Blackness, Rae's *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* expands the potential for Blackness. This is because Blackness has historically been considered inherently abject, to be Black is to live in a fluctuating state of humiliation and shame. A reflection that has been made culturally visible on television as Blackness and Black characters have been used as the punchline for a multitude of jokes. Through a certain reclamation of abjection, Rae can remix awkwardness from its history of abjection to an identity to be celebrated. For Rae, YouTube, a malleable and more accessible space than broadcast television, was the platform on which she could defy archetypes of Blackness. She accomplished this by being awkward as well as by addressing contemporary issues, including racial microaggressions at work.

Continuing the theme of the YouTube series, Rae embarks on a similar effort to empower the likes of the awkward Black girls in *Insecure*, her first series with HBO. The two main female characters of the HBO series, Issa and Molly, work to navigate their personal and professional relationships despite their feelings of self-doubt. By not only admitting but documenting their successes and failures to overcome their insecurities, J and Issa complicate the idea of “the strong black woman.” Harris-Perry asserts that “the strong black woman... confronts all trials and tribulations...is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection” (*Sister Citizen* 21). The development and maintenance of “the strong black woman” trope delineates specific and reductive expectations for Black women’s behavior and expression of emotions. To be strong is to be the antithesis of weak, thus the cultural signifier of the strong black woman fosters certain confining notions of Black female behavior. Frequently, Black women, both willing and unwilling, adopt facades of super-strength for themselves and others. By centering Issa and Molly’s insecurities as central to the narrative and aesthetic composition of the series, Rae works to trouble the mystique of “the strong black woman” exposing the unprotected interiority where feelings like shame, awkwardness, and insecurity lay.

Awkwardness & Insecurity in the Black Interior Lens

The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl and *Insecure* link Blackness with the interior emotional states of awkwardness and insecurity, emotions that are not often thought about in a Black connotation, though the broader Black experience is regularly characterized by both. Individual Black people are not exempt from these experiences, instead, because Blackness is seen and treated as inherently humiliating it often leaves no room for individual humiliation and ‘weakness.’ As a

result, Rae's characterization of both J and Issa diverges from dominant perceptions of Blackness. Consequently, these portrayals can also be contradictions to the ideal Black feminine figure, the "strong black woman." I argue that Rae is intentional in this juxtaposition as both *Misadventures* and *Insecure* place J and Issa alongside characters that embody this ideal, Nina and Molly respectively. Through these juxtaposes the audience's perception and experience of J's narrative as both insecure and awkward are heightened by this contrast.

For example, J's inability to meet the standard of the "strong black woman" is exemplified in the scene that opens this chapter, in which J is forced to contend with her own embodied insecurities about her burgeoning relationship with White Jay. This is largely depicted as a part of her inability to connect with him because of their racial, and perceived cultural differences. His dating life before her, which can be inferred as mostly white or at least mostly white in J's imagination, confronts her when Halloween shenanigans, bringing her face to face with his racially ambiguous and highly successful ex-girlfriend. J feels not only inadequate because of her lack of success, but also because of a particularly racialized and gendered form of inadequacy. Unlike herself, the ex's non-Black, white adjacent body is perceived as properly fitting a relationship with White Jay. The audience is privy to J's adherence to this notion in an earlier scene when she seeks advice from her best friend, CeCe, on how to date white men, as well as in this scene's internal monologue in which she critiques the ex's looks. J feels attacked by the ex's appearance because it illuminates her feelings of being not right for White Jay. This is further illustrated through the contrast in their attire as J's attire is a large, baggy, Black trash bag and the ex's outfit is a tight, white nurse's costume. The ex's outfit fits her, while J's does not.

