Digital Kitchen Table Talks
Black Feminist Discourse in the Age of Social Media

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

In recent years, social media technologies and internet platforms have offered particularly generative possibilities for critical opposition. Online self-broadcasting platforms can act as mechanisms for community formation and archives of historical neglect, granting heightened visibility to longstanding and newly developing systemic issues. Located at the intersections of media studies, critical race theory, and Black feminist thought, *Digital Kitchen Table Talks: Black Feminist Discourse in the Age of Social Media* examines how Black women use digital platforms for self-expression, connection, education, and discussions on social and political issues, utilizing these platforms as virtual third places. Inspired by the work of influential Black feminist scholars such as Moya Bailey (2018), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), this project will trace the ways in which women across the Black diaspora utilize YouTube and TikTok to disrupt oppressive systems by creating infrastructures of care through Black feminist discourse. Drawing specifically on Moya Bailey's concept of digital alchemy, this paper will investigate how Black female content creators and consumers transform harmful social media content into sources of empowerment. Creating online communities rooted in self-expression and like-minded conversation, which, in turn, fosters a process of unlearning sparked through open and candid dialogue. My research aims to expand on their work to demonstrate the impact of Black women's online "kitchen table talks".

Abstrait

Ces dernières années, les technologies des médias sociaux et les plateformes Internet ont offert des possibilités particulièrement génératrices d'opposition critique. Les plateformes d'autodiffusion en ligne peuvent agir comme des mécanismes de formation de communautés et d'archives de négligence historique, accordant une visibilité accrue aux problèmes systémiques, qu'ils soient anciens ou récents. Situé à l'intersection des études sur les médias, de la théorie critique de la race et de la pensée féministe noire, *Digital Kitchen Table Talks: Black Feminist Discourse in the Age of Social Media* examine comment les femmes noires utilisent les plateformes numériques pour l'expression de soi, la connexion, l'éducation et les discussions sur questions sociales et politiques, en traitant ces plateformes comme des tiers-lieux virtuels. Inspiré par les travaux de chercheuses féministes noires influentes telles que Moya Bailey (2018), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) et Patricia Hill Collins (1990), ce projet retracera la manière dont les femmes de la diaspora noire utilisent YouTube et TikTok pour perturber les systèmes oppressifs en créant des infrastructures de soin par le biais du discours féministe noir. S'appuyant spécifiquement sur le concept d'alchimie numérique de Moya Bailey, cet article étudiera comment les créatrices et consommatrices de contenu noires transforment les contenus préjudiciables des médias sociaux en sources d'autonomisation. Créer des communautés en ligne ancrées dans l'expression de soi et des conversations partageant les mêmes idées, ce qui, à son tour, favorise un processus de désapprentissage déclenché par un dialogue ouvert et franc. Ma recherche vise à développer leur travail pour démontrer l'impact des « discussions de cuisine » en ligne des femmes noires.

The Modern Day Third Place

  Ray Oldenburg's (1989) theory of the third place discusses the human need for social spaces that are neither domestic nor work-related. Specifically, for Black women in North America, third places have existed for generations in the form of hair salons, local restaurants, and barbeques, where they could discuss their experiences and personal lives with like-minded peers. However, over the years, people started visiting these places less, travelling directly between their homes and workplaces and leaving little room for socialization between commutes. Oldenburg (1989) explains, "People have jobs, and they have homes with little else in between save for commercially packaged diversions which often seem more enervating than invigorating. The American idealization of intimate marriages and high mobility careers has coincided with what some critics call the decline of the community" (p.266). Current data suggests that this still resonates, as Wilson's 2018 study reveals that over 62% of US adults go straight home after work. According to Wilson "happy hour" has been increasingly replaced by the home with familial responsibilities and the desire to unwind in solitude reported as major reasons for skipping social activities after work (para. 2-3). In addition, the digitization of the modern world combined with the recent COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the changing public sphere due to the convenience offered by technological innovations. These days, digital platforms provide users with countless opportunities for social interaction, leading to a downgrade in face-to-face connections and relegating them to a secondary role (Fischetti, 2023, p. 139). This retreat towards the domestic and digital has been generations in the making, as the industrial revolution and its aftermath has created a society that prioritizes efficiency and individualized comfort over social connection (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 274). Brown & Greenfield's "Staying Connected During Stay-At-Home (2021) article confirms this ongoing trend, stating, "the changing societal context has accompanied increases in communication technology use.

Sociological and psychological studies show that people are spending less time in the physical

company of others across their lifespan than they did previously" (p.148). They cite potential

explanations for this, including: "growing safety concerns and less freedom for adolescents,

internal migration, and lack of multigenerational living… Taken together, this research shows

that people were already spending less in-person time with others before COVID-19 caused stay-

at-home orders to be issues" (ibid). However, it is important to note that this does not mean

people are not connecting. The positive impacts of online communication on individuals lacking

physical spaces for communication showcase the importance of connection regardless of the

form it takes. Instead, it indicates that people stay in familiar circles such as family and close

friends instead of venturing into shared public spaces and meeting new peers. Additionally, a

more recent exploration of the third place is in Montgomery & Millers' (2021) article

highlighting the importance of libraries as "places of community and collaboration" (p. 230).

They emphasize the value of meeting new people outside of one's inner circle, which I quote

below at length:

> Comfortable third places provide an inclusive environment giving users the opportunity to meet new people with new ideas. Those who spend time at third places also find comfort in seeing familiar strangers. These individuals may not interact yet spending time at the third place provides a common bond and a familiarity in their relationship (p.232).

Manago et al.'s "Adolescents' Daily Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communication"

discuss the changing landscape of intrapersonal communication, contending that, "As the

Internet became ingrained in daily life, empirical findings began to accumulate demonstrating

that, in fact, the Internet tends to be used to facilitate and augment, rather than replace, face-to-

face relationships" (p.154). Consequently, the ease of studying at home rivals libraries, family

dinners compete with venturing out to restaurants, at-home hair stylists mimic the salon

experience, and places originally intended for potential socialization with "familiar strangers" now have online equivalents. As new generations of Black women enter an increasingly digitized, post-quarantine world, third places have become increasingly necessary but fewer and further between.

Introduction

Shaped in part by racial discrimination and social anti-Blackness, the Black female experience is both layered and nuanced and requires ongoing conversation, theorization, and care. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* begins with a similar sentiment. Emphasizing a critical, intersectional perspective, she writes, "In order to capture the interconnections of race, gender, and social class in Black women's lives and their effect on Black feminist thought, I explicitly rejected grounding my analysis in a single theoretical tradition" (p. vii). This concept will come up throughout this piece, as analyzing Black women's online conversations requires a deep understanding of multiple aspects of our social locations, complicated histories, and unique cultural experiences. As a dark-skinned, middle-class, second-generation Ghanaian Black woman, I recognize that there may be aspects of these conversations that I do not fully grasp. Therefore, I must acknowledge and address these gaps to accurately represent the realities of my peers. Through different eras and technological advancements, Black female theorization persists. As explained in Leah Jones' (2024) "Black Women Need a 'Third Place' More Than Anyone", "Black women can often live a life of misunderstanding and loneliness as the experience of Black women is comparable to none" (para. 3). There is a salient need to share and converse about the institutionally embedded and intersectional hardships Black women face. As a result, digital third places have appeared through social media platforms, particularly YouTube

and TikTok, creating new forms of online community where Black women can share their thoughts and experiences. Although users sometimes disagree on particular topics, occasionally causing internal divides, the ability to have these conversations freely is both healing and necessary. Moya Bailey's (2021) concept of digital alchemy informs this analysis of new third places for Black women, highlighting how content creators and consumers engage in transformative work by collaborating to repurpose harmful media representations into tools for empowerment (p.24). This paper focuses on themes commonly addressed by Black content creators and consumers. Additionally, it aims to emphasize the role of media representation and its impact on the experiences of Black women. My analysis begins with an investigation of conversations surrounding Black hair, followed by discussions on the politics of desirability, and concludes by examining the politics surrounding hardships faced by Black female communities. Overall, the main objective of this piece is to show that, in a sense, Black women have become (and potentially always have been) each other's third place, providing one another with the validation, understanding and respect to work through systems of oppression and unlearn white supremacist doctrines.

Chapter One: The Politics of Black Hair

"Every Black girl has a story about her hair. About sitting in between the legs of her mom or her mom's friend, as they braid and tug and brush and tie. About the box full of hair bows and conditioning creams. About the tall walls of the hair supply store, where everything felt possible. Where there were millions upon millions of options for the limited space of her head. I think every Black girl has a story about her hair. About the charged comments, the backhanded compliments. About the looks or the sneers, about the shame. About the desire of something else, something more manageable. Something more acceptable, something that's not her" (Shanspere, 2021, 0:48-1:24).

My research on the history of Black women's hair has inspired me to tell my own hair story. Earlier in this piece, I situated myself as a dark-skinned, middle-class, Ghanaian second-generation Black woman. My relationship with my hair does not differ much from the experiences recounted in this segment. Classified as 4C, otherwise known as the kinkiest curl type, grappling with my hair texture has been turbulent, to say the least. My story begins with a hair relaxer, the earliest memories of which were directly after a chemical straightening, shaking my limp strands in the mirror. At fourteen, my older sister saw imagery of healthy curly hair, and soon we were a part of the natural hair movement. As I waited for my curly hair to grow out of the relaxer, I wondered what my natural hair looked like. To my dismay, it was not as silky or "easy" as the picture that prompted our natural hair journey. Shortly after that, my hair became something to "figure out", requiring constant styling and shaping to be deemed acceptable by standards I didn't even know I had. Attending a PWI exacerbated my preconceived notions, and soon I found myself constantly finding ways to hide my hair, disguised as "protective styling". Like many Black women, I turned to braids with extensions, which soon damaged my hair

beyond repair. Now, I find myself still hiding, using wigs and weaves to create a version of me that I feel comfortable with. As Shanspere writes in the above quote, I find myself constantly searching for something else, something more manageable. Something more acceptable; something that is not quite me.

Introduction

The role of hair in one's life differs from person to person. To some, it merely extends their being or serves as an accessory. However, for certain groups, its significance transcends the mundane, bearing the weight of centuries of scrutiny, oppression, and disparagement. Across the diaspora, people of African descent have experienced discrimination because of the texture of their hair. While Black hair manifests in multiple forms; coarser, tightly coiled hair textures face disproportionate scrutinization. Kinky, undeniably African hair is frequently stigmatized, monitored, and discriminated against, partly due to its perception as differing from mainstream socially acceptable norms. Moreover, hairstyles used to protect Black hair also face prejudice and are often deemed unkempt or unprofessional. Using workplace discrimination as a prime example of the negative perception of Black hair in particular, Henson's (2017) piece titled, "Are My Cornrows Unprofessional", highlights the unique legal struggles Black women face due to implicit biases surrounding their hair in the workplace. The continuous effort required to straighten afro-textured hair "leads to an incredible burden on Black women" as we are "faced with the temporal, financial, and life-threatening costs that result from grooming policies that do not allow for styles that are the healthiest for Black hair" (ibid., p. 537). It is crucial to account for the societal barriers that Black people, particularly Black women, face in different environments. For this reason, I intend to explore workplace discrimination and Black hair bias

in greater detail in an upcoming segment. The escalating negativity surrounding kinkier hair textures has caused ongoing discussion within the Black community, especially on popular platforms like YouTube and TikTok. This chapter investigates the politics of Black hair," tracing the roots of hair discrimination in relation to the current social landscape surrounding textured hair in its diverse manifestations.

Current Conversations (YouTube and TikTok Discourse)

Hair Insecurity, Internalized Texturism, and Type Four Hair Discrimination

YouTuber: Saiuri Dioge

YouTuber Saiuri Dioge's (2023) video titled, "Y'all Don't Like Natural Hair " blatantly calls out Black women for only liking natural hair when it presents in specific ways. Emphasizing the uptick in wig sales and the reliance of many Black women on foreign hair, Dioge calls for a change within the natural hair community. Fellow YouTuber Mayowa's World (2023) mentions this phenomenon in her video, arguing that kinky hair is often only valued when elongated, straightened, blown out, or looser in texture. She maintains that afro-textured, tightly coiled, 4C hair that most fully Black women have is rarely admired or praised in its natural state. Saiuri Dioge presents with shrunken 4C hair, showing that she has embraced her hair in its natural form. It is important to note that Dioge is not against protective styles like wigs, braids, and weaves. However, she critiques the frequent reliance on these temporary styles, as it not only indicates a dependence on foreign hair but also reinforces and perpetuates negative attitudes toward kinky hair. She believes that Black women have become reliant on these hairstyles as a means of evading and concealing their natural hair, which contradicts the self-love narrative promoted by the natural hair community. According to Dioge, 4C hair is looked down upon too

often to be as cherished as people claim. Common rhetoric surrounding Black women with short, kinky hair is largely negative. For example, TI's misogynistic and highly problematic "The Breakup (Skit)" (2006), likens Black women's close-cut hair to "a dirty tennis ball", showcasing a history of damaging beliefs surrounding kinky hair. A more contemporary instance can be found in Black popular culture, with old cornrows labeled as "meek mill braids" due to a meme that states, "meek mill's braids are so old, they look censored". Despite the natural hair community's efforts to assert the inherent beauty of Black women's textured hair, kinky hair is frequently depicted with more conditions and limitations compared to looser curls. Although the natural hair community utilizes better phrasing, often highlighting the patience and care needed to maintain healthy type four hair, members tend to view it more as a challenge or inconvenience rather than synonymous with beauty. In light of this, Dioge argues that Black women do not believe there is beauty in tighter textures due to the idea that kinky hair is only beautiful when it is manipulated. This attitude is pervasive and passed down through generations, perpetuating negative biases about Black hair. She states, "Why do you want to hate natural hair so bad and then get mad when hair discrimination continues…if we want the problem to stop, we have to uplift ourselves" (3:13-3:30). Saiuri Dioge's video received 136K views, 12K likes, and 2,306 comments. Many users agree with her sentiment, sharing their personal experiences with internalized texturism and criticism from other naturals.

Here are some of the comments to Dioge's video in the discussion thread:

Comment #1: "The natural hair community still has a long way to go. I think some of those early YouTubers influenced us a lot more than we realize. From the terms, to the products, to the methods. A lot of what they showed was styling (which takes time) and product dependency (which takes money and is basically trial and error), and not just natural love and basic care. I

have to respect them for showing us we can live without relaxers. But yea, still a lot of work to do" [2.3K likes] (KrissesSZN, 2023).

The number and length of comments reflect the video's high levels of engagement. @KrissesSZN received 2.3K likes and 19 comments, some of which garnered likes of their own. Discourse about hair emerges in these comments and their replies, as some users agree and disagree with her statement. Saiuri herself commented to show her agreement with this user's opinion, while others added even more nuance to the topic by sharing counterarguments. For example, @Appleboo222 states:

I disagree, this isn't the natural hair movement's fault. Makeup and hair creators try a bunch of products because that's how they make money! I've been natural since 2012 and those influencers helped me and gave me options they didn't force me to do twist outs they just made me know it's a style I could try 😔 edit: we consume content and make our own decisions. It's not the law, we can't put that much blame on content creators when we have brains and the ability to do what works for us [56 likes] (@Appleboo222, 2023).

Others counter the original creator's viewpoints, stressing the significance of allowing natural hair to manifest in whatever manner the wearer finds most comfortable. @kendras.9772 highlights hair health and comfort as paramount for Black women.

Being natural doesn't mean it's fine to forgo moisture, style, or care for your natural hair. Waking up and going out with dry, ❤️ brittle, or hair that it's obvious you did nothing to is not anyone's fault but the individual. Everyone doesn't have the wake up and go luxury. Some require some TLC and that's okay too. The movement is to be about embracing your healthy natural. Hair that appears unhealthy is generally unappealing. Regardless of your choice of

style.Stop shaming people for how they choose to be natural when you know how it feels to be

judged [30 likes] (kendras.9772, 2023).

Comment #2: *"Natural hair isn't hard to take care of or style when you're not forcing it to be*

something it isn't" [3K likes] (leena5875, 2023).

This short comment received even more engagement than the last. With 3.1K likes and 70

comments, @leena5875 created a new space for conversation, discourse, and in this case, hair

tips.@luckygirl0303 comments:

Yes. I wash and grease my hair twice a week. And it's healthy. That's all I do. And I only style

it when I go out. Styling takes 5 minutes because I mostly wear an Afro puff 😂 *I just brush*

my hair up and go. I don't even do edges. (People who don't do edges are so valid 💖✨*) And*

surprisingly wash day only takes 5- 6 minutes. [56 likes]

The consensus from this comment thread seems to be that Black hair should be treated in ways

most natural to it rather than forcing it to be something it is not. This idea of "working with one's

hair and not against it" is recurring as comments suggest hairstyles that embrace kinky textures

rather than alter them. This comment exchange elucidates this point:

@Daydreamerr13: Afro hair requires more maintenance, and that's okay to admit that it is

hard to take care of sometimes. I don't think there is anything wrong with admitting that. [71

likes].

