

The Making of Unapologetic Blackness: Black Women, Media, and Meaning-  
Making

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## Dedication

This is for me. For never giving up on 10-year-old Monica's dreams and for becoming my ancestors' wildest dreams!

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## Playlists for Each Chapter

### Introduction:

Rihanna This is What You Came For  
Estelle Conquer  
Glorilla Let Her Cook  
Diana Ross I'm Coming Out  
Missy Elliot I'm Better  
Lizzo Good as Hell  
Jill Scott Golden  
India Arie Beautiful Day  
Sounds of Blackness Optimistic  
Ciara Level Up  
Destiny's Child Survivor  
Victoria Monet On My Mama  
ChloexHalle Do It  
City Girls Act Up  
Rihanna Bitch Better Have My Money

### Sisterhood Chapter:

Angie Stone Girlfriends Theme song  
Queen Latifah Living Single Theme Song  
Ella Mai Shot Clock  
Ella Mai Sink or Swim  
Ella Mai DFMU  
Ella Mai Pieces  
Ella Mai Trying  
Ella Mai ft Roddy Rich How  
Ella Mai Fallen Angel  
Ella Mai Leave You Alone  
Ella Mai Boo'd Up  
Ella Mai Trip  
Mahalia ft Ella Mai What You Did  
Mahalia ft Jojo Cheat  
Mahalia Terms and Conditions  
Aleza, Gloss Up, Slimeroni, & K Carbon Shabooya roll call

### Vulnerability Chapter:

Jazmine Sullivan's Heaux Tales Mo' Tales  
Bodies (Intro)  
Antoinette's Tale  
Pick Up Your Feelings

Ari's Tale  
Put It Down  
On It (Ft. Ari Lennox)  
Donna's Tale  
Pricetags (Ft. Anderson .Paak)  
Rashida's Tale  
Lost One  
Precious' Tale  
The Other Side  
Amanda's Tale  
Girl Like Me (Ft. H.E.R.)  
Issa's Tale  
Tragic  
Jazzy's Tale  
Hurt Me So Good  
A Breaux's Tale  
Roster  
Mona's Tale  
BPW  
Shanti's Tale  
Selfish

Respect Chapter:

Mary J Blige Real Love  
Aretha Franklin RESPECT  
Keke Palmer Assets  
Melanie Fiona It Kills Me  
Ari Lennox Get Close  
Mahalia ft Burna Boy Simmer  
Kelly Rowland ft Beyoncé and Michelle Williams You've Changed  
Fantasia ft Kelly Rowland and Missy Elliot Without Me  
Nicki Minaj Red Ruby Da Sleaze  
Jordin Sparks Call My Name  
Pink Pantheress Capable of Love  
Mariah the Scientist From A Woman  
Tems Me & U  
SZA Snooze  
Mariam Davina Can't Get Enough  
Tinashe Needs  
Megan Thee Stallion Cognac Queen

Conclusion:

Aaliyah Try Again  
Janet Jackson That's The Way Love Goes  
Megan Thee Stallion Hiss  
Beyonce Texas Hold Em  
Tyla Truth or Dare  
Lee Vasi Teach Me  
Lee Vasi My Bad  
Mary J Blige Gone Forever  
Tierra Whack 27 Club  
Mya Anytime  
DOE Holy Hands  
Anna Field Sing to Me  
Ayra Starr Commas  
DOE Breathe

# Introduction

## “And I’m Black Y’all”: An Introduction to Unapologetic Blackness

Light ain’t always loud, but you know it’s there. - Michelle Williams

The spark for this dissertation began long before my graduate studies. As a child, my parents would read me bedtime stories. And every book that my mom bought for me featured people who looked like me. My mom understood that representation mattered and that the mainstream did not always favor Black people in ways that were favorable. Now that I have a 3 year-old niece, I only buy her story books that feature Black characters just as my mother did for me. This, in my own way, is being unapologetic and celebratory of my Blackness.