Additionally, this scene is exemplary of the typically shared uncomfortable experience that is paramount to an audience's engagement with an episode of *Misadventures*. The situations that J clumsily finds herself in garner simultaneous feelings of relatability, sympathy, and humor. These

instances of communal embarrassment in line *Misadventures* with the tradition of “cringe-comedy,” which as a subgenre of comedy extracts humor from social awkwardness. In these instances, regardless of race and gender, moments like meeting your new crush’s attractive, successful ex when you are dressed in a garbage bag can provide that cringe feeling for a broad audience. According to scholar Jason Middleton, awkward moments are more than “moments [which] occur when an established mode of representation or reception is unexpectedly challenged, stalled, or altered” but instead are times when “‘the real’ occurs in unexpected and often unruly forms” (3-4). Rae’s *Misadventures* and the later *Insecure* rely on this reworking of “the mundane” and “the commonplace” into less predictable means to shift the occasional cringe-worthy moment by increasing its frequency and longevity. Thus, establishing an omniscient state of humorous, though unrelenting, awkwardness. In doing so, the awkwardness is not only narrative-based but extends to the audience. As a viewer you feel uncomfortable and out of place with J, because Rae is constantly returning you to these moments of awkward encounters

Conversely, despite the vast number of viewers that can relate to more general feelings of discomfort, Rae simultaneously seeks to depict a racialized and gendered specific experience as described in the earlier scene analysis. Similarly, in the first episode of the web series, “The Stop Sign,” J states that she is the two worst things to be, awkward and Black. Though gender is not explicitly stated as a characteristic that has significance in Rae’s plight, it still proves to work in tandem with both traits she identifies as most important. For example, later in the season J reveals that her ex-boyfriend had broken up with her for the second time after reconnecting for a few days because she had cut her hair making him feel “gay...no homo.” Her loss of femininity as a result of her haircut is the catalyst for this awkward breakup, not her Blackness.

Moreover, J is not awkward solely because of her identity as both Black and woman, but also because of her “nerdy” personality. Throughout the duration of the web series, J ignores not

only racially specific norms but greater societal norms. J's awkward identity is different due to her social position as a Black woman and its deviations from the normativity perceptions of a cool Black aesthetic. According to Nuri Chandler and Robin Chandler, cool has been and continues to be epitomized by the Black male body.³ This dates back to the iconography of the Black Power movement which included the afro and the beret and even further back to the aesthetic popularized during the cool jazz era by Black male musicians. The sense of defiance that styles like this invoked have been central to Blackness's connotation of coolness. J's femaleness offers an initial barrier to this as her feminine body does not benefit from implicit perceptions of cool as being based in masculinity.

Contrarily, while Black cool has been articulated in relation to Black men, Black women have not been entirely left out as Black women participate in the cultivation and maintenance of the Black cool aesthetic. In *Misadventures*, other Black characters regardless of gender are portrayed along a spectrum of cool. With some of the characters recurring gags, such as one male co-worker only speaking in a whisper or one female co-worker's inability to accept that she is fired, many of the characters are not portrayed as explicitly cool. In fact, none of the characters are represented as such, however, J is seen as exclusively being ridiculed for her uncool performances. J's consistent state of awkwardness challenges the normativity of Black cool allowing viewers of the web series to relate to this inability to fit the cool Black mold.

Rae's characterization of J presents her awkwardness as a byproduct of her inability to properly meet both racial and gendered rubrics of performance. The dissonance between conceived and lived realities of performance is further complicated when Blackness, both internally and externally embodied, is surveilled. In the case of *Misadventures*, the audience witnesses J's actions of self-surveillance, as well as her somewhat paranoid feelings of intraracial social surveillance. When J

³ This analysis of the gendered nature of "coolness" is discussed in Chandler and Chandler's "Flava in Ya Gear: Transgressive Politics and the Influence of Hip Hop on Contemporary Fashion."

is invited to her then office crush, Fred's, birthday party, her immediate feelings of joy at the invitation are replaced when she is overwhelmed with fear about having to dance in front of Fred and others at what she assumes will be a predominately Black party. This confusion of an inability to dance perfectly contrasts the scene that opens this episode, which is fittingly titled "The Dance." In that scene, J dances in the center of the dance floor as other partygoers flock to watch her skills as rapper Ice Cube's "You Can Do It," urges her to "get her ass up" and "put her ass into it." Though her slick and highly praised dance moves are interplayed with a few comedic moments such as her scooting on the floor to complete a failed breakdancing move, J is shown as a skilled, arguably highly skilled dancer, one that is so good that she is the center of attention. However, one comes to later realize that this scene was all a figment of her imagination.