@stanmomo9587: (replies to @Daydreamerr13) That's not what they're saying. So many BW who complain abt their hair not "doing what it needs to do" are almost ALWAYS trying to put it into hairstyles that are NOT made for our hair texture. For example, sleek buns/ponytails. Putting so many layers of gel on the hair, then brushing the hair back aggressively can mess with our hair. Things like sleek buns/ponytails are made for looser hair textures and it's also okay to admit that. [65 likes]

Comment #3: "Ugh!! The number of black female coworkers who were so concerned with my natural hair was unreal. I was told my hair looks like it needs a comb pulled through it, I should straighten it, nappy and constantly asking if they could do my hair for me. I honestly think it stems from self-hatred. Some people dont like to see you comfortable in your natural state because theyre not comfortable in theirs' ' [3.6K likes] (Ambi1021, 2023).

Saiuri's video has not only ignited engagement and discourse but also fostered specific conversations within this larger dialogue through comments and replies. This showcases the transformative nature of Black women's self-broadcasting and digital alchemy by offering community members opportunities to reflect, unlearn, and support each other on their journey toward self-love and acceptance.

Racial Identity, Texturism, and Erasure

YouTuber: Mayowa's World

YouTuber "Mayowa's World" (2023) takes on a controversial conversation surrounding Black hair and identity politics. "When Being Biracial Becomes the Representation of Black

Hair: Texturism and Erasure" calls for a separation between Black and biracial identities, particularly in the context of texturism (the bias toward more Eurocentric hair textures). In response to former actress Tia Mowry's promotional video for her upcoming haircare line, Mayowa notes the difference in social attitudes towards looser 2A-3C hair textures compared to kinkier 4A-4C curl patterns. Mowry's video features her "stripped down", in a black bodysuit with curly hair cut just above her shoulders. The voiceover recording and caption state, "Let Black hair be Black hair. I didn't grow up with enough representation of real Black hair in the media. I want to be that representation for you. Your hair is amazing just the way it is, and you should be proud like I am" (4ubyTia, 2023). At first glance, "4ubyTia" appears unproblematic and potentially inspiring. However, a deeper understanding of the historical context of Black hair politics, media representation, colorism, and texturism reveals that this advertisement falls short of delivering the depth and nuance it aims to achieve. Mayowa argues that due to Tia Mowry's identity as a biracial woman, the phrase "real Black hair" automatically falls short. While biracial people have curly hair, it is typically looser in texture than that of people who identify as fully Black. Mayowa highlights that this observation is not intended as a form of erasure but as a necessary specification to avoid conflating Black identities and experiences. The phrase, "Black people come in all shades," allows for hierarchies within the race, as white supremacy inevitably upholds proximity to whiteness as paramount. Therefore, those who have access to biological whiteness enjoy certain privileges that visibly Black individuals do not.

This notion holds particular significance in mass media portrayals, where individuals of mixed-race or biracial backgrounds receive more opportunities to represent Black identities. Mayowa cites examples of book-to-film adaptations in which the Black protagonist is cast as a more palatable form of Blackness. Some examples include, "The Hate You Give" (2018), "Nina"

(2016), and "The Sun is Also a Star" (2019), each film adaptation calls for a Black female lead but is subsequently portrayed by biracial actresses, i.e., Amandla Stenberg, Zoe Saldana, and Yara Shahidi, respectively. Additionally, Tia Mowry laments a lack of representation of "real Black hair" in the media. However, looser curly hair textures like hers were almost exclusively showcased as the only form of Black hair representation. Mayowa argues that this is one of the most devastating effects of hierarchies within racial groups as it dictates which manifestation of Blackness receives the most visibility due to perceived desirability. In contrast, kinky hair receives little media representation, Mayowa notes that this is due to the undeniable Blackness associated with tightly coiled afro textures, otherwise known as 4B and 4C hair. She states, "Meanwhile people who actually have 4C hair are still hiding our hair, are still scared to wear our hair out, are still shamed for having real Black hair. Real Black hair is hair that couldn't be any other texture… I've seen other ethnicities share a similar texture to Tia's… but have I ever seen anyone who is not Black share a similar hair texture to mine? Never. This is real Black hair" (12:15-12:45). Mayowa's take on texturism is particularly controversial as it calls for a separation between biraciality and Blackness rather than an amalgamation of a singular Black identity. In terms of Black hair politics, texturism and the representation of Blackness in the media, Mayowa's theory has credibility as acceptance of Black hair must include kinkier afro textures. Without the widespread representation of undeniably Black hair, Black men and women will continue to face scrutiny in other aspects of society. Therefore, the liberation of tightly coiled Black hair is crucial for Black liberation and true social acceptance. Mayoma's video received 216K views, 13K likes, and 4,266 comments. As with many Black commentary videos, political discourse in the comments section is inevitable. Many agree with Mayoma's sentiment, the comments read as follows:

Comment #1: "Viola Davis requiring her natural hair be shown on her show How to Get Away with murder was groundbreaking and allowed me to see my hair texture on tv. I am grateful to her" [2.5k likes] (@magzjay2548, 2023).

Comment #2: "As someone who is from South Africa, instantly understood the concept of Texturism when you said it without even googling it. During Apartheid they had the "Pencil Hair Test" where they'd use a pencil to run through your hair, if it passed through one's hair easily, you were other considered white or colored which I know is a slur in the USA, but it is socially acceptable in South Africa and is categorized as a race. Just by one's texture of their hair, their whole life was determined, access to schools, higher education, location, healthcare, etc. So yes conversations around black hair are political and do matter" [1.3k likes] (@molebohengmaphepha80, 2023).

Comment #3: "Real black hair is hair that couldn't be any other texture." The audacity of me not realizing this until you said it. Only other black women have hair like me. Right, you're so right
🥰
" [1.6k likes] (@puppywifey, 2023).

YouTuber: Toni Bryanne TV

Toni Bryanne's take on the topic of Black hair textures is more forgiving, as she highlights the historical context and social climate that created internalized texturism. Beginning with historical anti-Black rhetoric, Bryanne defines the word "nappy" which was used as a

derogatory term to devalue textured hair. Afro-textured hair often faced criticism as it is "one of the most unmistakable features to define whether someone is Black or non-Black" (1:20-1:25). However, in the Black community, the word "nappy" still holds prevalence, as even Black people still use the term to dehumanize or insult other Black people. The question is, what is considered "nappy" hair? The term typically relates to type four hair, which presents as more coily than curly. Bryanne states, "Most Black women have 4A, 4B, and 4C hair, the latter being the kinkiest and most fragile" (3:45-3:52). Due to the negative biases and attitudes surrounding kinky hair, this particular hair texture only receives praise, when it matches conventional standards of beauty. Length, thickness, density, and texture dictate when type four hair is considered beautiful by the Black community's standards. Meanwhile, shorter, thinner, kinkier textures are deemed undesirable and unmanageable. This inevitably leads to hair discrimination within the Black community. Toni Bryanne cites examples of hairstylists refusing to do 4C hair, a lack of type four hair representation in Black media, and hair insecurity amongst women with these hair textures. Ultimately, due to the predominance of mixed-race women with looser hair textures representing the natural hair movement and kinky hair being accepted only under specific conditions, it is understandable why many Black women do not always feel comfortable embracing their natural hair. Bryanne approaches this aspect with care, stating that Black women should feel liberated to do whatever they want with their hair without feeling pressure from either side. However, it is imperative that we do not overlook caring for our hair in the process. She explains that associating Black women with self-hatred is equally harmful, as "hair is a personal choice that everyone has the right to make… we should be allowed to do so without the fear of being judged or receiving negative feedback regardless of the many biases held against our mane" (15:11-15:22). Bryanne (2022) concludes the video with encouraging words, stating,

"please treat your hair and wear it like the crown that it is, and I promise you, you will feel just as royal as you really are whether you wear your hair natural, whether you wear a wig, or whether you wear a weave, rock it, love it, be it, but never forget where you came from" (15:22-15:37).

TikTok Discourse: The Legacy of "Lipglosssss"

Popular Black TikTok creator "Lipglosssss", was active on the platform from approximately 2020 to 2022. Known for posting videos discussing the Black female experience, Lipglosssss was inspirational for Black girls and women due to her wisdom and unapologetically radical opinions. In 2022, Lipglosssss posted a video explaining her divestment away from straightening and manipulating her 4c hair. Presenting on screen with her hair in its most natural, unaltered state, Lipglosssss informed viewers that her hair is "already done". She condemns the idea that Black women with afro-textured kinky hair need to "do" their hair to gain acceptance in society. Lipglosssss famously states, "This is just how the hair looks. That's what I don't want to run from anymore… I want to learn to wear it completely shrunk, I don't want to stretch it. My hair is not meant to be long and will never be long. And its time society came to terms with that. How are you going to tell me the way I was born is ugly? Stop f****king playing with me. It's hard to do this, but I'm just going to try." (2022). Her powerful words sparked a debate within the comments, with many Black users advising her to change or slick her hair. It was not long before Lipglosssss began to receive hate for her appearance due to the internalized racism, texturism, and respectability politics that still influence some Black users. The negative comments and constant debates eventually caused her to leave TikTok, delete all her posts, and leave only a final farewell video. It was not until after she quit TikTok, that users began to see her value. Her insights into white society, Blackness, and social politics resonated precisely with

what the community needed to hear. Presently, her post advocating for embracing her natural

hair has amassed over 400 reposts, with Black women unapologetically showcasing their short

and kinky hair without manipulation. Each post has gained over 100k likes as more and more

Black women follow suit. Despite the original post being met with severe hostility and

expressions of anti-Black sentiment from Black men specifically, the impact of Lipglosssss'

bravery to accept her hair texture has inspired Black women on TikTok. The comments, now

mostly encouraging, feature Black women uplifting one another and providing the community

with the representation they did not get to see. Marcus Garvey (1921) once said, "Take the kinks

out of your mind, not your hair"; I argue that as Black women create third spaces of self-

acceptance and representation, we are one step closer to doing exactly that.

The Roots of Black Hair Discrimination

The belief that Black hair needs to be tamed can be traced back to a long history of

subjugation, dehumanization, and discrimination. Beginning with chattel slavery, historians

believe that white slave masters shaved off the hair of enslaved Africans in order to prepare them

for the unsanitary conditions of slave ships along with "issues related to lice contracted from the

cramped, filthy, and inhumane quarters" (Hopkins-Laboy, 2021, para.1). However, it is believed

that the true purpose was to strip them of any cultural identity or tribal heritage connected to

their traditional hairstyles. Nabugodi (2022) elucidates this point, stating, "The denigration of

African hair was a significant step in an individual's transformation from person to chattel, or

from human to scientific specimen" (79). Across the globe, hair holds significant meaning both

culturally and individually. Julie Jacobs (2021) writes for LovePost, "hairstyles have symbolized

one's age, tribal affiliations, ethnicity, religion, social status, marital status and more, and have

allowed ethnic and cultural groups to define and even reclaim their identities" (para. 1). Jacobs

explores into the symbolic meaning of traditional hairstyles across cultures. For example, the

Himba tribe of Namibia use their locs to represent the essence of life through its rich colors,

protective qualities, and aesthetic value. Cornrows symbolize African American strength,

ingenuity and resilience as the curved braids represented escape maps and pathways to freedom

(2021, para. 4-5). Nabugodi (2022) highlights this further by outlining the importance of hair in a

European context, as "much European hair from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has

survived in the form of keepsakes and mourning jewelry," representing its sentimental value

(87). However, African hair did not receive the same treatment as the transatlantic slave trade

continued; the demonization of Black hair only increased. As a way to further devalue

Blackness, African hair was commonly referred to as wool to separate it from human hair

entirely (ibid.). To reiterate, Black hair wasn't merely compared to wool; it was explicitly

designated as such. This classification allowed slave masters not only to delineate whiteness

from Blackness but also distinguish people of African descent from humanity entirely, as "the

unstated implication is, of course, that if Africans belong to a woolly sheep-like species, it is

morally justifiable to use them like cattle" (Nabugodi, 2022, p. 80). According to Mbilishaka and

Hudlin (2023), this was the catalyst for the complex history of devaluing Black hair:

> It was on the plantations of American chattel slavery that Black people began to cope with White supremacy through toxic hair care practices… innovation of the enslaved turned axle grease into hair dyes and relaxers, grooming tools for sheep into hair detanglers, various fatty demi-solids to hair moisturizers and combinations of wheats and oils to cleanse the hair. Hair practices of applying high heat and chemical concoctions continued after legal slavery. With income and status, Black people would chemically alter the natural texture of their hair to experience more access to education, employment, housing, and even romantic relationships (p. 719).

Additionally, enslaved Black women faced unique forms of hair discrimination, as their hair

caught the attention of white men, resulting in the implementation of laws forcing them to wear

head coverings in public spaces (Hopkins-Laboy, 2021). Not only was Black hair treated as inhuman, but it was also perceived as innately provocative, dangerous, and unsightly. Thus, began the long and tangled history of devaluing Black hair and the reinforcement of negative connotations. From then on, African hair textures became synonymous with messiness, uncleanness, and otherness, negatively impacting the self-perceptions of those within the Black community.

Black Hair and Respectability Politics

The expression "You should really do something with that hair" resonates widely within Black communities and households. The policing of Black hair spans from childhood to maturity, extending beyond interactions with white society. Like all manifestations of racism, hair discrimination infiltrates various aspects of Black life, permeating not only the homes but also the psyche of Black individuals. Michelle Smith's article "Affect and Respectability Politics" (2014) describes respectability politics as "the idea that marginalized classes will receive their share of political influence and social standing not because democratic values and law require it but because they demonstrate their compatibility with the 'mainstream' or non-marginalized class" (para.3). The conventional wisdom that "propriety breeds respect", is a hallmark of respectability ideals. Smith (2014) goes on to cite frequently employed warnings enforced by Black elites and seniors. She states,

Have you been discriminated against in the job market? Take off that hoodie and pull up your sagging pants! Have the police thrown you against a wall again to search your pockets? Don't stand on the street looking like you're up to no good! Did your unarmed son/daughter/husband/wife/best friend/cousin die after the police applied the chokehold too vigorously? Cooler heads will prevail (para.1).

These beliefs can be traced back to the "Negro Problem" of the post-emancipation civil rights movement, as African intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington theorized potential approaches for Black integration into society. Similar in their desire for civil rights but differing in their approaches, these two activists put forth strategies that influenced the political climates of the time. While one encouraged hard work and economic self-reliance, the other pushed for more demanding methods, some of which teetered toward concepts of respectability (Calista, 1964, p. 245). Du Bois' theory of "The Talented Tenth", originally coined by white Baptist minister Henry Lyman Morehouse, asserts that only the elite can make lasting and meaningful change in any community, advocating for a select few of the "best" and most educated African Americans to pave the way for the rest of the Black community (1903, p. 33). However, it is understood that the concept of a "Talented Tenth" somewhat insinuates that there is an untalented ninetieth or the "worst" of the race. As stated by Morehouse (1896), "The tenth man, with superior natural endowments, symmetrically trained and highly developed, may become a mightier influence, a great inspiration to others than all the other nine, or nine times nine like them" (p. 182). As Du Bois' theory takes inspiration from these sentiments, it threatens, knowingly or unknowingly, to push white supremacist ideologies by informing which characteristics separate a "talented" Black individual from an "untalented" one. The idea of a trained and highly educated group primed to advance the Black race by setting an example for others to follow runs the risk of becoming separatist, creating a superior versus inferior group dynamic. These beliefs influence respectability politics as the ideology of what constitutes "proper behavior" amongst Blacks perpetuates internalized racism along with harmful associations of what comprises "improper" Blackness. For example, Racquel Gates' *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (2018), references the Black community's

negative pushback towards Flavour Flav due to his representation of Blackness perceived as incongruent with Obama's presidential campaign. Citing "a Du Boisian double consciousness" that assumes one Black person's behaviour threatens to "be perceived by whites as indicative of all Blacks", creates a dichotomy of "good Black people" versus "n*ggas" or, as Gates' calls it the "Flavor Flavs" versus the "Obamas" (2018, p. 3). The idea that one bad apple spoils the bunch fuels a positive and negative dynamic that shifts the blame away from white supremacist indoctrinations for creating discriminatory institutions as well as barriers to entry and places it on its victims. According to Harris (2014), "rules devised by Black elites, with the backing of the state and the support of ordinary Blacks who believe in their efficacy— commands Blacks left behind in post–civil rights America to "lift up thyself" (p. 33). Rather than complain about the powers that be, the politics of respectability urge Black people to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of good treatment. The expectation, often enforced by fellow Blacks, is to assimilate and convert to behaviors commonly associated with whiteness. However, it fails to acknowledge the overarching systemic implications that homogenize all Black people, regardless of "good" behavior and presentation. Harris cites Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter's 2011 speech as a "respectability talk", an example of Black elites browbeating Black youths into submission. In the aftermath of a flash mob led by Black teens, Nutter addressed this behavior with some choice words. Essentially berating those involved and labelling them "a shame on the Black race". Quoting Nutter, Harris writes:

> If you want all of us—Black, white, or any other color—to respect you if you want us to look at you in a different way – then stop acting like idiots and fools, out in the streets of the city of Philadelphia. "And another thing," the mayor thundered, "take those doggone hoodies down, especially in the summer." "Pull your pants up," he said as members of the congregation chimed in to help finish his thoughts, "and buy a belt, because no one wants to see your underwear or the crack of your butt (p. 35).