As a Black woman who does Black feminist media studies, I’ve noticed that the scholarship is not geared towards favorable representations of Black people and Black women in general. While the scholarship does analyze the social inequities and inequalities that Black people face, the tendency to see only grim sides of representation is what I refer to as the doom and gloom of Black studies. The turn to and utilization of Afropessimism, is prevalent in Black studies and often offers a disparaging look into Blackness. This is not universal to media studies, but there is rarely space or the study of anything else. While valid, and important, for my dissertation I want to look beyond the study of inadequacy that is often tied to Black studies because Blackness is not solely deficit, in terms of representations, stereotypes, or otherwise.

This project is situated in what Melissa Harris Perry (2011) coined “the crooked room,” in which Black women’s images have been warped by historical tropes or what Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) calls “controlling images” that reinforce stereotypes and degrade the humanity of Black women. It is these distorted images that create a crooked room that Black women must navigate around socially constructed identities of Blackness. This analysis, while valid, is based on a deficit model of Blackness and Black women. In the study of the oversexualization and hypervisibility of Black women and Black women’s bodies, very few of the characterizations explored by most scholars venture beyond these readings of Black representations (Harris Perry, 2011).

To approach this project’s analysis, I see myself reclaiming narratives based on stereotypes or other oppressive narratives about Black women; I am reclaiming media narratives from afropessimistic approaches as well as nuancing the ways in which Black women are visibilized, invisibilized, hypervisibilized, and objectified in media and across popular culture. The Oxford Languages Dictionary (n.d.) defines Reclamation as “the process of claiming something back or of reasserting a right” (Oxford languages, n.d.). Through my work, I am reasserting the right to exist with light and love in spite of the gendered and racialized hegemonic systems that perpetuate cultural dominance over me and other Black women.

This dissertation is first and foremost for Black women from a Black woman. I want to add that Black womanhood is not just for those who identify as a Black women, but is for the feminine adjacent, the genderqueer, the gender fluid, and all those who have ever been mistaken for a Black woman. As Simone De Beauvoir (2023) states “one is not

born, but rather becomes, woman” (p.283). To which Judith Butler (2011) adds that gendering occurs through a repeated embodying of norms that are both simultaneously expected and forced upon those to whom the expectation is addressed; in this way, gender becomes performative. This is only compounded through race- and gender-based expectations and stereotypes. Thus, for Black women especially who face the embodied and material consequences of racial and gendered oppression this dissertation is for you, and for the Black femmes, Black females, Black feminine-aligned, Black feminists, and genderqueer, non-gender conforming—all those who’ve had a Black feminine experience.

Rather than viewing Blackness through lenses imposed by dominant white supremacist social narratives, Unapologetic Blackness, as I define it, embraces a multi-dimensional approach to Black identity. I seek to demonstrate how Unapologetic Blackness not only serves as a form of individual and collective expression but also operates as a transformative social force that disrupts stereotypical representations and reifies sisterhood, vulnerability, and a radical commitment to respect for Black women. The primary argument of this dissertation is that Unapologetic Blackness--expressed through the intertwined practices of sisterhood, vulnerability, and respect--constitutes a radical and necessary reclamation of external narratives that seek to limit or control Black expression and identity. This is especially important for Black women who live in a society that has historically marginalized and misrepresented them.

Through each chapter, I argue that the practices of Unapologetic Blackness serve to re-story the foundational structures of afropessimism, challenge respectability politics,

disrupt controlling images, and resist and subvert one-dimensional representations of Black women. Re-storying combats the single story discourse, a framework that reduces diverse identities to a monolithic, through narrative participation— it is a form of identity bending, in which individuals “are responding as they witness people’s lived identities being represented, misrepresented, or erased” (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p.330). In unpacking two media objects, Amazon Prime’s *Harlem* and Jazmine Sullivan’s extended play *Heaux Tales*, I elucidate how both pieces of media embody Unapologetic Blackness by re-storying Black women’s experiences and offering multidimensional portrayals of Black identity.