Despite this later reveal, some audience members would be able to immediately deduce this scene as imagined, as it directly mirrors as a recognizable scene in the 2001 teen dance film, *Save the Last Dance*. By engaging in a pseudo-parodying of this scene, Rae places J in conversation with the film's protagonist, Sara, a young white ballet dancer who learns to dance to hip-hop to fit into her urban high school after unexpectedly transferring. Through this intertextual engagement, Rae aligns J's pursuits of a confident, assertive, and cool Black aesthetic through the learning of how to dance just like Sara. Therefore, J's pursuits are seen as outsider as Sara's. The paralleling of their two experiences does not seem to reflect J's reality, as her over self-surveillance of her Blackness is in fact what hinders her social success at the party, not the other partygoers' immediate judgments of her racial inadequacy.

As a part of an anthology of essays that defend and refute the notion of Black cool style, writer Mat Johnson writes, "Blackness is one of the few identities that comes with its own self enforced expectation of expression" (The Geek 14). The self-regulatory nature of Blackness is a recurring theme in *Misadventures* but is especially salient in the more realistic depiction of Fred's

birthday party. In this later scene, once again J's time at the party is portrayed as mirroring the experience of a teen movie protagonist, this time, Monica Wright from the 2000s Black cult classic, *Love & Basketball*. Invoking the late 1980s high school dance scene from the film, Johnny Kemp's "Just Got Paid" plays in the background as J and nemesis, Nina, reenact an exchange from the film. In *Love & Basketball*, Monica is taunted by her crush's date to the dance, a more popular and physically developed peer, Shawnee. Shawnee diminishes Monica's femininity, a soft spot for the young tomboy, by stating upon noticing her uncharacteristically tight attire that "I didn't know Nike made dresses." Similarly, in *Misadventures*, Nina intervenes during a private exchange between J and her crush, Fred, commenting on her outfit by stating "I didn't know Fubu made dresses."

Just as the earlier allusion to *Save the Last Dance* illustrated J's feelings of racial defectiveness, by having J's real party experience mimic that of Monica's dance experience, J's performance as feminine and desirable at the party is depicted as under the scrutiny of others, but solely by those who deem her as competition. Both Nina and Shawnee are shown to be partaking in a particularly malicious form of social ridicule of J and Monica respectively because they are seen as obstacles to the affection of their male suitors. While this may be true, both J and Monica seemingly interpret these public attacks of their femininity, and subsequent desirability, as a validation of their self-perceptions as unfeminine, undesirable, and uncool. In each of their cases, their own adherence and belief in the binary of cool and uncool, desirable and undesirable, and accepted and rejected, give them the vulnerability that makes their taunter's insults stick. Nina and Shawnee exploit that vulnerability in these actions, ruining the rest of the night for J and Monica. J spends the rest of the evening harping on her social defeat, she comments to CeCe, "my comebacks weren't fast enough" and "if this party is competition, I'm losing." Her admittance of defeat hinders her ability to enjoy the remainder of the party. She proceeds to overthink commonplace interactions such as what is the appropriate distance to dance near someone else at the party. The other partygoers notice this and

react. One male partygoer dancing quite lively glides to the other side of the dance floor as J creeps up behind him in a slightly offbeat manner. Through this portion of the party, the audience can see the social aftermath of J's self-surveillance as it constantly places her in vulnerable positions that push her defend her performance. A defense she is ill-prepared to give, as she herself invests in these criticisms. Through the interactions portrayed in this episode, one is able to clearly see Rae's usage of comedy as a tool to converge a more broadly understood feeling of awkwardness with a racially and gendered specific one. In the case of "The Dance," this is most explicitly accomplished through an intertextual engagement and assumed audience knowledge, I argue that in the transformation of her work on *Misadventures* to *Insecure*, Rae engages in analogous acts of intertextuality that act as connectors between the lower budget YouTube series and the sheen of the HBO show. This works to service the taste of a more monetarily invested and mainstream audience while providing maturation and nuance to the *Misadventures*' formula of cringeable relatability.