Nevertheless, respectability politics extends beyond merely behavioral considerations. The desire to assimilate and gain acceptance in white spaces influences physical representations as well. While other bodily traits are immovable, such as traditional Black features and skin tones, hair can be manipulated to any desired form. As a result, hair has become a substantial talking point in discussions on respectability. Straighter and sleeker styles have become synonymous with whiteness and propriety and, therefore, are considered ideal for professional environments. On the contrary, Black hair in its most natural state, frequently deviates from this conventional presentation. Additionally, popular Black hairstyles that serve as a form of self-expression and/or hair protection, often emulate the natural curl patterns and textures of Black hair, making them unacceptable for white society. Consequently, curly and kinky hair textures have become stigmatized as hindrances to Black assimilation and elevation, hence statements including but not limited to, "You ought to do something with that hair". However, it is important to note that some Black folks choose to chemically alter, straighten, or cover their hair for other reasons. One main factor is convenience, as low-manipulation hairstyles like weaves and wigs keep the hair protected underneath and require little to no daily maintenance. Likewise, the desire to chemically alter or straighten natural hair can also reflect convenience and lifestyle considerations, as some individuals may lack the time or patience required to regularly tend to their hair. Although the styling of Black hair isn't always influenced by respectability politics, the notion that Black hair, in its natural form, is deemed unsuitable for certain occasions stems from deeply ingrained white supremacist ideologies.

Texturism and Internalized Racism

As mentioned previously, respectability politics hinges on perceived propriety as a means to align more with white society and the underlying belief that proximity to Blackness is inherently negative. Traditional "Black" features, darker skin, and kinkier hair textures all symbolize African roots and heritage, naturally separating Black individuals from whiteness. White supremacy maintains the belief that whiteness is superior to all races, creating a distinct form of self-hatred for those who have been racially subjugated. These ideas transcend behaviour and influence which physical features are considered proper, desirable, and more importantly, socially acceptable. In the context of Black hair, this manifests in a preference for hair that aligns more closely with straighter textures rather than those typical of traditional African hair types. Shepherd (2018) describes texture discrimination or 'texturism' as "the prejudicial or preferential treatment of people with afro-textured hair based solely on the texture of their curls" (p. 3). Once again, rooted in chattel slavery, "the miscegenation that occurred during this time led to both a skin shade and hair texture hierarchy in the Black community, with "good hair" described as being straighter, softer and lacking any kink" (ibid., p. 2). Shepherd (2018) elucidates this point by stating, "Because society's hegemonic beauty ideals do not represent African features, African American women are more likely to experience self-hate and feelings of inadequacy, as well as suffer from feelings of anger, pain or confusion towards their skin color or hair texture. The internalization of these beauty ideals can not only affect the individual but can also lead to a multigenerational culture of self-hatred" (p. 4-5). Self-hating rhetoric is noticeable in many aspects of Black and African culture, from language to beauty and social expectations. Dubbed "racism's most insidious coincidence", David et al. (2019), defines internalized racism as "racism that exists and operates at the internalized level" (p. 1060). However, researchers argue

that "internalized racism is much more" than self-blame and criticism. Citing Williams and Williams-Morris, (2000) Speight (2007) refers to internalized racism as "the acceptance, by marginalized racial populations, of the negative societal beliefs and stereotypes about themselves" (p. 129). In this case, it is the acceptance of the belief that tightly coiled, afro-textured, Black hair, in its most natural state, is deviant and unsightly. As a result, mixed-race members of the Black community received preferential treatment due to their looser, more European-seeming hair textures. Those with tighter curls saw quite the opposite, as kinky hair became synonymous with words like "unkempt", "nappy", "messy," and "unprofessional". Naturally, this fuelled harmful ideologies within the Black community, as looser textures became synonymous with beauty, desirability, and propriety. Therefore, Black people who fit into these standards received social benefits, a phenomenon that persists to this day, manifesting in the previously mentioned medium of texturism, colorism, and featurism. It should be noted that looser textured hair and lighter skin are often conflated with femininity, an association that emasculates lighter-skinned men and effeminizes lighter-skinned women. For lighter-skinned men, this often results in erasure and mockery, as shown through "funny light-skin memes" circulating on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok that poke fun at their looks and overall demeanour as unaligned with stereotypical ideas of Black masculinity. In contrast, darker skin becomes masculinized, impacting the social treatment of both men and women with deeper complexions, which the following chapter, "The Politics of Desirability" will discuss in greater detail.

The Afro Hair Movement vs. The Natural Hair Movement

Black people have been reclaiming their hair for decades, most notably in the 1960s and mid-2010s. However, while one effort celebrated Black pride and kinky hair, the other still

struggles to part from the Eurocentric beauty ideals that deem looser textures superior. The question is, what happened between these two movements that transformed the dominant attitude towards kinky hair in the Black community? Beginning with the former, the Afro Hair Movement of the 60s and mid-70s, was both a political statement and a show of self-acceptance during the fight for civil rights. The afro became a symbol of Black pride, "seen as a way to reject Eurocentric beauty standards that dominated American culture for centuries and celebrate Black identity and culture" (Black Wall Street Media, 2024, para.4). The normalization of afro hair "was a rejection of the assimilationist approach to civil rights, which advocated for Black Americans to assimilate into mainstream American culture by conforming to white beauty standards" (ibid., para.6). During this era, the outright rejection of dominant Eurocentric beauty standards and social structures sparked a reframing of African American values. As a result, Black hair in its natural state, particularly the afro, "was widely adopted and provided an example of 'culturally contextualized everyday resistance'" (ibid., p. 107). Garrin & Marcketti's (2017) study provides more insight into "how African American women created and negotiated their collective identity through hair choices during and in reaction to the Black Pride and Power Movement time period" (pg. 105). Their study, which includes interviews with Black women who were young adults during this time, showcases the influence Black celebrities and activists had on popular Black culture, with participants citing Angela Davis as an inspiration for embracing afro hairstyles along with the "Black is Beautiful" sentiment. However, the outcomes of these influences varied from symbolizing solidarity to mere trendification. Byrd and Tharps' *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (2014) explains how Black activists advocated for the afro to push toward unity, liberation, and separation from whiteness.

Meanwhile, Black celebrities popularized afro hair as a fashion statement in Black popular culture, resulting in the creation of a mainstream trend amongst Black communities (p. 47). The trendification of the movement, coupled with the dissolving of the Black Panther Party, and the subsequent incarceration and death of many prominent Black figures of the time resulted in a winding down of the Black Power movement. Additionally, according to Black Wall Street Media (2024), Black Americans experienced a cultural change brought on by external factors as "a conservative political shift exacerbated the situation by promoting "a narrative of individualism and consumerism that discouraged collective action and political activism… As a result, the Afro Hair Movement, which was rooted in a sense of community and solidarity, lost its appeal to many Black people who were influenced by the conservative zeitgeist of the era" (ibid., para. 20). Put simply by Byrd and Tharps' (2014), after the mid-70s, "many brothers and sisters of the revolution had to get a job", forcing them to conform to the very systems they once fought against in order to climb the economic ladder (p. 50). Citing the popularization of the hot comb in the early 1900s, Cheryl Thompson (2016) discusses the pre-civil rights lean towards assimilation and straight hair. Thompson writes, "When Black women straightened their hair during C.J. Walker's time, it was because they felt they had no choice. "It was the difference between whether you ate or you didn't," says Ruth. "When a Black woman goes to apply for a job (today) and she doesn't get that job because her hair is natural you need to take a step back and say something serious is going on here," she adds (p. 3). Could it be that a similar phenomenon occurred almost a century later? According to Byrd and Tharps', workplace discrimination and economic divides fuelled the decline of afro hairstyling (2014, p. 50). To add, the continued demonization of the movement resulted in "the dominant white majority stigmatizing the afro as militant, unkempt and the symbol of the Black Panthers" (Thomas, 2013,

p. 3). Soon, Black hair was relegated to an uncomfortable reminder of political statements opposing hegemonic ideals of acceptable hair, "and many people still hold these meanings as true today" (ibid.). The 90s saw a similar pattern of assimilation with many Black celebrities embracing looser hair textures and extensions. In her analysis of Chris Rock's documentary "Good Hair", Rhonda Jeffries (2014) highlights interviews featuring well-known 1990s/2000s actresses Nia Long and Raven-Symoné. Long gained fame from her role in the iconic Black sitcom "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990)," while Raven-Symoné starred in "The Cosby Show" (1984) as well as Disney's "That's So Raven" (2003). Both actresses expressed comparable reasons for favoring straighter hairstyles. Jeffries writes, "Raven Symoné, former Disney actress, suggested this explanation for why Black women feel such great need to adjust their hair to fit a White norm-referenced standard, "I think you're trying to blend in. I think you're trying to make everybody comfortable and relaxed so they're not like, 'Oh my God, what is that'" (2014, p. 164). Nia Long's response is similar, as she states, "There's always this sort of pressure within the Black community that if you have good hair, you're prettier or better than the brown skin girl that wears the Afro or the dreads or the natural hairstyle" (ibid., p. 164). The media played a pivotal role in cementing this belief as Black media began making its way into the mainstream. This continued into the 2010s, as Black female hair evolved into a signifier of cultural hegemony, illustrating its influence in media texts and social justice movements. An example of this cultural hegemony can be found within the natural hair movement, teetering the line between Black empowerment and internalized oppression. As a means to "embrace their natural hair texture…many Black women were choosing to wear their hair in its most natural state as a process of self-expression, self-definition, and rejection of white beauty standards' (Jeffries, 2014, p. 3). This led to the formation of the natural hair community, providing a space

for Black women to gather, exchange hair care advice, and support each other by sharing their personal experiences in the journey towards embracing their natural hair. However, the natural hair community has fallen victim to both texturism and internalized racism, as "women with tightly coiled hair are not equally represented; rather, women with curly or wavy hair are the face of the movement" (Shepherd, 2018, p. 3). Described as "colorism in the natural hair community", similar to how lighter-skinned Black women, have enjoyed more representation in mainstream media as the more acceptable face of Black female beauty, looser textured curls are hailed as the ideal version of natural hair, receiving disproportionate praise. Critical mixed-race studies explain how gender changes the treatment of multi and bi-racial communities, as mixed-race Black women specifically are feminized due to their (often) looser textures while mixed-race men are emasculated because of it. This refers back to the masculinization and devaluation of Blackness, due to its historical separation from European-White beauty standards (Garrin & Marcketti, 2018, p. 106). Reiterating the intersections of race and gender on desirability politics and Black hair, Patricia Hill Collins writes "Black men's blackness penalizes them. But because they are not women, valuations of their self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness. In contrast, part of the objectification of all women lies in evaluating how they look" (p. 89). As stated previously, the following chapter will delve more into concepts of race and desirability. The lack of representation for tighter curls is indicative of a self-perpetuating cycle of oppression brought on by white supremacy and internalized racism. For Black women specifically, "the prevalence of this texture discrimination demonstrates that the journey of going natural and having naturally textured hair has been interrupted by societal, Eurocentric beauty ideals" as media imagery centering looser textures adversely affects Black women's perceptions of beautiful natural hair. (p. 4). Consequently, the same deeply ingrained white supremacist

ideologies that fuel respectability politics are responsible for what classifies "good hair" and "bad hair" in the Black community, along with the perpetuation of self-devaluation amongst those with kinkier hair textures.

The Rise of Hair Relaxers

Similar to texturism and internalized racism, the widespread use of hair relaxers can be attributed to respectability politics, European beauty standards, and the influence of white supremacist ideology. Hair discrimination originated as early as chattel slavery, contributing to the major shift in attitudes towards Black hair. Mbilishaka & Hudlin (2023) write, "It was on the plantations of American chattel slavery that Black people began to cope with White supremacy through toxic hair care practices. Innovation of the enslaved turned axle grease into hair dyes and relaxers, grooming tools for sheep into hair detanglers, various fatty demi-solids to hair moisturizers and combinations of wheats and oils to cleanse the hair" (p. 719). Control over Black hair persisted as "hair practices of applying high heat and chemical concoctions continued after legal slavery" (ibid., p. 720). White supremacist ideologies placed afro textures at the bottom of a hair hierarchy and permeated these ideas into Black minds through media imagery (Thomas, 2023, p. 5). Attempts to embrace kinky hair through Black Power Movements were conflated with deviance and rebellion, therefore only certain manifestations of Blackness were accepted. The demonization of the Black Panther Party solidified these fears. In Kehinde Andrews' (2014) analysis of radical Black activism, they explain that the Black Panthers "were seen as dangerous and unacceptable to the state because of their refusal to bow to the power system" (p. 28). Rooted in fear of Black uprising, the American government set out to destroy the Panthers, in an effort to maintain mainstream authority and keep Black people subordinate

(ibid., p. 28). As a result, hairstyles that resembled that of the white majority became most favorable. The quote attributed to American writer and comedian Paul Mooney – "When your hair is nappy, white people are not happy, when your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed" is particularly relevant here, with boxed relaxers providing Black Americans with an easy, semi-permanent solution to this hair problem. Solidifying the concept of hair hegemony through media representation played a significant role in signaling which hairstyles are acceptable and which are not. Quoting Hebdidge's Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), Thomas explains that "hegemony exists when the dominant majority is successful in shaping how something is perceived or understood" (2013, p. 3). By these metrics, bad hair is that which is political, rebellious, big, kinky, and hard to manage. With these beliefs repeatedly shown in Black and white media alike, hair straightening became crucial for gaining acceptance in white society. This need for access to white spaces fuelled the uptick in hair straightening methods. As explained by LaFlora (2023), "It wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that hair relaxers began to gain widespread popularity among African American communities. This was due in large part to the post-Civil Rights era and the desire among African Americans to blend into mainstream society. Straightening one's hair was seen as a way to "look more presentable" and to conform to the Eurocentric beauty standards that were prevalent at the time" (para. 5). As a result, many African Americans turned to different forms of hair straighteners, particularly hot combs and chemical relaxers. Created by Garrett Agustus Morgan in 1909, the "G.A. Morgan Hair Refiner" used sodium hydroxide and guanidine carbonate to chemically "break down the bonds that give hair its natural texture, resulting in straighter hair" (LaFlora 2023, para. 4). Morgan's invention provided Black folks with a way to permanently straighten their naturally curly hair, making it both easier to manage and easier to manipulate into styles preferred by the white majority. This

desire for and expectation of straight hair persisted throughout the 1990s and 2010s, along with that, hair straightening tools only become more and more accessible. Cheaper, at-home chemical hair relaxers emerged, eliminating the need for salon visits and professional hair care. To make matters worse, the media continued cementing the idea that straight hair was synonymous with beauty, as "these practices of hair straightening were enforced by images in print magazines, movies, and television produced by whites and Blacks alike" (Mbilishaka & Hudlin, 2023, p. 720). For Black women in particular, this propaganda fuelled the chemical relaxer craze. In a study that investigates the psychological effects of these practices, Mbilishaka & Hudlin (2023) reveal that "chemical hair straightening has become a statistical norm for Black girls and women, with over 70% altering the texture of their hair at some point in their lifetimes" (p. 718). Not only are these practices extremely common amongst Black women, they are often introduced at an early age. According to Abrams', "Black women accounted for the greatest population of people who had started using relaxers at age 10 or younger. More than 50% of the Black participants in the study also had used hair relaxers before they reached age 10" (para. 28). These statistics showcase the deep-rooted presence of the concept of "good hair" within Black communities, so much so that 'kiddie perms' became as popular as adult relaxers. Marketed as 'safer' for children's use, studies reveal that kiddie perms contain ingredients similar to that of adult relaxers, including but not limited to "calcium hydroxide, guanidine, lithium, and potassium hydroxide, all of which are also active ingredients in toilet cleaners, drain cleaners, and bleach" (p. 718). New research has discovered a link between relaxers and various health concerns in Black women, further proving the inescapable dangers of chemical hair straightening. Bertrand et al.'s (2023) Hair Relaxer Use and Risk of Uterine Cancer in The Black Women's Health Study" along with Wise et al.'s (2012) earlier "Hair Relaxer Use and Risk of Uterine

Leiomyomata in African American Women" have greatly contributed to raising awareness on this growing side effect. Despite the inevitable hair damage and the dangers associated with chemical relaxers, many Black women have chosen to continue using these products. For some, the manageability and ease that relaxers provide are more important than the potential health risks. Douglas (2022) writes, "Whether it's personal preference, tradition, or response to external pressure to have straight hair, relaxers are a habit many Black women just won't, or can't, quit" (para.4). However, for many other Black women, straight hair is simply not worth it. This sentiment led to the popularity of the aforementioned natural hair movement. Nonetheless, hair discrimination exists even in spaces dedicated to empowerment. Shepherd (2018) discusses the ways in which the preference for looser textured curly hair shows another form of white supremacist programming. While it is true that the natural hair movement has caused more Black women to embrace their afro textures leading "to an increased demand in hair care products for natural hair and a 34% decrease in the sale of relaxers since 2014" (Sidibe, 2015). Despite this effort towards rejecting the Eurocentric beauty standard as straight hair is better, there is still preferential treatment given to one type of curl over another (Shepherd 2018, p. 12). Along with a preference for sleeker, less texturized hairstyles currently popularized on Instagram and TikTok. The upcoming segments will explore ongoing discussions regarding Black hair, the widespread practice of hair manipulation within the Black community, and the disproportionate effects of hair politics on Black women.