In the first chapter, “Sisterhood has entered the Groupchat,” I examine sisterhood as the foundational practice of Unapologetic Blackness, emphasizing the power of communal bonds among Black women. I argue that sisterhood serves as a practice that creates safe spaces where Black women can support one another, affirm each other’s identities, and resist isolation imposed by structural and interpersonal discrimination. Sisterhood, in this context, extends beyond mere friendship to encompass a deeper, almost familial sense of responsibility and care that is essential to sustaining Black womanhood. In this vein, Amazon Prime’s *Harlem* presents an intriguing entry point into understanding mediated representations of Black women’s sisterhood, as well as the intertextuality of media driving such representations, due to it being created by a Black woman, centering Black women characters, and being targeted at Black audiences. This chapter demonstrates how these bonds provide a counterpoint to the pervasive narratives that often seek to undermine Black women’s solidarity.

In the second chapter, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” I explore vulnerability as a practice of Unapologetic Blackness, through Jazmine Sullivan’s extended play *Heaux Tales*. This EP offers a frank exploration of Black women’s vulnerability as they navigate their identities and desires in ways that resist commodification and objectification. I argue that Black women’s vulnerability allows for a fuller expression of affective openness that functions as an act of resistance. This chapter analyzes how Black women’s willingness to embrace vulnerability disrupts controlling images of the “strong Black woman,” and instead positions Black women as fully realized individuals with diverse affective landscapes. Vulnerability, as I present it, is not weakness; rather, it is a means of reclaiming control over self-representation, rejecting the limitations of respectability politics, and fostering deeper connections of sisterhood.

In the third chapter, “Respectfully, You Gonna Respect Me,” I focus on Black women’s demand for respect both as an internal sense of self-worth and as an external demand for recognition and dignity. Respect, as I define it, insists on the inherent dignity of Black womanhood and challenges representations that perpetuate disrespect. I argue that within Unapologetic Blackness, respect moves beyond personal respectability politics to include a collective call for acknowledgment and fair treatment. In this chapter, I examine *Harlem* to demonstrate how Black women are able to confront societal expectations of code switching and respectability politics. I also use *Heaux Tales* to elucidate how disrespectability politics challenge societal expectations and expands the understanding of Black womanhood as fully complex and deserving of respect.

In the concluding chapter, “Was. Is. Will.,” I examine the temporal nature of Unapologetic Blackness, and highlight the dynamic ways that the representations in *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* show how sisterhood, vulnerability, and respect function as everyday acts of resistance and solidarity that challenge restrictive norms, disrupt mainstream narratives, and redefine the multiplicity of Black experiences. Together, these works illustrate Unapologetic Blackness as a holistic and multi-dimensional approach that defies limiting narratives and redefines Black womanhood, positioning Blackness not as “other” but as an autonomous identity worthy of respect.

Each chapter contributes to the overall argument by dissecting the practices of sisterhood, vulnerability, and respect and illustrating how they interact to form a comprehensive framework of Unapologetic Blackness. Through sisterhood, Black women establish solidarity which allows space for vulnerability, which rejects reductive stereotypes, and reconfigures the parameters of Black identity, all of which demand respect. This dissertation ultimately argues that Unapologetic Blackness, as defined by these practices, re-stories the representation of Black women.

### **Defining Unapologetic Blackness**

My theorization of Unapologetic Blackness functions as a multi-dimensional framework rooted in theories of representation and power, each offering a pathway to reclaiming and asserting Black identity against reductive, white-dominated narratives. Relying on Stuart Hall’s (2006) and Herman Gray’s (2013) theories on media representation, Unapologetic Blackness highlights and critiques how Black identities are framed in media, arguing that *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* use complex portrayals of Black

women to reject controlling images and stereotypical tropes. Informed by Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality and Patricia Hill Collins' theory of controlling images (2000), Unapologetic Blackness shifts power away from one-dimensional narratives of victimhood and instead presents Black womanhood as multi-dimensional. Finally, Unapologetic Blackness utilizes Audre Lorde's (1993) theory of the erotic to demonstrate the power of joy in these media representations. This reclamation of affect challenges the emotional control exerted by stereotypes, instead highlighting the agency Black women exercise over their narratives, and centers their joy. By synthesizing these theories, Unapologetic Blackness emerges as a framework that emphasizes how Black women define their own narratives and create spaces where joy can flourish outside of oppressive structures of racism and sexism. Together, these theories elucidate Unapologetic Blackness as a transformative practice that defines how Black women and Black communities are understood.