In a May 2018 interview with the *Atlantic*, Rae tells writer, Julia Ioffe, that she has a personal interest in reproducing "the quirk that African Americans were not allowed to have on-screen." She tells Ioffe, "You were either the extreme pretty girl or the nerd; there was no in-between. I was interested in the in-between" (Ioffe 22). Based on our earlier engagement with *Misadventures* we see that this is not a new phenomenon in Rae's work as J's predicament in the web series is made not only relatable but engaging because of her constant struggle with her seemingly permanent residence in the in-between. She struggles between the polarity of femininity and masculinity, acceptable and ostracized, white and othered, and black cool and uncool. Therefore, it is no surprise that *Insecure*, a work that is partially based on *Misadventures*, would contain similar thematic trends. Not only analogous in theme, but narrative structure as the lead character, Issa Dee, played by Issa Rae, and her best friend, Molly, played by Yvonne Orji, work to navigate their late 20s against the backdrop of career challenges and relationship struggles in Los Angeles. Just like J and

CeCe, both Issa Dee and Molly struggle against an underlying feeling of dissatisfaction fueled by what could be described as “epitomiz[ing] a new economic and interpersonal insecurity of the US middle class” (Wanzo 31). Both sets of friends are defined singularly and jointly by a certain level of perceived social failure, the former both unhappy at their weight-loss pill call center jobs and Issa has similar feelings about her employment at the non-profit, “We Got Y’all.” Molly, the only member of either pair who seems not only pleased with her current occupation as a corporate attorney but having planned for it is still engulfed in an internal struggle that all the girls are plagued by a romantic one. All four women are “seem[ingly] ill-equipped for adult life” (Wanzo 32). Though all the age to be identified as women, this trait seems to place them in a social state of naivety, or girlhood.

Contrastingly, aside from the aesthetic and stylistic choices that distinguish the two series, which will be analyzed later in this chapter, two critical differences between the shows are in the characterization of these two focal friend groups. The switch from Indian American, fellow career failure, CeCe to Black, highly career-focused, Molly, services a fairly obvious and intentional effort of Rae to showcase two Black female experiences in tandem. Unlike CeCe’s character, who does not receive episodes where she is the central focus, Molly’s character even within the first season has a developing professional and personally narrative arc that is independent of her best friend. Additionally, a noticeable factor is the main character of *Insecure* being given the same name as one of the show’s creators and main cast member, Issa. By allowing the character to share her name, Rae seemingly makes a more explicit declaration of alignment with *Insecure*’s Issa Dee than she did with *Misadventures*’ J. This alignment works to blur the boundaries between the creator’s identity and the show’s protagonist. In doing so, Rae joins a television tradition common of the comedy model, that the dramedy lays in. Dating back to *I Love Lucy* to *The Jamie Foxx Show*, these shows were made possible through the main star’s already existing audience. The characters sharing their most

recognizable name functions as a sort of pseudo-authenticity. Though audience members understand that antics and storylines are exaggerated, the show's characterization of their namesake often becomes interpreted as an adequate representation of the lead actor. This seems to ring true for Rae as well, who has on multiple occasions used her personal Twitter account to remind fans that she is not Issa from the television series. However, those claims seem to frequently go ignored, I would argue that this a byproduct of Rae's successful relatability.

As *Misadventures* was able to develop an engaged online community through an active YouTube comment section, *Insecure* has utilized social media, namely Twitter, to cultivate an analogous community. As written in a 2017 article from *The Undefeated*, "Insecure is successful because people are insecure. And what better display of that than social media?" (Kimble). The social media sphere allows for Rae's personal persona to constantly be entangled with her on-screen counterpart through not only dialogue, but visual commentary namely through memes. This internet characterization extends to more traditional media platforms like magazines, where frequently Rae is asked about both her personal experiences of awkwardness and insecurity. One can argue that Rae has become the poster child for both. Thus, *Insecure* is as much an adaptation of *Misadventures*, as both series are an adaptation of Rae's own interiority.