Impacts & Race-Based Hair Discrimination

A quick Google search reveals the difference in social perceptions between curly and straight hair. When researching synonyms for straight hair, words like "smooth", "sleek", "silky"

and "glossy" appear. Meanwhile, other words for kinky and curly hair typically include: "frizzy", "nappy", "messy", and "coarse". This reveals a negative societal attitude towards Afro-hair textures. These biases arise in mass media portrayals, where characters with curly hair are often depicted as unkempt, reckless, or even chaotic. Some examples include Mia Thermopolis in *The Princess Diaries* (2001), Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and The City* (1998), and Rue Bennett in *Euphoria* (2019). In contrast, characters with straight hair tend to exhibit a wider range of personalities or are presented as prim, proper, clean, and successful. For example, Charlotte York in *Sex and the City* (1998), Cher Horowitz in *Clueless* (1995), and Monica Geller in *Friends* (1994). I have purposely provided examples of majority white actresses to showcase not only the dearth of monoracially Black female protagonists in films with textured hair but also to indicate the negative connotations of curly hair in white media. Cheryl Thompson's article "Black Women and Identity: What's Hair Got to Do with It" (2008) provides a nuanced understanding of the turbulent relationship many Black women have with their hair, particularly resulting from media representation or lack thereof. She writes:

> In the media, many of the black women who are glorified for their beauty tend to be women who also have long, wavy hair (Patton, p. 3940, 2006). Further, when you consider that for the past 100 years manufacturers have almost exclusively only promoted the idea that natural black hair needs to be altered, it all begins to make sense. When was the last time short, curly, kinky black hair was celebrated or promoted as equally as beautiful? As sociologist Ann DuCille notes, "We have yet to see Miss America or black Miss Universe with an Afro or cornrows or dreadlocks (p. 2).

These associations between textured hair and messiness along with the erasure of natural kinky in the media points to a longstanding stigma towards Black hair. This stigma is manifest in workplace discrimination and hiring processes, an area in which Black women are disproportionately impacted. According to the Harvard Business Review (2023)*, "Black women's hair was two-and-a-half times more likely to be perceived as unprofessional… as one-

fifth of the Black women surveyed between the ages of 25 and 34 had been sent home from work because of their hair" (2023, para. 5). Additionally, these biases towards Black hair are often internalized, causing many Black women to become hypervigilant about their appearance. Job insecurity takes on a double meaning here as The Harvard Business Review (2023) states, "more than half of the Black women surveyed felt like they had to wear their hair straight in a job interview to be successful. Two-thirds reported that they had changed their hair for a job interview… and a quarter of the Black women surveyed believe they were denied a job because of their hair" (ibid., para. 5). As mentioned previously, an immovable aspect of hair politics is the preference of certain types of "Black" hair over others. Texturism impacts the workplace as "research suggests that employees with hair textures that have a proximity to white and Eurocentric hair are shown preference over those with Afro-textured hair that's coarser and more tightly curled" (ibid., para. 11). Once more, individuals of African descent with tightly coiled hair face adverse effects, highlighting systemic and institutional disparities in social treatment. Robertson writes about the "very real reality that Black employees must often choose between their hair and gainful employment or prospective growth in their career" (p. 223). This unfortunate fact has sparked many legal debates, bringing up the question of whether or not hair is an immutable trait. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Catastrophe Management Solutions case set a precedent that influenced the rights of Black individuals at work. According to the first agreement, "The manual states that employers can impose neatness and grooming standards, as long as racial differences are taken into account and the rules are applied equally across racial lines. Employers cannot discriminate against an employee wearing an afro, for example, because that is Black hair in its natural state. While employers might be able to request that an afro be groomed, they cannot demand that it not be worn at all" (Griffin,

2019, para.). However, it was soon shifted after "The Commission argues that natural hair—and by extension any natural hairstyle—is inextricably tied to race and thus protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which "prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin… Bans or restrictions on natural hair or hairstyles associated with Black people are often rooted in white standards of appearance and perpetuate racist stereotypes that Black hairstyles are unprofessional" (Griffin, 2019, para). Proving that Black hair is not in fact, "just hair", and highlighting the cultural and historical context embedded within Black hairstyles and textures.

Conclusion

Black hair is an extremely nuanced topic that ignites numerous discussions and debates about its definition, styling, and the societal influences shaping its perception. Influencers such as Toni Bryanne TV (2022), Saiuri Dioge (2023), Mayowa (2023), and others on platforms like YouTube and TikTok provide platforms for Black individuals to navigate these complexities by creating theories, popularizing new terms and validating experiences. Garnering over 500,000 likes and comments in total, these conversations are vital for ongoing recognition and understanding within both broader society and Black communities. This third space of communication and brainstorming creates new ways of thinking about Black hair. Additionally, kinky hair is now more a part of the conversation than ever before, as women with these textures are finding ways to be the representation lacking in the media. Now more than ever before, through these digital spaces, Black women and girls find validation and support, empowered with the ability to articulate their unique experiences with greater clarity and resonance.

Chapter Two: The Politics of Desirability

"Black women have been called ugly for longer than we've been deemed human," Ebony Smith (2022) writes in The Harvard Crimson. Her article, "Society Thinks Black Girls Are Ugly" recounts her experience as a young Black child in school, facing implicit biases hidden in differential treatment. Citing Tarana Burke, Smith notes the ways in which Black women and girls rarely benefit from the innocence and femininity bestowed onto white and white passing women. Smith encapsulates these experiences when she states, "for Burke, the ugliness the world attached to her was physical. For me, ugliness spoke to being unimportant, unseen, and unheard as a child" (ibid., para. 6).

Discussions about desirability among Black women have intensified as the social advantages linked to conforming with hegemonic femininity have become more apparent. Giselinde Kuiper's (2022) work, "The Expanding Beauty Regime: Or, Why It Has Become So Important To Look Good," explains the growing importance of physical attractiveness in contemporary society. Kuiper attributes this trend to factors such as the rise of visual and consumer culture, social democratization, the shift to a service economy, and the recent prominence of social media (2022, p. 207). Beauty holds significant power due to its perceived ability to enhance various aspects of life. Kuiper elaborates on this, stating, "economists speak of a 'beauty premium' to explain the advantage of good looks in many domains of life. Such consequences are, however, not a natural result of appearance. Instead, both negative and positive consequences of beauty spring from human judgements that are embedded in normative cultural frameworks specific to our day and age" (2022, p. 228). As a result, conversations surrounding desirability have become more frequent, particularly on YouTube and TikTok. For Black women, these conversations stem from real life social trends and shared experiences of

devaluation. This chapter on the politics of desirability, will analyze current conversations surrounding predominant beauty feminine standards and Black women's place within them.

Current Conversations (YouTube and TikTok Discourse)

Divesting from Desirability

YouTuber: Abrasive Youth

Calling her channel, a "dump of sentiments," Abrasive Youth has been creating commentary videos on YouTube since 2017. Despite having a modest subscriber base compared to other lifestyle YouTubers, her video essays consistently garner significant attention, often reaching up to 100K views. Most notably, her videos "The Shaming of Whitewashed Black Girls on TikTok" (2021) and "The Insecurity of Black Girls on TikTok, (2021)" have done very well. In this segment, we will consider the latter video, where Abrasive Youth explores how social media perpetuates the devaluation of Black beauty through insulting memes and trends. In particular, she addresses a meme that circulated TikTok in 2022. The post featured images of Asian, White, Hispanic, and Black girls with the caption: "one has to go". The reaction to this meme was an overwhelming amount of TikTok users commenting that Black girls were the least attractive group and therefore should be the "ones to go". Abrasive Youth explains that her initial reaction to the meme was dismissive, since this type of content circulates regularly. According to her, Black women have moved past harmful memes of this nature and cultivated a level of confidence that transcends insulting "shit-posts". However, this was not the reaction of many Black female TikTok users, as counter-posts circulated shortly after in response to it. Black women and girls began posting videos insinuating that the post deeply impacted their self-esteem. The videos featured a photo of Black female users captioned "me, finally loving myself and skin color", followed by the "one has to go" post and the harmful comments accompanying

it. This is a prime example of how desirability politics intertwines with racial discrimination on social media platforms to reinforce the devaluation of Black women. This topic, in particular, comes up quite a bit on YouTube and TikTok, as these instances show up repeatedly in multiple facets of the Black female experience. Abrasive Youth comforts her viewers by minimizing the validity of negative social media, highlighting the importance of cultivating self-love, and centering empowering content made by Black female creators. With over 4.8K likes and 700 comments, Abrasive Youth's video motivated many Black female users to divest from discouraging sentiments that devalue them altogether. While this chapter examines origins and impacts of Black women's position within desirability politics, it's crucial to recognize that although beauty standards have deep roots in white supremacist colonial histories, this concept should not stop Black women from loving themselves or hinder us from developing a strong, empowered sense of self independent from societal expectations. The comments under Abrasive Youth's video reflect this sentiment, establishing a supportive community that encourages Black women to prioritize self-worth over social media judgments.

Here are some of the comments to Abrasive Youth's video in the discussion thread:

Comment #1: "I wanted to see more Black women choosing to say they would take themselves out of the equation bc we aren't menu items" [1.6K likes] (missdaliesh, 2021)

Comment #2: "I just want black girls to stop giving those colorist/racist videos attention and learn to LOVE THEMSELVES without the validation of others. We are so gorgeous and smart and heavenly. We've been through a lot and still prosper and shine. I want them to ignore those ugly videos and move on" [896 likes] (n.5316, 2021).

Comment #3: "Also the "least desired" stastitic came from a freaking dating site and not the 7

billion people who live in this world. So black women next time someone wants to use that realize IT IS NOT A FACT it's an opinion 100%" [947 likes] (CarsonSingclere, 2021) User @n.5316 responds to @CarsonSingclere's comment, showcasing the importance of empowering conversations, combating and unlearning anti-Black and misogynoiristic rhetoric. They state:

"THANK YOU! THIS is what I keep telling people. That "black women are the least desired" statistic comes from some random dating app with dumb people. It's an OPINION. Of course, not everyone will want to date a black girl/woman and that's fine, but we are desired by many. I wish other [people] could see that". [195 likes] (@n.5316, 2021).

Black Women and Hyper-Glamorization
YouTubers: Tee Noir and Ty Talks

      Tee Noir, another Black YouTuber and commentator deconstructs this topic in "Society vs. The 'Average' Looking Black Woman" (2022). This video highlights the ways in which Black women are expected to glamourize themselves to be deemed attractive while women of other races, particularly white women, are praised even in their most natural state. Tee Noir cites JT (formerly of the City Girls) and Ari Lennox as examples. Before their glamorization, these women were often either compared to animals or labeled as unattractive from the onset. Both women were likened to dogs, particularly Rottweilers in the case of Ari Lennox (Tee Noir 2022, 3:46-4:08). However, these comments have changed quite drastically, as Ari and JT now receive praise for their looks. Through beauty enhancements such as makeup, false eyelashes, hair extensions, fitness training, and fashion, they have been able to maximize their appearance, resulting in more favorable treatment from the public. Tee Noir describes this phenomenon as

"society's standard and default discontent towards Black women in the ordinary" (2022, 5:17).

The idea is that Black women cannot simply come as they are, in their most natural state. Tee

Noir references another commentary video by fellow YouTuber Ty Talks (2022), furthering the

discussion on how Black women must overperform in order to be considered desirable. Ty Talks

describes this succinctly when she states, "For Black women, the standard of beauty is that you

always have to look your absolute best no matter what time of day it is" (Ty Talks 2022, 3:28).

The glamorization of Black women directly points to the impacts of traditional feminine beauty

standards.

Quoting Patricia Hill Collins, Thompson elucidates this point, stating, "As Collins once

observed, externally defined standards of beauty long applied to African American women claim

that no matter how intelligent, educated, or 'beautiful' a Black woman may be, those Black

women whose features and skin color are most African must 'git back.' Blue-eyed, blonde, thin

white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with classical

African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair. (26)"

This can be traced back to the history of colorism since Black women have more access to

desirability when they have as many socially acceptable (typically Eurocentric) features as

possible. This goes for hair, skin, and facial proportions. Essentially Black women's desirability

hinges on their proximity to whiteness. As most Black women have traditional African features,

coarse hair, and darker skin, achieving society's beauty standard requires a complete

transformation from their natural state.

Despite the negative impacts of over-glamorization and devaluation, Black feminist

YouTubers promote mental liberation within the Black community through social commentary.

Additionally, this seems to be a group effort, as Black feminist YouTubers work indirectly but in tandem, to politicize social phenomena and raise the consciousness of viewers. Often, a Youtuber will reference another creator who inspired them by linking their content or featuring their video on screen. This creates a chain of content delving into different aspects of the same topic. As shown previously, from Abrasive Youth to Tea Noir to Ty Talks, Black feminist content creates an educational pipeline to deconstruct and unravel white supremacist indoctrination within the Black community. Communication with one another through these videos, Black female commentary YouTubers galvanize wider discussions that transforms harmful social media content into sources of empowerment. This is particularly helpful when tackling complex topics such as desirability politics that require critical thinking and social analysis. Ty Talks sums up the insidious effects of these beauty ideals on not only her self-esteem, but that of fellow Black women, stating, "It's a never-ending cycle of insecurity, of doubt, of low self-esteem, I just don't feel pretty enough, and that is sick. Not only can I not be accepted in society, but even within the Black community I still am not the standard of beauty" (2022, 14:15).

The European Beauty Standard

"Imagine trying to contain a concept as immeasurable, incorporeal, emotional, energetic, and evolving as beauty within one set standard? Why? For what reason? And to serve whom" (Defino, 2020, para. 4)? Beauty reporter Jessica Defino immaculately points out the absurdity and arbitrariness of the conventional European beauty standard, which she describes as "the individual qualifications women are expected to meet in order to embody the 'feminine beauty ideal' and thus, succeed personally and professionally" (Defino, 2020, para. 5). With proven psychological concepts like "The Halo Effect" and "Pretty Privilege", it is clear that people who

are perceived to be beautiful according to mainstream Eurocentric standards, are favored socially. The Halo Effect, also referred to as the "beautiful is good" bias, can be defined as a cognitive inclination "whether consciously or unconsciously, to assume a person's attractiveness reflects that person's inner characteristics, resulting in more positive feelings and beliefs regarding them" (Frederick et al. 2015, p. 1). The assignment of multiple positive traits based on physical appearance can also attract opportunities and preferential treatment as "pretty privilege" refers to the many social advantages beauty affords (Yong, 2021, para. 3). Frederick et al's., "Beauty Standards" (2015), highlights the ways in which perceptions of beauty vary between cultures, showcasing its subjectivity. Citing Kayan, Chinese, and Hindu practices as examples of the myriad ways attractiveness can manifest; cultural grooming rituals like neck stretching, foot binding, and nose piercing exemplify how "cultural norms affect the qualities and traits that are most valued in a society" (ibid., p. 2). While the concept of beauty is inescapable across cultures, the issue arises when one representation of beauty becomes paramount. These cultural norms have been influenced by centuries of oppression and European colonization, crowning fair skin, light eyes, dainty features, and long blonde hair as the epitome of ideal feminine beauty. The economic power, societal privilege, and prestige associated with whiteness supersede diverse cultural beauty ideals, leading to the perception that white norms are more attractive, and therefore "putting pressure on people from other groups to try to emulate them" (ibid., p. 3). Defino emphasizes the intra-racial implications of mainstream European beauty standards, stating, "Those with lighter skin were considered beautiful, and that is still an ongoing thing within cultures and within groups." She maintains that even when the colonizers left the U.S. and after abolition, the standard remained. "The colonizers left, but they left a legacy: the legacy of whiteness. It's an ongoing colonization of the mindset" (2020, para. 11). Mady et al.'s study "A

Whiter Shade of Pale: Whiteness, Female Beauty Standards, and Ethical Engagement Across

Three Cultures" (2023), references casteism as an indicator of how British occupation of India

"continues to pervade and influence their society to the present day," with the highest caste

(*Brahmins*) presenting as near-uniformly lily-white and the lowest caste (*Dalits*) as dark-skinned

(p. 73). Frederick et al., (2015) highlight that Black women are particularly vulnerable to the

adverse effects of desirability politics both within their demographic groups and broader society

(p. 3). Focusing on Black women, the following segment demonstrates how deeply ingrained

social belief systems can dictate definitions of beauty, by excluding certain groups and

compelling them to conform.

To understand Black women's place in Euro-American beauty standards, it is essential to

contextualize the historical constructs of race and femininity. According to Robinson-Moore

(2008), "race can be conceptualized as the social construction of whiteness as normal and

standard, while non-whites are categorized as other" (p. 69). In essence, white people have

established the definition of normalcy and the ideal standard. The displacement of Black women

within this standard began during the transatlantic slave trade and continued long after

emancipation, as discrepancies between skin tone solidified new belief systems about Black

female beauty. Intra-racial discrimination, otherwise known as colorism, reinforced the pervasive

notion that proximity to whiteness signified superiority across multiple sectors of life.