My definition of Unapologetic Blackness is an expression of Black sociality that is radical in its creation of safe spaces for Black women to be their full selves—emotionally vulnerable and demanding respect. This demonstration of personal autonomy is often illegible to white imaginings and thus often feared or constrained by white supremacist ideologies of Blackness. Unapologetic Blackness is essentially an expression of Black public pleasure, which is oftentimes illegible to white audiences due to white supremacist narratives that often impose shame on perceptions of Black pleasure. As Jennifer Nash (2014) contends “Blackness must be understood as a complex circuit of desires and pleasures that constrains and violates while pleasuring and titillating, and as a

construction that can produce embodied delight. ...The possibility of ecstasy—and the freedoms that ecstasy can bring—hinges on it” (p.151). This is significant because the expression of Black public pleasure tends to make white people uncomfortable oppositional as it is to stereotypical discourse of Black social death (Brown, 2020). However, Unapologetic Blackness centers the joy of Blackness.

I am not the first to theorize Unapologetic Blackness, nor will I be the last. Although it is most commonly theorized colloquially and undertheorized in academic scholarship at the moment, when scholars have discussed Unapologetic Blackness it is in terms of educational settings or instances of violence and political strife (Lenning 2017; Shange, 2016; Lundquist, 2022). Allen and Miles (2020) define Unapologetic Blackness as “the centering of Black identity and culture in places and spaces where race is neutralized and racial politics are silenced or ignored” (p.377). And while I agree with their definition, I would like to add my own theoretical framing. For this project, I will be using the term unapologetic as a noun, verb, and adjective. I want to spend some time with the dictionary definitions of these words as a base to demonstrate how I am theoretically expanding and explicating the terms. In opposition to the unapologetic, one must understand the antagonism of the apologetic to elucidate why the unapologetic is a necessary lens for examining Black media representations.

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines “apologetic” as adjective meaning,

“1: feeling or showing regret : regretfully acknowledging fault or failure :  
expressing an apology

2: offered in defense or vindication.”

I use the term apologetic as a modifier needed in conjunction with Blackness. I am purposely leaving the term Blackness undefined. In its undefined state, it can be varied, disparate, distinct, and distinguishable; in other words, I will leave the door open for all forms of Blackness to be included in this theorization of the Unapologetic.

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines “unapologetic” as an adjective meaning,

“1: not apologetic :

2: offered, put forward, or being such without apology or qualification.”

I want to expand on this viewpoint of a quality not diminished by apology. The modifying prefix “un” serves to separate repentance or regret from Blackness. As a noun, the Unapologetic anchors a state of being or a mindset. As an adjective, Unapologetic in conjunction with the word Blackness, enhances the term Unapologetic Blackness to a state of being. There are no assumptions about Blackness in the employment of the term. As a verb, unapologetic socially undoes any apologies or qualifications associated with the term Blackness. As a non-fixed sign, I am anchoring the unapologetic following Stuart Hall's (2013) concept of the "floating signifier:" a symbol or signifier that lacks a fixed or stable meaning and can have various interpretations depending on context and social practices around it. As a floating signifier, Unapologetic Blackness can be mobilized to signify different social constructions or ideologies of Blackness, making it a potent tool for forms of collective identity and ideological contestation of Blackness as a monolith.

Unapologetic Blackness is not an equation in the same way as the phrase “Black is Beautiful.” In the 1960s, when the Black is Beautiful movement first emerged, the phrase equated Black to beauty. This enthymeme challenges implied sociocultural norms of Eurocentricity determining value (Baird, 2021). My conceptualization of Unapologetic Blackness goes beyond such aesthetics and centers agency in social, political, and economic spaces without compromising or minimizing expressions of Black culture or experiences.