A paramount comedic characteristic of *Misadventures* is J's rapping, as the character is often shown writing and revising her raps in front of the camera. In the YouTube series, this creative endeavor gains its initial characterization as a private, cathartic pastime. One that J is reluctant to share with others, aside from CeCe. This illustrates the depth of her relationship with CeCe, who she describes as her "awkward soulmate" and appreciator of her "flows" as the sole person in the first season of the series to be introduced to a habit that J has claimed to partake in since the sixth grade. CeCe is allowed access not only through spectatorship to J's rhymes, but she also becomes an active participant servicing as a beatboxer and occasional lyrical collaborator. The purpose of making these

raps a recurring phenomenon in *Misadventures* is not to exhibit J nor Rae's brag worthy rhyme skills, in fact, their inclusion demonstrates the antithesis. J herself describes the raps as "violent rap lyrics" with no mention of the alleged quality or lack thereof of the rap lyrics. This presentation of her lyricism allows the audience to formulate some semblance of their own presentation. That "some" is key as such lines include "bitch nigga, you's a liar. I'll set your face on fire" and "white nigga had me caught up/mulatto babies, my ass, you fucked up/who is that new bitch? Do you love her? Is she prettier than me? DON'T ANSWER." The process of writing raps and the intimate performances of said raps for herself and CeCe act as a tangible site for an uncensored display of self. That underlying interiority is able to face outward- in the series and to the audience.

In the first episode of *Insecure* entitled "Insecure as Fuck," Issa Dee drags Molly to open-mic night that she is invited to by her ex-boyfriend, Daniel, after an unsatisfying birthday celebration with boyfriend, Lawrence. To impress Daniel, a music producer and firm supporter of Issa Dee's now only semi-bad rhymes, she performs a freestyle, "Broken Pussy," inspired by Molly's "inadequate" love life. This performance differs significantly from the type of rap performances that occur in *Misadventures* as the introduction of Issa Dee's rap skills is incredibly public. Fashioned in a mint green mini dress, Issa Dee stands alone on stage only accompanied by a mic and a stand. Two sets of columns like circular lights literally and figuratively box her in on stage and on the screen. She is the only one lit in a mild soft yellow light while the rest of the crowd, including an apprehensive Molly, is colored by a blurring blue tone. As Kelis' "Bossy" plays in the background, Dee gains increased confidence and animation in her performance as the audience offers her audible and visual affirmation through their chants of "AYYY" and head bobbing. This performance acts a direct contrast to a scene in *Misadventures* in "The Exes [S. 1, Ep. 11], where in a flashback J is shown participating in a cypher with her then high school crush. Upon the completion of her rather explicit and lustful lyrics topped off with the line, "I'm a virgin but I promise thee, I got that ILL NA

NA..No FOX-Y!” She is met with a rather different reaction as her crush, played by singer songwriter Kevin McCall, replies, “Nahh, I’m good.” The changes in the performance and perception have dual catalysts, the production quality offered by HBO, and the addition of director Melina Matsoukas, as well as the effort to replicate and translate these simultaneous feelings of release and regret.

As much as the audience’s view into the interior experience that Rae curates for Issa Dee is present in *Insecure*, the possibilities of this depiction are contingent on the possibilities first offered by HBO, a premium television network. The network is known as the longest running and still operating for pay television channel. HBO has been home to acclaimed original programming since the mid-1990s including, but not limited to *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Wire*. This led the network to have a reputation for a type of quality programs including not only offering the nuance that is accomplished by Rae’s confessional writing style that was already in development in *Misadventures*, but also enormous budgets. According to a *Variety* article, *Insecure* receives approximately 3.5 million dollars an episode, a far cry from the YouTube series which relied heavily on viewers’ donations through Patreon. This large increase in budget not only improves the aesthetic that was advanced during *Misadventures* but allows for the introduction of new types of styles, namely that of director Melina Matsoukas, who directed half of the episodes of the eight episode long first season. Matsoukas states “A good video has the right visuals, a well conceptualised story and should be exciting an elicit reaction” (Banda 2). This is the logic she utilizes when crafting her content, which includes not only television episodes, but movie videos and now a feature film. Her visual abstract style is defined by “bright colors..crisp black and white images,[and] smooth spotlights.” With Matsoukas’ directorial expertise, *Insecure* is able to meld the standards set forth by HBO’s earlier original programming with Rae’s relatable cringe worthy confessions by establishing an aesthetic quality that shines through quite literally.