Meanwhile, traditionally African features closely associated with Blackness had the opposite

effect, causing more hardship for those within these groups. Providing a brief historical

background of its emergence, Aja Witt (2018) states, "lighter complexioned slaves, or

"mulattoes", who were the product of white slave owner's r*pe of Black slave women were

considered genetically superior to darker-skinned slaves because of their white ancestry and were

assigned to 'house servant, artisan, crafts[person], and skilled laborer' positions…Additionally, better jobs and more education would continue to benefit lighter-skinned Black people following enslavement's abolition" (p. 4). Emphasizing the influence and impact of skin color stratification amongst Black folks, Robinson-Moore (2008) writes, ""In a nation where 'whiteness' is ideal, light skin invariably represents the standard" (Hall, 2000, 179) ... Lighter skin, already given a higher social status, evolved into a socio-economic resource" (p. 72). These notions persisted long after emancipation, Kiara Child's "The Shade of It All" (2022) examines desirability politics in the context of beauty culture at the turn of the century and its inescapable ties to whiteness. The expansion of the makeup industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries sparked an increase in the popularity of skin whitening. This trend rose from the perception that lighter skin tones represented "ideal white and genteel beauty", highlighting distinctions among social classes that made it easier for some to gain cultural prestige, and economic advancement (Childs, 2022, p. 2).

Traditional "White" Femininity

While these standards affect both Black men and women with traditional African features and skin tones, "it has been thoroughly suggested that these biases lead to greater harm for African-American women as research specifies that skin complexion affects women in the sectors of beauty ideals, partner selection, and social and socioeconomic status" (p. 250). The reason is that femininity is more closely linked to whiteness and perceived purity than masculinity. Circling back to ideas formulating characteristics of the 'ideal woman', one must consider how whiteness comes into play. Through the aforementioned systems of subordination, whiteness was deemed the superior opposite of Blackness. Ergo, if whiteness and anything close

to it is the beauty standard, Blackness is automatically the reverse. Citing Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* (2000, 2009), Witt writes "… within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, Blonde, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (2018, p. 13). Essentially, for white women to be deemed most feminine, Black women had to fulfill the role of most masculine. Therefore, due to this duality, proximity to Blackness indicates masculinity and proximity to whiteness denotes femininity. These ideas have not only survived but thrived as one of the loudest echoes of white supremacy manipulating feminine beauty standards. Positioning Black women outside of hegemonic femininity stems from a long history of systemic abuse. For Black women, this separation from white femininity began in chattel slavery. Tracing the roots of Black female subjugation, Angela Davis' *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) centers on how legacies of oppression distorted Black womanhood by categorizing Black women as genderless workers rather than as women. She writes, "In the words of one scholar, the slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother, and homemaker" (p. 8). Davis goes on to explain that on plantations, "the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex. In this case, the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men (ibid). Black women's experiences of barbarous mistreatment in a fashion similar to that which was experienced by Black men coupled with abuse that exploited their gender, solidified the distinction between white femininity and Black femininity. Dehumanization plays a major role here, as Black women's ongoing fight for personhood overshadowed their social location as women. For example, while white women were regarded as "mothers" Black women retained the title of "breeders". In likening Black women to animals, white supremacist ideologies pushed Black women out of the feminine

sphere, branding them not only as less feminine than white women but hardly women at all. This

establishes a dichotomy between human and inhuman, mothers and breeders, and most

importantly, feminine and masculine. Davis elucidates this point further by stating:

> As the ideology of femininity — a by-product of industrialization — was popularized and disseminated through the new ladies' magazines and romantic novels, white women came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work. The cleavage between the home and the public economy, brought on by industrial capitalism, established female inferiority more firmly than ever before. "Woman" became synonymous in the prevailing propaganda with "mother" and "housewife," and both "mother" and "housewife" bore the fatal mark of inferiority. But among Black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found (p. 12).

These historical factors feed into current desirability politics. For those who do not fit into

European feminine ideals, Childs' (2022) investigation suggests that the ultimate consequence

often involves erasure, not only within beauty culture but in terms of overall desirability. Ebony

Smith (2021) offers a similar argument, stating, "Black women exist in a space between

femininity and masculinity that denies us access to either. For Black women, "ugly" means

something deeper. It means that we aren't seen as fully human and therefore, we do not fit into

the Eurocentric construct of gender. It also means that other people define us before we get to

define ourselves" (para. 9). Patricia Hill Collins' theory of "controlling images" is relevant here,

since Black women's erasure from the beauty standard allows for a redefinition and distortion of

their femininity. Childs (2022) believes that this, coupled with the ways in which Black women

have been exploited for capitalist gain along with the systematic denial of rights and privileges,

"function effectively to keep Black women in an assigned, subordinate place and construct our

contemporary standards of beauty and Black aesthetics" (p. 2). Meanwhile, proximity to

whiteness remains paramount in terms of physical attractiveness and social success. The

following segment analyzes how mainstream media put these ideas into practice, by delving

deeper into the concept of controlling images.

Desirability Politics and Controlling Images

According to Patricia Hill Collins, mainstream media representation not only creates

narratives about specific groups but cements them as fact. Controlling images are especially

pervasive in the case of Black women's desirability, as negative representations devaluing Black

femininity have influenced the normative beauty standard. Jerald et al., (2017) highlight

traditional feminist ideologies and societal expectations of femininity: the ideal woman is modest

yet physically and sexually appealing, thin, and white (p. 541). In many ways, Black women

have been represented as outside of these ideals. The Mammy, Sapphire (Angry Black Woman),

Strong Black Woman (SBW), and Jezebel are all stereotypical tropes that starkly contrast

traditional feminine ideals. Instead, they possess hypersexual, sexless, or more masculine traits

that function to place Black women outside of these standards. While the Mammy is the most

maternal figure of the group, she is aggressively desexualized through her appearance. Directly

opposing The Jezebel, the Mammy typically presents as "almost exclusively older, heavy-set,

and dark-skinned, helping to conceal the fact that many house slaves, especially women, were

frequently sexually abused by their white masters" (The Take, 2021). While the Mammy

completed feminine tasks and assumed feminine roles like mothering, housekeeping, and

caregiving, she was highlighted as a sexless being, more akin to a household item than a woman.

As mentioned, the Jezebel contrasts this in a highly exaggerated and equally detrimental manner.

Unlike the Mammy, she is hypersexualized, promiscuous, domineering, and animalistic (The

Take, 2021). The Jezebel is masculinized, not through her looks, but through her aggressive

temperament and insatiable sexuality (Jerald et al., 2021, pg. 543). This version of Black womanhood mirrors other depictions of Black female aggression represented through the Sapphire and/or Strong Black Woman (SBW). In accordance with Jerald et al., "the verbally and physically aggressive nature of the Sapphire and sexually aggressive nature of the Jezebel are in stark opposition to the submissive and sexually conservative norms of mainstream femininity" (ibid., p. 543). Bettina Judd's (2019) "Sapphire as Praxis: Toward a Methodology of Anger" places the Sapphire as "the backlit image and sound of the Angry Black Woman stereotype" (p. 180). While the defeminization of The Mammy is shown through physical representation, the Sapphire is defeminized through her emasculating nature and perceived "attitude". In stark contrast to the seductive or submissive traits that signify The Mammy and Jezebel, The Sapphire is portrayed as angry, loud, sassy, and condescending. Her quickness to anger often frames her emotions as unjustified, seen merely as a manifestation of her inherent masculinity (ibid., p. 180).

Each of these tropes is far removed from gentle, dainty, and soft-spoken depictions of traditional femininity, therefore solidifying the idea that Black women are inherently unfeminine. Particularly, the SBW is the most modern and covert rendition of older controlling images, masked in independence and tenacity but just as homogenizing. As stated by Jerald et al., "The SBW prioritizes others' needs over her own and remains emotionally resilient in the face of adversity, all while managing responsibilities from all of life's domains," providing minimal space for individuality and overall humanity. As stated by Darlene Clark Hines, "Creating and disseminating a visual history is perhaps more important with Black women than with any other single segment of the Black population. We know all too well what this society believes Black women look like… what we have not seen nearly enough is the simple truth of our complex and

multidimensional lives" (1989). From older representations to their equally harmful reincarnations, mainstream media plays a crucial role in how Black women are viewed in society. It is useful to examine the effects of these tropes and how they have altered many public perceptions of Black women. Bombarded with either masculinized, sexless, and/or hypersexual imagery, Black women's femininity and desirability has been distorted, creating the false notion that Black women are unequivocally less attractive than their white counterparts.

Black Women on Dating Apps & Marriage Statistics

With the rise of digital dating, the power of desirability has become more evident. A study run by OKCupid in 2009 provided insight into the online dating scene, and how race influences user's choices. According to Chow and Hu on NPR News, researchers found that "not only is race a deciding factor in our online dating interests, but particular races get disproportionately high – or low – amounts of interest" (para.1). The study showed that Black women and Asian men had the fewest interactions overall, receiving consistently low scores compared to other races of men and women (Hu and Chow, 2013). Seemingly, the only group of men Black women could count on for potential dates was Black men. According to OKCupid, Black men were 23% more likely to respond, while Latino men were 3% less likely, white men were 6% less likely, and Asian men were 13% less likely (McClinton, 2019). These statistics are disproportionate to Asian, white, and Latino women, who had far more positive and more varying results. Ultimately, Asian women and white men were the most successful in online dating, garnering a steady flow of collective interest. Chow & Hu blame racial preferences, the fetishization of Asian women and the glorification of white men (2013). While white men are viewed as standard or ideal men, with little to no racial stereotypes attached to them, Asian

women are desired due to their perceived subservience and docility, another product of racial stereotyping and controlling images. As mentioned, the effects of racist imagery have had a similar impact on Black women, resulting in defeminization and disinterest. So, how does this affect dating and marriage for Black women in the modern era? In 2024, online dating is still alive and well, but some things have changed. According to Mouzon et al., (2020) "Overall, Black Americans have experienced a dramatic decrease in marriage rates over time, from 64% of Black men and 62% of Black women being married in 1950 to 38% of Black men and 33% of Black women being married in 2019" (para.3). This varies significantly from white marriage statistics, as data from the US Census Bureau (2022) revealed that "nearly 54 percent of the White population was married compared to 31.2 percent of the Black population. Only 27.5 percent of the White population had never been married compared to half of the Black population. Some 34.4 percent of Black men were married in 2021, compared to 28.6 percent of Black women. For Whites, 55.5 percent of men and 52.4 percent of women were married" (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, para. 1-2). The difference is stark for Black women specifically. As Raley et al.,'s "The Growing Racial and Ethnic Divide in U.S. Marriage Patterns (2015) points out, "fewer than two-thirds of Black women reported having married at least once by age 40" (p. 91). They further illustrate that this is due to a lack of viable partners since Black men have higher rates of incarceration and death and "relatively low levels of education," resulting in a "scarcity of better-off Black men relative to Black women" (ibid., p. 101). This, combined with economic disparities, has played a significant role in the lower marriage rates of Black Americans. According to a report by McKinsey & Company (2021), intersecting economic gaps, including but not limited to wage disparities, food deserts, and cost-burdened households, have also disproportionately impacted Black communities as the median household

income for Black families is substantially lower than that of White families, which impacts

financial stability and marriage decisions (para.42). Additionally, the Black community has seen

an increase in interracial unions, for Black men in particular. Pew Research Center reports,

"Among Blacks, intermarriage is twice as prevalent for male newlyweds as it is for their female

counterparts. While about one-fourth of recently married Black men (24%) have a spouse of a

different race or ethnicity, this share is 12% among recently married Black women" (Livingston

& Brown, 2017, para.5). Why are Black men intermarrying at a disproportionate rate? Does this

showcase different levels of desirability? And, if so, what are the potential social factors that add

to these statistics? The next section attempts to answer these questions by analyzing current

online conversations and investigating how white supremacist beauty standards influence Black

women's dating prospects.

Colorism and Fair-Skinned Women as Trophies

In "Why Do Light-Skinned Women Dominate the Pop Charts", Ellen Jones (2019) cites a

well-known picture of Black male icons in the industry celebrating after the MTV Video Music

Award show (para.11). The image features Diddy, Kanye West, Steve Stoute, Jay-Z, and Swizz

Beatz laughing over drinks as their wives stand dutifully behind them (ibid., para.12). However,

what stands out about this image is not the patriarchal positioning of the husbands and wives, but

rather, the one thing each woman has in common. The featured other halves, Alicia Keys,

Beyonce, Lauren Branche, Kim Kardashian, and Cassie, are light complected, mixed-race, or of

non-Black ancestry. Upon first glance, this is merely a picture of Black excellence, with Black

men and women basking in immeasurable wealth. But this image represents much more than

that; it indicates widely held beliefs within the Black community directly resulting from white

supremacist indoctrinations. The fact that the most powerful Black men in the music industry all have light-skinned or mixed-race wives and girlfriends synonymizes lighter-toned women with success and high status, placing darker skinned women on the other end of the spectrum by default. As Witt states, "positioning light skinned women as the 'prize' for making it is troubling. It reveals a colorist "preference" far too many rappers feel comfortable sharing. It's also reminiscent of the "long-held belief that Black men of stature [want] white (read: light) women… as a trophy — an affirmation that they've 'arrived' at the same level as their white counterparts" (2018:21). Kanye West's feature on Future's popular track "I Won" exemplifies this perfectly, as they express admiration for their partners, Kim Kardashian and Ciara, respectively. The lyrics are as follows, "I made it over NBA, NFL players, every time I score it's like the super bowl… You could look at Kylie, Kendall, Kourtney and Khloe, all your mama ever made was trophies, right" (Future & West, 2014)?

In an article published by The Guardian, Dream McClinton's (2019) "Why Dark-Skinned Black Girls Like Me Aren't Getting Married" states, " [Black men] have unnatural power within marriage markets that enables them to bid up cursory characteristics like skin shade... In other words, the lighter the female, the higher the probability of marriage" (2019, para. 17). McClinton recounts her own experience online dating as a dark-skinned Black woman. She retells a particularly troubling encounter in which her colleague expressed to her that he wants a white family as opposed to a Black one: "'I want a white family.' The words stick with me for the rest of the day, weighing me down like a bale of cotton. It brings tears to my eyes. I wonder: are dark-skinned women just the placeholders until they meet their desired match? Do all these men really just want white families?" (McClinton, 2019, para. 31). Why do Black men, particularly those with fame, status, and/or wealth tend to settle down with white women or bi-racial/racially

ambiguous women? This trend underscores several factors, such as the unequal effects of colorism, representations of Black masculinity, and its effect on Black male desirability, which this segment explores in greater detail. According to Jerald et al. (2017), whiteness is associated with status and access. Therefore, Black men who have attained such status seek out women more closely aligned with white society. This particular phenomenon of high-status Black men marrying white, white-passing, or racially ambiguous women has caused many discussions on TikTok and YouTube. Content creators often cite Kanye West with Kim Kardashian, Seal with Heidi Klum, Sean Combs (Diddy) with Cassie Ventura, and Jordan Peele with Chelsea Peretti as prime examples of this trend. Another prominent instance is the trend of Black male division one (D1) athletes exclusively dating and marrying white women and/or non-Black women. Some contemporary examples include Michael Jordan with Yvette Prieto, Kawhi Leonard with Kishele Shipley, and Kobe Bryant with Vanessa Laine.

TikTok users often use the term "paper bag test" to describe the dating choices of Black male celebrities. As defined by Moore et al., "The "paper bag" test was used by some African-Americans to assess eligibility for entrance into their parties, churches, and social organizations based on being lighter than a brown paper bag" (2021, p. 1003). However, this test is merely a symptom of an overarching system of racialized oppression. Once again, colorism significantly influences modern-day perceptions of desirability and disproportionately impacts many aspects of Black women's lives, particularly, in this case, marriage and dating. The dating preferences of Black men, who often choose partners outside their own race, have significant implications for Black women's dating prospects. In societal narratives, Black women are frequently portrayed as less feminine, while Black men are often depicted as hyper-masculine and therefore more attractive to women of other races. It is crucial to clarify that this does not mean Black men

solely benefit from stereotypical portrayals, but rather that certain narratives may hold more appeal in the context of relationships and dating than others. In "Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity: Understanding Representations of Black and White Manhood in Print Advertising," Kevin Thomas (2013) examines the differences in pre- and post-emancipation portrayals of Black masculinity compared to white men and Black women. According to Thomas (2013), to separate Black men from their white counterparts, their masculinity took two streams, the Simple-Minded Sambo and the Brute Negro (para. 4). Focusing on the pervasiveness of the Brute Negro narrative,

Thomas (2013) explains, "By aligning Black masculinity with criminality and savagery, the nation created the space to contain the threat now viewed as inherent in Black men. In the post-emancipation era, the dominant discourse regarding white masculinity was largely kept intact. However, notions of white masculinity correlating with being a provider and protector were heightened" (para. 6).

Modern day representations of Black men align more with hyper-masculinity particularly in the context of popular culture. Goodwill et al.'s (2019) study "Media Representations of Popular Culture Figures and the Construction of Black Masculinities" asserts that "Professional Black male athletes, musicians, and political figures hold unique social positions that both highlight their popularity and influence people's beliefs about performance of gender" (p. 288). Using rap and hip-hop culture as an example, they state "hypermasculine messages were more common in rap/hip-hop music when compared with other genres, and these messages often characterized Black men as "materialistic, competitive, sex-focused, and risk-taking"" (ibid., p. 289). It is possible that these controlling images set Black men apart from men of other races, as shown through the growing popularity of attractive dark-skinned Black men in the media, i.e.

Chadwick Boseman, Idris Elba, and Duke Dennis, to name a few. Today, in terms of dating,

Black men are regarded as dominating, strong, and athletic, traits often considered attractive in

men. However, it must be noted that this hypermasculinization has also created the false

narrative that Black men are inherently violent and hypersexual, a sentiment used to justify

discrimination, fetishization, and the maintenance of ideal masculinity associated with white men

(ibid., para.6). Meanwhile Black women's representations aligned closer with white male

masculinity as a means to separate them from femininity altogether. This is showcased through

the Mammy caricature, who "was positioned as a strong, diligent worker and fiercely loyal to her

white owners. Conversely, white femininity was portrayed as the nexus of beauty, morality, and

respectability" (Thomas 2013, para. 4). This functioned to place Black women outside of

hegemonic femininity, while simultaneously forcing Black men inside an exaggerated form of

masculinity. As mentioned previously, within the societal dichotomy of whiteness versus

Blackness, Black women are often positioned closer to masculinity than femininity by default.

Therefore, the hypermasculinization of Black men is projected onto Black women, as

accompanying controlling images perpetuate the misguided belief that Black women exhibit

more masculinity compared to their white, bi-racial, and non-Black counterparts. With colorism

in mind, it is possible that the exclusion of Black women from hegemonic femininity

disproportionately impacts those with darker skin tones since they possess features more closely

aligned with Blackness. In his study on the unequal impacts of colorism among Black men and

women, Robert L. Reece (2021) emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the diversity among

Black individuals and questioning whether colorism affects all African Americans equally.

Utilizing Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, Reece (2021) conducts an

intersectional, gendered analysis to understand "how color and gender may merge to shape social

outcomes" (p. 48). Focusing specifically on income and wages, Reece's findings conclude that skin color majorly affects one's earnings, as light-skinned men and women are highly favored in this regard. While both dark-skinned men and women ranked consistently low in each reference category, dark-skinned women continuously trailed just behind dark-skinned men. Although the difference between the treatment of light-skinned men and dark-skinned women was more significant, dark-skinned women often ended up "standing behind, with everyone else in the middle" (ibid., p. 52). Even though Reece's (2021) study centers on income disparities, similar trends arise on dating platforms with Black women, particularly those with darker complexions, following behind their male counterparts. Black men's slightly elevated position in society enables them to select women perceived as high status, particularly when the man achieves financial security or success. Consequently, Black women, who typically prioritize intra-racial dating, find themselves with fewer choices. This contributes to their underwhelming dating statistics and sheds light on the increasing tendency of successful Black men to align themselves with white, bi-racial, and non-Black women.

The Lighter the Better? Conversations with Mixed-Race Studies

It is crucial to include, in this piece, a conversation with critical mixed-race studies and the ample research into multiracial identities and mixed-race experiences. According to Jayne Ifekwuniqwe's (2015) exploration of mixed-race studies, the stratification of race and color is not all black and white. In this text, Ifekwuniqwe highlights the "differential access to prestige, privilege, and power" across cultures, as the social definition of "mixed" varies. Daniel G. Reginald's "Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed-Race Studies" (2014) provides some necessary nuance to this sentiment. According to Reginald, monoraciality and hypodescent

beliefs are deeply ingrained into society, particularly for individuals with both European

American and African American ancestry. In line with Ifekwuniqwe's above statement, Reginald

elucidates this point, which I quote here:

>   The one-drop rule of hypodescent designates as black everyone with any African
> American ancestry ("one drop of blood"). This mechanism, which is unique to the United States,
> has historically precluded any choice in self-identification and ensured that all future offspring of
> African American ancestry have been socially designated as black (p. 12).

The concept of mixed-race and Black identity politics comes up frequently both in this paper and

in Black women's online discussions. Particularly in the context of media representation, Black

hair, and desirability politics. Reginald considers these societal benefits as he writes:

>   European Americans may consciously express a preference for individuals of color who
> more closely approximate their phenotypical norms as well as assumed behavioral and attitudinal
> characteristics... Many individuals of color internalize similar biases when judging individuals in
> their own racial group and other groups of color (p.14).

However, in aligning statements, Reginald calls not for separation but more specificity in

accounting for those with mixed-race ancestry. Using census data as a prime example, this author

spotlights how monoracial norms force multiracial groups to select one (or more) monoracial

categorization boxes. This puts forth the notion that they "should view themselves as parts of

various or multiple monoracial communities rather than also as constituents of a multiracial

collective subjectivity" (p.14). Essentially, critical mixed-race studies advocate for a more

nuanced understanding of mixed-race identities and perspectives by challenging these systems.

Especially for those with Black and white heritage, the societal inclination to consolidate bi-

racial and multiracial Black identities into one monoracial category is rooted in white

supremacist ideologies that prefer to homogenize Blackness rather than account for identity politics. Additionally, the separation of Blackness from whiteness, even in biological union, perpetuates notions of white racial purity so as not to "contaminate" the white race with any other. These white supremacist systems also inform a racial hierarchy amongst monoracial Black people and bi-racials, creating sub-categories of racism that conflate, compare, and divide these two racial groups based on social hierarchies and proximity to whiteness. As a result, we are too busy in-fighting rather than accounting for the inherent racism embedded within these structures, which, in effect, distorts how both groups understand their Blackness.

As Seen On TV: The Impact of Desirability Politics on Black Women

In current discussions about Black women and desirability politics, commentary YouTubers and TikTok creators frequently focus on reality television dating shows. This topic appears regularly, particularly during the periods in which these shows air. Productions like "Too Hot to Handle," "Love Island", "The Bachelor", "Perfect Match", and "Love Is Blind" are hot topics on most commentary platforms, as the politics of beauty and desirability are most visible in these contexts. From five to ten-minute short form content on TikTok to twenty-minute YouTube videos, Black women are particularly eager to share their thoughts on dating trends as seen on TV. Across platforms, the sentiment remains the same. Black women are simply not desired on dating shows. However, this is not for lack of beautiful, eligible Black women on screen, but rather due to the preferences of the male bachelors. This begs the question, why aren't Black women being picked? Why do so many men, including Black men, find Black women less desirable than their white, biracial, and non-Black counterparts?

As stated by Childs (2022), "Black women have long been framed as less attractive within industries that focus on attractiveness and privilege whiteness" (p.2). Focusing on "Perfect Match", Youtubers Toni Bryanne, Bre with an E, and Jessie Woo break down the problematic treatment of Black women on popular dating shows. "Perfect Match" caused quite an uptick in discussion videos on this topic, as its treatment of Black women was particularly egregious and damaging to viewers. According to Netflix, "Perfect Match" is a reality show in which "couples who prove their compatibility gain the power to make or break other matches in this strategic and seductive dating competition" (Coelen et al.,2023). Essentially, contestants from previous Netflix dating shows return for a "second chance at love" as fellow castmates handpick members to bring onto the island and potential matches to spend the night with. As per most dating shows, the objective is to stay in the game by becoming or remaining part of couple. Therefore, this show hinges on desirability, as one's ability to make and sustain connections dictates their success on "Perfect Match". The duration of new and returning contestants' time on the show depends mainly on their attractiveness and likability. Those deemed most appealing stayed on the show from start to finish. Meanwhile, for others, their time was short-lived, with some leaving the villa after only one night or part of a day. However, a peculiar phenomenon seemed to occur on the show: amongst the female contestants, Black women were continuously sent packing. While Black female viewers are not new to the mistreatment of their peers on live television, "Perfect Match" felt particularly targeted. The Black female contestants on the show were each booted off swiftly after arriving whether it was due to men showing little to no interest, minimal options, or strategic gameplay. What is it that sets Black women apart in such a negative way in terms of mainstream dating? This section explores the social implications of desirability politics and beauty standards, seeking to understand the precise positioning of Black

women within these contexts and the underlying reasons for implicit biases, particularly as they relate to dating trends portrayed in media.

Premiering in 2023, "Perfect Match" prided itself on its all-star cast of ex-islanders and contestants. Combining famous and infamous characters from "Love Is Blind", "Too Hot to Handle", "Selling Tampa", "The Mole", "The Circle", "The Ultimatum", "Sexy Beasts", and "Twenty-Somethings: Austin", the show was able to pull in viewers from multiple Netflix fanbases. Due to its large audience, the show sparked many discussions among viewers, particularly Black women, who were particularly vigilant of the Black female contestants. Three Black women appeared on Perfect Match: Anne-Sophie, Colony, and Diamond, each with a similar trajectory. It is important to note that most of the Black men on this show were not interested in Black women. As explained by YouTuber Toni Bryanne, "With the men that they cast on these shows, depending on the type of series it is, these Black women are either used as pawns or they're just put on the back burner and not selected as someone that is deemed attractive or deemed as wanted" (2023:4:11). As a result, Black women were often left with few to no options, whereas white women contestants tended to have the opposite experience, remaining in high demand throughout the show. While some were rated more highly than others (Francesca Farago and Kariselle Snow), overall, white women rarely struggled to secure matches. Compared to the Black women, and other visible minorities on the show, the differences in treatment were undeniable. The upcoming section analyzes the three Black women's time on the show and the similarities in the events that led to their seemingly inevitable eliminations.

Anne-Sophie Petit-Frere

Anne-Sophie entered "Perfect Match" as an original (OG) cast member alongside Francesca Farago, Dom Gabriel, Joey Sasso, Kariselle Snow, Shayne Jansen, Ines Tazi, Zay Wilson, Savannah Palacio, and Nick Uhlenhuth. At the end of each night, islanders must couple up and choose a partner to spend the night with. Upon arrival, Anne-Sophie was met with slim options, as most bachelors swiftly chose other options, Joey with Kariselle, Francesca with Dom, Shayne with Ines, and Nick with Savannah. Ultimately, the two least desirable contestants were left to match together, Anne-Sophie and Zay Wilson (Mackelden, 2023). Zay's first choice, as with most men on the show, was Francesca Farago, who is white Italian and racially ambiguous. The differences in how Zay interacts with each of these two women are striking. With Francesca, Zay is more meek and mild. He is shy and careful with his words yet open and forthcoming. In his confessional, Zay describes Francesca as "tall and beautiful", and he goes out of his way to tell her he is interested. Meanwhile, with Anne-Sophie, Zay seems withdrawn. She seems to be the one vying for his attention. He elucidates this by stating, "What? You want my attention; you got my attention". When she tries to get him to show more interest, Zay remains leaned back, withdrawn, and short with his tone and body language towards her. There is no confessional snippet about Anne-Sophie at all. At the end of the night, after all the couples have matched, Zay begrudgingly matches with Anne-Sophie. However, he makes it clear that this is not due to any attraction or interest but simply because of his fatigue. He states, "I thought I was going to be a first-round draft pick, I guess we just ended up together". Later that night, the two form a barricade between them in bed. Zay makes it clear that he has no sexual or romantic interest in her.

Colony Reeves

Colony Reeves entered "Perfect Match" at the beginning of episode six as a new arrival, set up on a date with Dom Gabriel. Like most of the Black men in the house, Dom often exclusively showed interest in white women. At the time of the date, Dom had recently switched partners from Francesca Farago to Georgia Hassarati, the two most highly sought-after women in the house. Initially, Dom expressed going into the date with an open mind and heart, prepared to potentially make a new connection. However, upon meeting Colony, he quickly changed his tune, explaining that he owes it to Georgia to explore their relationship. While Colony's visible Blackness may not have influenced his decision, considering Dom's previous matches, it is hard to imagine that a white woman would have received the same treatment. Additionally, Dom made sure to point out Colony's Blackness in a manner that YouTuber Jessie Woo deemed "weaponizing" (Jessie Woo 2023, 10:48). Upon learning of Colony's career as a real estate agent, Dom proceeded to label her a "Strong Black Woman". As discussed previously, the SBW is a modern controlling image that masculinizes Black women, framing them as unfeminine and undesirable. Having made up his mind that he does not wish to pursue a connection with Colony, Dom tries to pawn her off to the only other Black man in the house, Bartise Bowden. Putting forward the Strong Black Woman stereotype, Dom highlights this as her best attribute. Soon after, Colony and Bartise have a short conversation about age and marriage expectations that ends with Bartise abruptly stating, "In that case, I'm probably too young for you then" (Coelen et al., 2023). In the end, Colony, like Anne-Sophie, is left without a match and sent home after not even twenty-four hours in the villa. It is no coincidence that during each 'men's choice' elimination night, women of visible minorities were consistently sent home. First, Anne-Sophie and Savannah (Black and Asian respectively) and Colony and Izzy (Black and bi-racial). Finally,

the two Black women leave the villa hand-in-hand, as Colony states, "Coming in here, I was open-minded, and I really wanted to meet my perfect match. But I don't think that person was here for me" (Perfect Match, 2023).

Diamond Jack

Diamond arrives at the beginning of episode eight, late in the show's season of twelve episodes. Another Black woman set up on a date with Dom; she is quickly rejected as his relationship with Georgia has progressed further by this point. After pursuing other men in the house, Diamond finally matches with Will, a competitive game player. Initially, the two seem interested in one another until Diamond is selected for a date with Bartise. Shortly after, Will uses Diamond's potential interest in her date to go after the highly sought-after, Francesca Farago. Back in the house, Diamond is left with slim options, as Bartise takes an interest in Abbey, another new arrival, soon after returning to the villa. This leaves Diamond feeling embarrassed, to which she says, "He wanted Abbey. We had a good date but he's not the guy for me. I kind of felt it though" (Coelen et al., 2023). Taking a look at the demographics, it seems to be no coincidence that Francesca and Abbey are white women who do not struggle to find matches. When both Will and Bartise express their interest in other women, Diamond chooses to self-evict, stating, "I decided to leave, and I actually feel really good about that. You're not gonna match my energy, I'm not going to stay here and waste my time. And that is the best thing I can do to walk away and say" (Coelen et al., 2023).

All three Black women on "Perfect Match" had lackluster experiences. Along with their early eliminations, Black women often left the house without making any viable connections, resolving that their 'person' simply was not on the show. Additionally, they were all humiliated by men who used the women as pawns to succeed in competitions and elongate their own time

on screen. This differential treatment is in line with what this chapter has described as desirability politics, and the devaluation of certain racial groups over others.

Conclusion: #BlackGirlMagic, Positive Representation, and Empowerment

While the statistics are not exactly promising, the landscape of desirability is slowly transforming for Black women through growing sources of empowerment. Although past controlling images continue to loom over the Black female image, Black feminists and content creators have identified a change. Beginning with 2016's #BlackGirlMagic movement, this powerful form of resistance challenges harmful ideas about Black womanhood, allowing Black women to reclaim and redefine their identities authentically (Mason, 2021, p. 719). The influence of this hashtag set a precedent for further demonstrations of resistance against oppressive Western systems as Black women mobilize the internet as a third place for digital alchemy. By creating spaces for virtual roundtable discussions about current social events, Black women recognize the pressing need for uplifting imagery and communities of care. For example, the mistreatment of Black (specifically dark-skinned) female contestants on dating shows sparked conversations amongst Black women on TikTok and YouTube, resulting in multiple posts both condemning negative imagery and pushing empowerment. As Black women create common understandings amongst themselves to unlearn societal devaluation, we also create content that counters this narrative. #BlackGirlMagic has been reincarnated through trends like "The Black Wife Effect" on TikTok, showcasing the positive impact Black women have on their romantic partners by enhancing their beauty. Thus, creating a new narrative that shows Black women in loving relationships where they are not only desired but recognized for their ability to uplift themselves and others. In mainstream media, empowerment takes shape through the rising

prominence of Black female producers and filmmakers providing diverse representations of Black women. From Shonda Rhimes's portrayals of complex Black women in positions of power (i.e., Olivia Pope, Annalise Keating, Queen Charlotte) to Issa Rae's normalization of the "awkward/ordinary Black girl", each of these representations are necessary to show Black female viewers that they are valuable in every form. By banding together in solidarity, Black women root for each other on and off-screen, proving that societal ideologies surrounding beauty and desirability cannot measure the scope of #BlackGirlMagic. This showcases the importance of multiple forms of representations as monolithic portrayals negatively impact Black women both personally and systemically. However, while Black women's ability to alchemize harmful media into empowerment shows immeasurable strength and resilience, it is critical to challenge the idea that Black women can and will always fight for themselves. The next chapter explores a particularly damning narrative, that of the "Strong Black Woman," who withstands everything society throws at her. This narrative is explored further in "The Politics of Struggle," examining shifts in mentality spurred by online discourse about the discriminatory treatment of Black women in healthcare, relationships, and media.

Chapter Three: The Politics of Struggle

Black women have never accepted societal domination. Constantly fighting against racist and patriarchal structures, resilience is an understatement. Our modes of resistance have evolved over time through the rise of social media in recent years. Presently, resistance takes many different forms, as Black women mitigate the socioeconomic adversity thrust upon them. This chapter will center on Black female experiences in multiple institutions – marriage – healthcare – media, and the seemingly inseparable correlation to hardship. Examining the concept of struggle through a Black feminist lens, this piece will analyze how Black women use TikTok and YouTube as platforms to popularize a new form of activism grounded in open conversations and candid dialogue. Discussions around Black women's mobilization of social media platforms have been extensively explored by Black feminist scholars. They have contributed significantly to understanding how Black women utilize digital spaces for activism, community building, and cultural expression. Particularly, Moya Bailey's "Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance", centers the idea of media making as a mechanism for Black women to subvert the harmful representations that influence their quality of life. She writes, "with the rise of social media, Black women are in an even better position to challenge the stereotypes that negatively impact their health and well-being" (Bailey, p. 10). The term "digital alchemy" encapsulates the heart of this piece, which Bailey describes as, "the ways that women of color, Black women, and Black nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks in particular transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media that recode the failed scripts that negatively impact their lives" (p. 24). However, while Bailey uses the term in the context of medical culture, I aim to discuss the ways in which digital alchemy transforms how Black women view and advocate for themselves, as a means to unlearn pervasive narratives that

reverberate throughout the community. By using self-broadcasting platforms, Black women show one another that their experiences are not myopic, but rather an example of deeply embedded systems of oppression. Establishing platforms akin to "kitchen table conversations" where Black women validate and empower one another, works to challenge narratives propagated by mainstream media.