Issa Dee's "Broken Pussy" plays not unlike a music video where a rather reluctant and questionable act is met with immediate and collective approval. An approval that is made ambiguous through the wash of blue light that makes audience members' features hard to distinguish especially in juxtaposition to Issa Dee's well-lit one. However, this can be interpreted as specific reworking of the formula of self-surveillance, release, and regret that is apparent in the show's predecessor. Instead of immediate disapproval from her peers like in the "Ill Na Na" cypher, she accrues the backlash later as recording of the freestyle circulates the internet eventually becoming popular with the teenaged children she works with. The type of awkwardness and subsequent insecurity depicted in the aftermath of this performance can be understood as a specific type afforded by the diffusion and visibility that social media provides. Both J and Issa Dee experience analogous feelings but Issa Dee's are heightened by video sharing. Much like the difference in scale of *Misadventures* and *Insecure*, the style of these similar scenes showcases an effort to make intentional shifts in the modality of depicting the engagement between individual's performative Blackness and intimate self. Issa Dee's experience of insecurity, awkwardness, and shame is on a larger scale not only because of HBO, but because the arc of a public social media humiliation holds an identifiable experience for the moment that *Insecure* comes.

Conclusion

Rae's representation of the Black Interior in both *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* showcase the nuanced portrayals of the Black female experience that are shaped by, but not limited by, their insecurities and the awkwardness. Her blatant admission of failure as a "strong Black woman" is central to the experience that she presents, despite insecurity and awkwardness often being seen as emotional spaces inaccessible to Black people. As evident by YouTube

comments and Twitter memes, Rae's audience has tremendous investment in that narrative; they relate to her depictions of Black female figures being contradictory and messy. The transition from YouTube to HBO requires Rae and her new production team, including the likes of Matsoukas, to reorientate presentations of this type of Black female interior experience to fit the conventions and the possibilities afforded by the bigger network. This new, more stylized illustration of the Black Interior necessitates shifts in aesthetics from the charmingly low-quality cringe comedy to the HBO primetime melodrama, with the increased budget allowing for those differences. Also, temporality comes to play as the two series situate themselves to their respective new mediums, in the case of YouTube for *Misadventures*, but also streaming for *Insecure* as it joins a more normative television platform. However, one sees that Rae's process of illustrating the Black female interior attempts to hold on to her aim of depicting the commonplace quirks of Black women, especially through her retention of her confessional writing style.

CODA: Expansion & Afterthoughts

No matter the medium, Black women creatives who depict aspects of Black women's experiences contend intentionally and unintentionally with the Black Interior. Efforts to offer fully developed depictions of their characters require an engagement with the exterior, as well as the interior. The juxtaposition of *The Women of Brewster Place* novel and miniseries, as well as *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* allowed for an analysis that was attentive to multiple layers of the tensions: first between the external and internal; then at the level of depicting the fictitious characters; and finally within the lives of the Black women central to creating the works. Both works illuminate the politics behind the process of depicting the Black interior, which I understood as interpreting, archiving, translating, and replicating. In matters that could be seen as successful and unsuccessful at times, the Black creatives in this project attempted to conceptualize the emotional states of love, lust, insecurity, and awkwardness in a way that centered Black women's experience while adapting and reconfiguring the requirements of their format and audience. The vast nature of these works which extended not only across two books as Naylor later wrote a follow up, *The Men of Brewster Place*, but also multiple hours and even seasons of televisions could not be entirely examined under the scope of this thesis.

For example, this work began with a much larger set of primary materials, including Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide." These works were ultimately not tackled in this analysis, because I felt that I was not able to show equity to that many works in this research. Additionally, the process of writing has unearthed additional limitations. I believe that this research lacks an attentiveness to Black women outside of

dominant Western, and even Anglophone, culture; a result not born out of a lack of interest on my part, but the result of my own linguistic barriers. As a scholar, the purpose and intention of my research is to help humanize and empower Black women and Black female cultural producers. My work is an addition to the discipline of Black studies, as well as Women, Gender, and Sexuality and Film and Media Studies, but it is also personally an ode to Black girls and women. The current limitations of my research are my Americanized experiences and lens, thus limiting my ability to continue to increase the accessibility of my findings to my desired audience—Black women across the diaspora. During the process of writing this work, I was recommended other works that attempt to represent Black female interiority in the African Diaspora, specifically, *Maitresse d'un homme marié* (Mistress of a Married Man), a Senegalese YouTube series that has gained increased traction and been described as a “Senegal’s *Sex & the City*.” An understanding of the Black Interior as conceptual framework to interpret and engage with representations of Black girls and women by Black female creatives would be incomplete without a global diasporic lens. I hope that this can be addressed not only by myself in a maturation of this work, but other emerging Black female scholars across the diaspora.