Current Conversations: YouTube and TikTok Discourse

"Got a white boy on my roster// He be feeding me pasta and lobster// He just hit me up on tuesday// like, "What you doing bae?// Let me take you shoppin'" (brrp)// I told him, "Well, I'm a little busy"// (damn)// He said, "Damn, I'm in your city (fuck)// But anyway, it's okay, hope you have a good day// I'ma send you 'bout eight fifty" (ooh)// Then I told him, "You treat me so well"// He said, "Cashapp or zelle? (Ching)// Matter of fact, scratch that, I'ma send you a stack// Just cause you fine as hell"// And I told him, "Well, thank you, baby" (thank you)// Anything for my favorite lady (ooh)// Well, I gotta go, they just let me know// That I could pick up my Mercedes (skrrt)" (Kaliii, 2022).

In 2022, American rapper Kaliii's hit single "Area Codes" gained traction on TikTok. The following year, the song became immensely viral within the Black community, sparking a new cultural phenomenon known as the "pasta and lobster" frenzy, which is closely linked to the "hard wig soft life" theory. Essentially, the lyrics to Kaliii's song describe a scenario in which a successful white man finances her opulent lifestyle. The phrase "pasta and lobster" comes from the very first line, where Kaliii explains that the "white boy" amongst her current group of suitors treats her to expensive dinners and sends her exorbitant amounts of money. Race is particularly important in this context as proximity to whiteness is often associated with success and wealth. By emphasizing this particular suitor's whiteness, Kaliii sets him apart from the rest,

regardless of the problematic social hierarchies it maintains. This concept completely contradicts common narratives of Black women's appeal. In the chapter "The Politics of Desirability," I discuss how data shows that Black women are less preferred in dating, evidenced by lower marriage rates and disparities in online dating interactions. This highlights broader societal biases and challenges faced by Black women in the realm of romantic relationships. Kaliii's "Area Codes" subverts this notion, by flaunting the rapper's ability to attract successful men. As a result, the song's TikTok virality has reflected this, with many Black women proudly showcasing their white partners. The comments reiterate this notion, as users express their envy and hope for a "pasta and lobster" relationship of their own. Shortly after the rise of Kaliii's song, Black creators began noticing something peculiar about these interracial "pasta and lobster" relationships. It soon became evident that the women flaunting these coveted relationships often had hairstyles that were precarious, characterized by messy or poorly installed wigs, giving rise to the "hard wig, soft life" theory which asserts that Black women with unkempt wigs are more likely to attract wealthy (often white) men, thus acquiring a "soft" life of luxury and ease. This new saying has sparked numerous discussions about Black women, interracial dating, and the perceived "upgrade" associated with securing a white partner. Many YouTubers and TikTokers are grappling with the question: Does the "pasta and lobster/hard wig, soft life" theory signify positive progress in how Black women's romantic relationships are portrayed? Or does it suggest something more troubling?

The Curse of Black Beauty Standards

Toni Bryanne: He Be Feeding Me Pasta and Lobster | Hard Wig Soft Life Theory

Prominent YouTuber Toni Bryanne provides a well-rounded explanation of not only this trend, but the debates surrounding it. According to Bryanne, Black women are the least likely to date outside of their race, hence, the notion that pasta and lobster or the "hard wig soft life" theory is directly linked to residing in or being in proximity to white communities. As I showed in previous chapters "The Politics of Black Hair" and "The Politics of Desirability", hair is extremely important especially in regards to Black women's beauty standards, which due to centuries of discrimination are still heavily informed by white society. Smooth, carefully styled, "unclockable" hair is now the expectation for most Black women. As a result, anything that does not meet these criteria is often seen as unattractive and unwanted, until the concept of "hard wig soft life" was introduced. As seen on TikTok, the vast majority of Black women in interracial relationships with white men sport "hard" or less coiffed wigs not favored by the Black community. Bryanne believes this theory stems from TikToker @damnafricawhathappened_'s video where she states, "no one can pull a white millionaire like a slim Black woman with a bad wig" (TikTok, 2024). This simple statement incited a plethora of think piece videos and even a "pasta and lobster" trend with Black women purposefully styling "bad" wigs in hopes of attracting a white man. To some, "hard wig soft life" is merely a lighthearted joke, however, Toni Bryanne believes there is more to it. To this YouTuber, the theory carries a more negative connotation rather than being harmless banter. According to Bryanne, while the Black community can be uplifting and supportive of its members, we can also be "each other's biggest critics and bullies". What may seem like a basic TikTok trend can also be understood as a means to mock Black women who do not conform to the beauty standards set by the mainstream Black community. This, Bryanne argues, is damaging as it reinforces the belief that Black women

cannot simply exist as they are. They must appear near perfect, with meticulously styled hair, in order to be deserving of love. Toni Bryanne is motivated, not by the resolve to find a white man, but by the urge to embrace her Black identity and natural beauty, without feeling the need to enhance her appearance in order to feel wanted. She ends the video with encouraging words for her Black viewers, "whether your man is white or Black, be authentically you and continue growing within yourself" (25:22-25:38). Contributing to the "kitchen table talk" nature of Black feminist discourse on YouTube and TikTok, Toni Bryanne's video has amassed 102K views, 5.5K likes, and 795 comments. Commenters also start conversations on their own, expressing their agreement or disagreement with Bryanne, or sharing their own personal experiences.

Pasta, Lobster, and Princess Treatment

Oh! Stephco: "It's a Pasta and Lobster Summer Ladies… And I Love That for Us".

Debates surrounding the phenomenon described above typically fall into two main perspectives: one that sees empowerment in the unconventional portrayal of Black women in luxurious romantic relationships, and another that views it as a problematic fetishization of white men. This segment centers on the prior viewpoint, that regards the "hard wig soft life" theory as a positive change in the way Black women are viewed and depicted in the dating scene. According to YouTuber @hellostephco84, otherwise known as Oh! Stephco, the pasta and lobster phenomenon opens Black women up to new possibilities in love and dating. In this video, Oh! Stephco shares her underwhelming dating encounters that resonate with the common narrative of "struggle love" often associated with Black women in mainstream media. Too often, we see unfortunate representations of single motherhood, abandonment, and domestic abuse. Moya Bailey points out that mainstream Black media, including prominent figures like Tyler Perry, is especially culpable in perpetuating this narrative. Perry's collection of "struggle love"

films frequently depict Black women enduring hardships in their personal and romantic relationships. These representations are particularly damaging, as they relay to Black women and girls that they are not deserving of exceptional love stories. For that reason, the pasta and lobster, or "hard wig, soft life" theory is particularly inspiring, as it demonstrates to Black women that lavish, effortless, and affectionate relationships are not just a possibility, but are actively happening in real time. Oh! Stephco's resolve is to "focus on the good stories", which she believes is a positive and necessary switch from the consistent barrage of negative experiences. She urges fellow Black women to do the same, stating, "I encourage you to go find whatever your version of pasta and lobster is. Remember that it's happening, Black women are being treated well. Black women are being loved, Black women are being spoiled, and it could happen to you" (18:08-18:21). Oh! Stephco's video has garnered 33K views, 2.1K likes, and 378 comments, most of which are in agreement with her talking points. Many comments in particular are from Black women sharing their experiences in "pasta and lobster" interracial relationships, showcasing to viewers that this phenomenon is not sporadic, but here to stay.

The Problem with Pasta and Lobster

Elle Pastoral: "We the People vs. Pasta and Lobster (Interracial Fetishization)"

The other side to the pasta and lobster, "hard wig soft life" debate finds issue with the fetishization and romanticization of white men. YouTuber Elle Pastoral particularly detests this frenzy, as it threatens to reinforce harmful narratives about Black women's desirability. While Oh! Stephco finds hope in seeing Black women experience exceptional romances, Pastoral fears for the possible desperation this trend galvanized. Citing TikTok comments as prime examples, Pastoral highlights the problematic comments under "pasta and lobster" videos. Including but not limited to: "where did you get one? Did you get it off Amazon? How did you bag a white man?"

It's important to recognize that not all of these remarks are endorsing the trend or expressing a desire for white partners; some are rooted in irony, sarcasm, and humor, contributing to the skepticism many Black women have towards this phenomenon. While Elle Pastoral's examples may be slightly exaggerated, a brief TikTok search shows that some Black viewers take it to extremes. For example, @keraax commented "do I gotta beg and plead?? When ima get my pasta n lobstaaaa 😩" (2023-12-6), @bonolo_s1 "lyohhhh girl since I was a young I always wanted a white guy and I'm on talking stage with him 🤣🤣❤️❤️❤️" (2024-3-9), and one creators video titled, "they say I'm obsessed with white men and I agree, I like my men pasta and lobster" (@mooo.nakaa, 2024-3-9). Comments like these are not hard to find under pasta and lobster, hard wig soft life, and Black women/white men interracial relationship videos. According to Elle Pastoral, this type of reaction teeters on the line of desperation and fetishization, as this trend places white men on an unearned pedestal. Suddenly white men have become associated with opulence, success, wealth, and most importantly, pasta and lobster. As shown in the aforementioned comments, white men are even likened to food, as some comments simply state "I want pasta and lobster" as interchangeable with expressing interest in white men. Additionally, it can become problematic when white men are praised simply for showing the slightest interest in Black women, further cementing the belief that Black women are not always wanted romantically. Statistics and media already show a particular narrative about Black women in dating, from disappointing marriage projections to offensive Tyler Perry movies. Elle Pastoral believes that some Black women's melodramatic reactions to perceived "pasta and lobster" relationships, reinforce the notion that desiring Black women is so out of the norm that it deserves disproportionate praise; that Black women being treated properly is an extremely rare occurrence. Pastoral closes her video by stating, "how many times must we platform these white

men for having the extraordinary belief that black women are attractive before we get it? (2024, 8:28-8:36)." Although there is nothing inherently wrong with celebrating and highlighting positive and loving relationships, as Black women, we should be cautious of reinforcing stereotypes that society has already imposed on us. Positive relationships and carefree lives should be the standard for Black women, rather than being sensationalized on the internet.

Current Issues: Healthcare Discrimination

The concept of struggle and its impact on Black women ranges from everyday challenges to serious life-threatening situations. This segment examines the current issues plaguing Black women, starting with healthcare discrimination and the harsh realities of racial biases, and ends with the dismissal of Black women's experiences of pain and abuse. From routine medical procedures to childbirth, Black women consistently find themselves wondering, "if I go to this hospital, will they even take me seriously" (Charlemagne, 2022)? This is a direct quote from Berlecia Charlemagne, a Black TikTok user who took to the platform to discuss a recent near-death experience at a local hospital, and she is not the only one. By simply looking up "Black women healthcare" on TikTok, one will find multiple videos on medical negligence and discrimination. But where does this differential treatment come from? What are the effects of medical negligence against Black women? And how are Black women using TikTok to disrupt these systems of oppression? This segment aims to address these questions, revealing the realities of Black women's healthcare experiences along with the benefits and limitations of Black feminist TikTok activism.

In a TikTok titled "Health Inequity Encounters as a Black Women", Berlecia Charlemagne recounts her experience in an emergency room in Atlanta. At the time, Charlemagne was throwing up blood and showing symptoms indicating a stomach ulcer. After

waiting in the ER for seven hours with worsening symptoms, Charlemagne asked to speak to the

nurse in charge. The nurse told her that other people were in worse condition, advising her to

wait since she "looked fine." When Charlemagne was finally able to see an ER nurse ten hours

later, she was once again informed that she "looked fine" and deemed "too young" to complain

of such symptoms. Only when Charlemagne saw her doctor, a middle-aged Black man equipped

with a team of Black nurses, was she diagnosed and given proper treatment. The TikTok ends

with Charlemagne stating, "had I not demanded the adequate care that I needed, I definitely

would not have gotten it; this is not just a coincidence" (2022). What happened to Charlemagne

is an amalgamation of injustices faced by Black women in healthcare resulting from decades of

structural and institutional racism. Charlemagne's story is not an isolated incident, as these

situations occur with frightening regularity. Margo Snipe's (2022) "Clinicians Dismiss Black

Women's Pain. The Consequences Are Dire," addresses the concept of pain and the devaluation

of Black women's suffering that contributes to extended ER wait times. By accessing pain levels,

emergency staff can determine whether or not the patient needs immediate care. Failure to

believe Black women's expressions of pain often leads to delayed care, which can be life

threatening. Snipe (2022) states, "physicians have shown a pattern of distrust when Black

patients seek help with pain, especially Black women. Black patients are significantly less likely

to receive adequate pain treatment across a wide range of diagnoses compared to other patients"

(para. 6). According to Sarai Rodriguez's (2022) article, "Women, Black Patients See Longer

Emergency Wait Times", "Black women with chest pain waited 15 minutes longer than white

women to be evaluated for chest pain in the ER. These delays can have serious implications for

Black patients who already have an increased risk of death caused by premature heart attacks"

(para.8). Particularly in terms of obstetrical care, Black women are more vulnerable to the

harmful effects of racial biases in emergency departments. According to Diechen et al., (2022), not only do Black women seek Emergency Department care the most, they are more at risk for pregnancy related complications, i.e., hypertension, preeclampsia, and depression (p.1). Despite these predispositions and challenges, ED wait times for Black female patients tend to remain prolonged, often waiting "approximately 46% longer than White women with ED visits for pregnancy problems" or not receiving emergency care at all (p. 4). Diechen et al. assert that healthcare provider bias, inequitable triage strategies, affordability concerns, and decreasing availability of emergency department services are critical factors in determining whether or not Black women receive timely care (p.2). Ultimately, the consequences for these discriminatory practices are dire, as many emergency cases are obscure yet time-sensitive, highlighting the need for equitable service. The next section will inspect this topic further, exploring Black women's prenatal healthcare and the healthcare bias contributing to elevated rates of infant and maternal mortality.

Black Women and Maternal Mortality

While systemic racism certainly affects Black women's access to healthcare resources, Mahomes (2020) believes that "regardless of whether a Black woman is afforded access, she is still likely to have negative birth outcomes because of stereotypes and implicit bias" (p. 21). The "Black Super-body myth" coupled with "The Sapphire" and "Angry Black Woman" caricatures create prejudicial thought patterns that manifest in a perfect storm of inequity, leaving Black women in dangerous situations regarding their health. According to a report by The Kirwan Institute, "although the study returned barely any sign of explicit bias, it showed approximately two-thirds of clinicians harbored implicit biases against Black patients. Further research shows implicit bias may cause doctors to spend less time with Black patients, underestimate their

complaints of pain, and ignore their symptoms" (Mahomes, 2020, p. 22). This emulates the experiences of countless Black women, as healthcare providers doubt and minimize their complaints of excruciating pain. This phenomenon is especially prominent in maternity care, as Black women report a growing number of preventable deaths and traumatic birthing experiences. According to ABC News, "Black babies are more than twice as likely to die than white babies, and Black women are four times more likely to die than their white counterparts with the same symptoms" (2020, 5:46). Tragically, two in three pregnancy-related deaths are preventable if timely, quality care is provided (CDC, 2022, para.1.). But, for those with structural and prejudicial barriers, chances of survival differ considerably. The following paragraph discusses the roots of this discriminatory treatment, focusing on the various expressions of anti-Black racism stemming from historical events such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the enactment of Jim Crow laws.

Historical Analysis and Media Representation

Moya Bailey's Misogynoir Transformed highlights the role media representations play in controlling how Black women are viewed and treated. She states, "Black feminist theory clearly articulates the power of the image to serve the hegemony of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" by controlling the way society views marginalized groups and how we view ourselves" (2021, p.1). In accordance with Bailey, these stereotypical images draw attention to the widespread presence of misogynoir in mass media communication, serving as a means to rationalize the disproportionate institutionalized challenges and mistreatment. As Bailey eloquently states, "Black women are caught at a vexing crossroads, hyper visible in media through misogynoir and invisible when in need of lifesaving attention" (p. 6). Rupe Simms'

"Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women" (2001) analyzes the 19th century roots of Black women's experiences with negative media representation. The researcher conducts a literary review and historical analysis of the ways in which controlling images were used during the era of transatlantic slavery to justify the dehumanization of Black women. During this time, the main goal of controlling images was to frame Black women as biologically inferior, made to serve the white family through domestic servitude, breeding, and field labor. As explained by Adams-Bass, "characters and popular culture icons are often crafted on the negative racial stereotypes of the Mammy – asexual, happy, obese, dark-Black, mother figure; Jezebel – the shameless, over sexual, schemer, and Sapphire – the rude, loud, and overbearing emasculator. These historical caricatures have been transformed into contemporary distortions; the welfare queen, who is sexually promiscuous and schemes for money; the video vixen, a loose woman; and the gold-digger, who schemes and exploits the generosity of men" (p.80). According to Simms, these ideas were encouraged in every aspect of 19th century media, from 'science' backed with pseudo-facts and co-signed by 'learned scholars' to popular literature and religious doctrine apparently sanctioned by God and written in scripture. This propaganda was pushed from all sides of the media to ensure society understood Black women's place, framing discrimination and oppression as the natural order.

The Black Super-Body

The belief that Black people are biologically stronger than their white counterparts is a direct manifestation of slavery. In addition to vindicating centuries of abuse, the Black Super-body myth encourages the medicalization and mutilation of Black bodies. Black women faced disproportional mistreatment, as their bodies were regarded as malleable, indestructible, and

expendable. Deirdre Owens' "Medical Bondage" provides an in-depth historical analysis of the severity of said abuse and the scientific racism that justified it. As explained by Owens, "it was out of this putrid environment that the Black medical super-body was birthed and came to represent a being that was treated as something between human and lower primate in sickness and in health" (2017, p. 109). Black women, in particular, had their bodies pushed to the extreme, often being used as test subjects, primarily in gynecological experiments, to fulfill the scientific inquiries of white men. According to Owens (2017), "slavery produced miasmas that polluted all within its reach, including doctors who brought their racial prejudices into examination rooms" (p. 109). The invasion of Black women's bodies for medical experimentation elucidates white doctors' abandonment of ethicality due to the false notion of Black women's heightened ability to withstand inhumane conditions. Bailey (2021) notes Henrietta Lacks as a prime example of said medical negligence and abuse, rooted in scientific racism and sexism as "her health needs mattered only insofar as they were connected to larger scientific needs, interests, and goals" (p.10). This perception of super-humanness robbed Black women of their humanity, a detriment that haunts us to this day. Resultantly, our experiences of pain are continuously invalidated, and even decades later, Black women still do not receive the same care afforded to white patients. These deeply racist stereotypes are entrenched in our institutions, forcing Black women to convince healthcare providers of their pain in an attempt to save their own lives.

The Mule/ The Strong Black Woman

　　　　Currently, in terms of Black female representation, controlling images manifest in two distinct forms, one being the hyper-masculine and hyper-independent woman and the other being

the abused woman. Both originate from the 19th century stereotype of the 'mule'. The sole purpose of the mule image was to justify physical abuse and enslavement against Black women. The idea is that the mule is robust, unwavering and able to withstand all forms of torture. By reducing Black women to the mule, white society stripped them of their humanity. Instead, Black women, like animals, could be worked to death and slaughtered just the same. Today, the mule image has changed with the times. While the Black woman is still viewed as the workhorse, the phrasing has changed, and she is now dubbed the "Strong Black woman". While the mule can withstand physical abuse at the hands of her master, the strong Black woman can withstand all forms of systemic abuse. This woman is expected to work longer hours for less pay, exerting twice the effort to receive only half the recognition whilst sacrificing her own well-being for the sake of others. Popularized by mainstream television and media, the Strong Black Woman trope has haunted us for decades. According to The Take (2020), "its modern image began to take shape in the 1950s and 60s during the Black liberation movement as a means to escape the pervasive negative stereotypes of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire" (5:25).

These three tropes stem from various periods of the Jim Crow Era, each functioning to deny and manipulate Black womanhood in unique ways. The Strong Black Woman, however, allowed us to detach from these images as it represented independence and offered recognition for our ability to resist and withstand hardship. Following Dr. Yvette Cozier (2022), "the myth is of a proud, no-nonsense woman who faces adversity with wisdom, but in the end, she must accept her fate" (para. 2). Similarly, The Take (2020) describes the SBW in television as "supernaturally strong, inspirational characters who can endure extreme suffering and still be okay" (9:02). But, as stated by a commenter on the previously cited YouTube video, "this stereotype literally kills us in the medical field" (The Take, 2020). What was supposed to be a

pivot from harmful labels created an insidious caricature that frames every Black woman as inherently strong and unable to feel mental and/or physical pain. As stated by Tricia Hersey, founder of The Nap Ministry, the Strong Black Woman archetype allows for constant abuse and manipulation as women of the Black diaspora are deemed superhuman. This stereotype strips Black women of their humanity and vulnerability, leading doctors to overlook their pain because of the perception of unwavering strength. Like Berlecia Charlemagne, Black women are dismissed and advised to "go home and rest" while their conditions and symptoms worsen. Unlike our white counterparts, Black women are not afforded the privilege of being seen as delicate or fragile. Instead, we are expected to exhibit strength and resilience in the face of life-threatening circumstances. And resultantly, Black women who demand proper care are met with more stereotypes framing them as sassy, unyielding, and abrasive. Enter the Angry Black Woman and Sapphire archetypes.

The Sapphire/ The Angry Black Woman

"The Strong Black Woman " archetype works in tandem with the "Angry Black Woman" caricature. Also normalized through mainstream media and television, this trope breeds misogynoir and unwarranted animosity towards Black women (Bailey, 2021, p. 59.). Fuelling the belief that we are excessive and unreasonable, the Sapphire stereotype "paints us as irrationally mad – and is commonly trotted out to position us as the hysterical opposite to men's (especially white men's) rationality" (Everyday Feminism, para. 9). The image of the quick and ill-tempered Black woman fosters long-lasting prejudicial notions that rob us of our individuality, creating a reverse halo-effect that encourages people to assume the worst. In "The Halo Effect Fallacy", Grcic (2008) describes the reverse halo effect as "the tendency to form a generally negative opinion given a negative trait which would be the "Black" side in a bifurcation" (p. 4). Using

public speaking as an example, Grcic (2008) explains how "someone awkward and shy in public speaking situations may be assumed to have other negative qualities such as low intelligence and poor administrative skills yet there is no necessary connection between these qualities' ' (p. 4). The same goes for Black women, as the assumption of Sapphire traits homogenizes us all. As explained by Mahomes (2020), "the perception that Black women are angry and argumentative may contribute to a doctor's unwillingness to heed a Black patient's complaints. The doctor may perceive the patient as unnecessarily hostile and therefore disregard her symptoms" (p. 23). Similar to the effects of the Strong Black Woman trope, which justifies the minimization of Black pain, The Sapphire stereotype supports a complete dismissal of Black women's suffering. Doctors become unconsciously annoyed with Black women, eliminating any capacity for compassion (Mahomes, 2020, p. 24). These implicit biases also create a paradox, as Black women must speak up for themselves in hospital environments, an act regularly misconstrued as "forceful" and "egregious," further cementing this anti-Black rhetoric. In sum, all these stereotypes intertwine, contributing to the reinforcement of a systemic pattern of institutionalized discrimination that ultimately puts Black women's lives at risk.

Stereotypes in Practice: Black Motherhood On-screen

The Black matriarch is a character that has been distorted and devalued for decades. She typically falls into two categories: strong, selfless and unyielding (the mule stereotype) or loud, sassy, and emasculating (the sapphire stereotype). Although some African American sit-coms featured Black mothers who subverted these tropes, proving to be assertive yet loving and gentle. However, dramatic Black movies, or "African American Horror Films," do not usually follow this image. Instead, viewers are presented with one of the two caricatures mentioned earlier, often accompanied by a precarious living situation and an abusive partner. According to Sesali

Bowen in the publication *Refinery 29*, Black motherhood seems to be represented on two ends of a spectrum. She states, "Representations of Black motherhood in pop culture always sit in the realm of super positive and aspirational, or bastions of malaise and trauma. For every Rainbow Johnson (Tracee Ellis Ross) on *Black-ish (2014)*, cozily living out her upper-middle class life as a wife and physician, there is one of the mother figures in Tyler Perry's universe, thriving on chaos and resentment" (para.2). In agreement with Bowen's sentiments, these representations indeed lack realism, "at best, they represent exceptional cases; if not, gross exaggerations" (para.2). Again, the humanization aspect is lost, as both depictions of Black motherhood are one-dimensional. The strong, unwavering, "does it all" Black mother is not realistic for most Black households, nor is the traumatizing, abusive Black matriarch. Bowen cites predominantly white-casted television shows like *Shameless*, which give white mothers the dimension Black mothers do not receive. She states, "Take *Shameless* matriarch Fiona Gallagher (Emmy Rossum), for example. She isn't a mom, but the older sister, forced to step in and raise her siblings thanks to her father's irresponsibility. Their family is a literal cesspool of poverty, drinking, drugs, and criminal activity, but the tone of *Shameless* isn't daunting. Instead, Fiona is humanized and complex…White mother figures get to define the norm in every sense of the word" (para.5). From sitcoms to mainstream dramas, white motherhood can range from soft-spoken Rebecca Katsopolis (*Full House, 1987*) to smart-mouthed Georgia Miller (*Ginny & Georgia, 2021*). Similarly, different aspects of white womanhood can exist in a single character. Using Georgia Miller as an example, she represents an imperfect woman who experiences both affluence and poverty. Notably, while her troubled past is a crucial part of her characterization, we quickly learn there is more to her than struggle. The Miller family matriarch can be cunning, quick-witted, violent, sensitive, and charming, all in one episode. She is a complex individual before

she is a white woman. Therefore, the main difference is not merely positive or negative representation, but variety. Most people who grew up in African American or African diasporic households do not experience the sensationalized, traumatizing, or over-the-top upbringing represented in Black cinema. Many Black mothers simply exist in between and not at the end of some exaggerated spectrum. These representations point back to the belief that Black stories must be unbelievably chaotic and riddled with hardship to be considered valuable. But the bottom line is, accurate Black representation sells. POC normalcy can be just as interesting as white normalcy. Citing Bowen, "It's time for Hollywood to realize that our commonalities are important, too" (para.5). The ordinary Black family is just as valuable as the everyday white family. This must also be depicted on-screen to provide a multi-dimensional portrayal of Black matriarchs and the nuclear Black family.

Black Women On-Screen (Rethought)

In order to subvert these images and reverse the effects, complex Black female leads must be shown on screen. Highlighting the significance of positive and diverse portrayals of Black womanhood underscores a growing departure from stereotypical roles. As noted in the previous chapter, Black female filmmakers Shonda Rhimes, Ava DuVernay, Issa Rae, and Quinta Brunson represent the rise in diverse representations of Black female identities. Shonda Rhimes has created a new terrain for Black female leads, as shows like Scandal (2012), How to Get Away with Murder (2014), and Bridgerton (2021) showcase sexually empowered and powerful Black female leads in interracial relationships. DuVernay also achieves this by focusing on political narratives celebrating Black futurism and pride. Additionally, Issa Rae and Quinta Brunson contribute to the emergence of the "ordinary Black girl" archetype, disrupting

the idea that Black women must be hyper-glamorized to be deemed interesting and attractive.

Most notably, in each of these new representations, Blackness is portrayed as just one aspect of

these multidimensional characters, not the sole defining characteristic of their entire identity.

While these representations are not perfect or overwhelmingly positive, they provide the

necessary nuance that disrupts monolithic imagery.

Similar to how offensive media reproduces harmful representations, positive shows also

have the capacity to transform our perceptions of specific groups. While these characters are not

'perfect' representations, they are at the very least, dynamic, multi-dimensional, and most

importantly, human. We can only hope that filmmakers and producers continue to give Black

characters the same development afforded to white characters. This is why collectives like

Netflix's "Strong Black Lead" are so important, as they actively "amplify content specifically

targeted to various slices of the Black experience" (para.4). Showing, finally, that the Black

experience is not monolithic, nor synonymous with hardship and abuse. In the words of Netflix's

"Strong Black Lead" marketing team, "playing kings and queens of our neighborhoods.

Defeating larger-than-life forces, trying to flip our world upside down. We stand up, on any stage

and every screen. A day when Black women are boldly the lead characters, whether inmates or

scholars, we are not a genre. Because there's no one way to be Black. We are writing while

Black. Nuanced and complex. Resilient and strong" (Netflix, 2021).

The Digital Kitchen Table Talk: Impact

Bailey highlights the importance of transformation in discussions of misogynoir and

adversity by addressing the myriad of ways Black women fight to destroy these narratives. She

states, "I did not want to account for all the vile and deleterious hate that is misogynoir without

making it clear that there are those of us working to transform it", championing Black women's digital content creation as harm-reduction strategies (Bailey, 2021, p. 26). Since negative representations directly correlate to Black women's mistreatment in society, representations to the contrary are crucial to mitigate these realities. The content created by Black women on YouTube and TikTok manifests as "a praxis designed to create better representations for those most marginalized, through the implementation of networks of care beyond the boundaries of the digital from which it springs" (p. 24). Circling back to the concept of the "digital kitchen table talk", Black women utilize digital tools, particularly self-broadcasting platforms not only to raise awareness about important issues but also to connect with each other. Much of the hardship Black women endure is covert, masked in seemingly empowering narratives and storylines. Therefore, it is largely up to us to uncover, theorize, and challenge them. It is through Black women's use of social media that a simple rap song became the catalyst for transforming the ways Black women view their own desirability. With countless videos on both TikTok and YouTube created on Black feminist topics, Black women have forged digital third places for one another to engage in meaningful conversations, despite inevitable debates and differing viewpoints. However, the true question remains, are these spaces for discussion and theorizing truly inciting a departure from anti-Black, misgynoiristic, white supremacist rhetoric? And if so, how can we evaluate the impact and influence of Black women's digital innovation in terms of its visible effects on both Black women and society as a whole? Black women's mobilization of social media platforms has made discussions on beauty standards, media representation, implicit bias, dating demographics, algorithmic oppression, systemic discrimination, cultural appropriation, and colorism easily accessible in user-friendly formats. From short TikTok clips to lengthier YouTube videos, Black feminist content is more accessible now than ever. Here,

Black women do not need access to scholarly sources or prestigious universities to understand and communicate their experiences to others. Now, Black women do not even have to be in the same physical space to find a sense of community through collective ordeals. Through digital alchemy, Black women have empowered themselves to advocate for change, whether it be in terms of their media portrayal, social and institutional recognition, or internal beliefs. In turn, the vast outreach potential of these platforms enables content to reach a larger audience than ever before. Years of self-broadcasting and advocacy has sparked a demand for positive representation in mainstream media and online algorithms. So much so, that changes are occurring, slowly but surely. The work Black women have done to carve a place for themselves online can be seen in Halle Bailey's portrayal of Ariel in the Little Mermaid, in #BlackGirlMagic twitter posts, and in TikTok's dedicated search page for Black women identities that includes an empowerment section. Through creating our own visibility, we not only liberate ourselves but also pave the way for future generations of Black women.

Conclusion: Must We Always Fight for Ourselves?

The beginning of this chapter states, "Black women have never accepted societal domination. Constantly fighting against racist and patriarchal structures, resilience is an understatement". While this is an empowering sentiment, it is precisely this mindset that puts so many of us in danger. This chapter touched on media representation and its substantial impact on the perception and treatment of Black women in society. In agreement with The Take, "loss of social standing is an ever-present threat for individuals whose social acceptance is based on behavioral traits rather than unconditional human value" (2020, 15:00). While The Sapphire and Strong Black Woman may seem like empowering archetypes that illuminate the resilience that we certainly have, "these dangerous tropes mean life or death for Black women" (Samuel:

para.6.). We must receive recognition for our uniqueness, individuality, and humanity. Black women are not a monolith. We are diverse within ourselves, and society must understand that. Social media platforms, despite their limitations, have given us a chance to tell our stories, free from the constricting archetypes of the media. Black women speak about their experiences openly, letting their diverse identities and positionalities shine through. Authentic representation and community education are the core impacts of digital Black feminism. It provides a platform for Black women to represent themselves authentically and, more importantly, on their terms. Perhaps this understanding may finally afford us the compassion and empathy we have needed for centuries. Proving the onus should not be solely on Black women to advocate for and save themselves. Liberation is a joint effort, and with the cards stacked against us, we do not need reminders of struggle and resilience; we need support.

Final Conclusion: Digital Third Places, Turning Media in Gold

TikToker @ivy4evr's video titled "Just Some Black Girl Advice:)" goes out to all of the young Black girls who have felt undervalued at any point in their lives, especially in terms of validation, desirability, and visibility. Speaking on the experience of Black girls in predominantly white institutions, @ivy4evr reassures her viewers that "There is light at the end of the tunnel. You are not this unattractive person that your environment is setting you up to be. I know from personal experience; it can feel so lonely growing up with the world viewing you as that. It 1000%, hands down, gets better" (2024). With over 128,000 likes, 600 comments, 12,000 saves, and 1,000 shares, the impact of Black female content creation is clear.

As mentioned throughout this piece, Moya Bailey (2021) likens alchemy, "the 'science' of turning regular metals into gold" to "the ways that women of color, Black women in particular, transform everyday digital media into valuable social justice media magic that recodes failed dominant scripts" (p. 24). Due to the systemic nature of Black women's oppression, much of the mistreatment we face is inconspicuously hidden in plain sight. It is in the media we consume, the products we buy, and the institutions to which we belong. And oftentimes, it is up to us to identify, unravel, and unlearn the scripts that pervade every facet of our lives. Therefore, from twenty-minute YouTube videos to ten-minute TikToks, Black women utilize every online resource to let our voices be heard. As commonly held notions about Black female identities rise through social media, so do we. By showcasing current conversations Black women engage in, along with the impact it has on Black viewers, *Digital Kitchen Table Talks: Black Feminist Discourse in the Age of Social Media* champions the valuable work of Black female content creators and highlights the empowerment derived from these newfound third places.

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