Furthermore, if I were to continue this specific iteration of this research, I would want to add an examination of the aging femme fatale, Etta Mae Johnson, to my analysis of Naylor’s work. Not only does her character represent an unusual take on the jezebel trope, but at the time Jackie Harry, the woman who played her was a rising actress simultaneously starring in *227*, another program that centered Black women’s homosocial relationships and interior authenticity. In regard to Oprah Winfrey, a continuation of this work could juxtapose her position in the reimagining of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* against *The Women of Brewster Place* as a part of an effort to understand how Winfrey’s star power continues to be used in front of and behind the camera to legitimate this translation of Black women’s literature.

Likewise, while Issa Rae's *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* were the focus of my discussion of new media platforms used to replicate the Black Interior, in my survey of these series I was introduced to a myriad of YouTube series that work in analogous manner. Though my initial engagement with the Black creative space on YouTube was through a random recommendation from a peer to watch a video, "What Men Think" from comedy crew, Dormtainment in 2012, this research has brought me in contact with series as far back as the *PuNanny Diaries*, which was originally published in 2009. The purpose of acknowledging that is to showcase that though Rae's work is deserving of merit in her own right and even her "come up" so to speak to a broader, more lucrative audience, one must not erase her predecessors and peers. For example, some of Rae's frequent collaborators the creatives that make up *Black & Sexy TV* (2008) originally started on YouTube following the release of Dennis Dortch's film, *A Good Day to be Black and Sexy*. During the height of their YouTube usage they were producing up to as many as five separate series at a time, but the possibility of content was contingent on Patreon subscriptions. Since then they have transitioned from using YouTube as their main platform to developing their own independently operated and Black owned streaming network that offers original content including series, movies, and music. This goes to show that Rae is a singular entity in this web of Black creatives who crafted not only individual platforms to produce original content, but a virtual community that adapted some of the conventions of normative content production from network television and studio-produced films and coupled them with focused expression of their complicated identities. It also illuminates how the YouTube that they joined before the boom of the beauty guru and social media YouTuber was a prime place for this synergy. Further analysis of this phenomenon would require one to address the increased popularity of YouTube and the more commonplace monetization of content.

Finally, I believe embarking on an expansion of the analysis of the Black female interior would greatly benefit from the cultivation of a conceptual framework. Initially when I began doing this research, I crafted a rough outline for a potential logic for thinking through an analysis of interiority. This method of thinking was defined by four aspects, the processes of interpreting, translating, archiving, and replicating, as Black female creatives worked to transform stories of Black female interiority into consumable media for varying audiences and registers. At any moment, those transformations are resting at the nexus of two or even all those practices. As I progressed through the journey of completing this thesis, I realized the gravity of trying to equitably include all four aspects. A task that I decided would be able to inform the direction of this analysis but could not in the scope of this thesis be used in its entirety. I hope that even though I was unable to wholly utilize the framework that future usage can spark more nuanced engagement between creatives and audiences.

Ultimately, this work was an effort to add to the overall conversation about the politics and aesthetics of Black female representation in media. As my main intervention in Alexander's concept was the centering of a gendered analysis, I believe that my analysis showcases the Black Interior's utility in being attentive to the multilayered portrayals that Black female creatives were, are, and will continue to make. While there is a dominant focus on external performances of Blackness, it is through an analysis of the interior that a creative work's influences—upon its creators, the conventions of its form, and the nature of consumption—can be properly examined alongside the image, and not as a mere afterthought. I hope that my use of the Black Interior encourages more scholarship to deviate from concentrating on assessing Black female creatives' works as acts of resistance, or on their ability to positively depict Blackness, but instead prompts greater exploration of perceptions of gendered Blackness that are not fixated on external comparison.

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