Unapologetic Blackness is based on three key practices, which I will explore in depth in each chapter of this dissertation: 1) community, 2) vulnerability, and 3) agency as it manifests in respect. The media objects *Harlem* and Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales* exemplify Unapologetic Blackness through their intentional rejection of respectability politics and their nuanced portrayals of Black womanhood, offering both personal and communal explorations that reflect lived realities of Black women.

All of these practices that express Unapologetic Blackness change through time. As the expression of Unapologetic Blackness evolves over time, it is important to note that this is in conjunction with “how Black people survive and thrive in suppressive social conditions where antiBlackness perniciously evolves across time and space” (Allen and Miles, 2020, p.393). Unapologetic Blackness thus changes and modifies to respond to the time in which we live. Now, in the post-Covid era, when Black communities are twice as likely to be affected by the virus, and Black maternal mortality rates are skyrocketing in the U.S. over the last decade, it is clear that anti-Blackness still reigns in the contemporary sociohealth paradigm (DeSimone, 2022; Hoyert, 2023). Additionally,

in the wake of George Floyd, Daunte Wright, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black men and women lost to police violence, anti-Blackness persists with policing in the skewed criminal justice system in the United States. As Herman Gray (2013) notes,

We presume that a corrective to the [oftentimes negative] image[s of Blackness] would repair lost dignity, redress resources imbalances, and help generate recognition, empathy, and trust that might lead to more care and protection for all of us. However, getting the story straight in terms of authenticity, generating more and better facts, and telling better and more accurate and representative stories seem no longer sufficient to redress injury or generate new practices of equality in the moment of racism after race. Given the digital capabilities and platforms of circulation and connection, cultural critiques of the existing order and imaginings of new practices of equality may also require attending more closely to media's role in gathering and deploying sentiments, in building attachment, belonging, exclusion, and resentment. This means thinking about the work of race in media (and media on questions of race) along the lines of media circulation, intensification, and proliferation of affective investments and not just the legibility and authenticity of representation. (p.792-793)

Simply improving media portrayals of Blackness is insufficient to address racial inequality in a digital era where media shape our emotional attachments, senses of belonging, and forms of exclusion. Instead, I want to trouble this idea of authenticity, which denotes a certain essentialism about what representations could be.

## **Circulating Blackness**

Market considerations contribute to depictions of Blackness as spectacle (Balaji, 2009). From Black minstrel shows to current displays of, “Black suffering and Black social misery, Black oppression and Black exploitation has become a major part— if not the motor inside of the merciless, macabre-making machine— of the US entertainment industry” (Rabaka, 2013, p.130). In the 1920s, white youth appropriated jazz as a form of rebellion, in the 1950s, they embraced rock and roll for dissent, and in the 1990s, they adopted hip hop as youth culture (Rabaka, 2013). These patterns illustrate how the market drives representations of Black culture in media, shaping them to appeal to broader audiences while often erasing their origins. For example, jazz and hip hop, initially rooted in Black communities as expressions of resistance and identity, were commodified and repackaged for white consumption, reinforcing racial and cultural hierarchies. Understanding this requires situating these representations within the broader history of liberal capitalism, where racialized gender and sexual diversity in Black cultural formations is both shaped by and reflective of global capitalist trends.

This historical context reveals that the racialized gender and sexual diversity in African American culture reflects broader patterns within global capitalist production. The ideologies constructed in Western popular culture by the globalized economy have played a significant role in the production of otherness; yet “agency and leverage are complicated by racial dynamics when it comes to Black women performers in cultural industries” (Balaji, 2009, pp. 229-230). This cultural circulation shapes perceptions and influences local practices worldwide; however, when Black women enter cultural

industries, they often encounter additional complexities tied to race. Yet despite these challenges, Black music—often a vehicle for protest—serves as a powerful medium, fostering communal solidarity and shared resilience within its audience (Morant, 2011).

Popular culture narratives of race and gender hold the power to dominate musical representations of Black artists and perpetuate misogynoir. Thus, using Black music as an insight into the racialized sociopolitical values of the United States allows perspective on Black female musicians in generating alternative narratives on sexuality and power.

*Heaux Tales* as a case study is significant because it challenges the limits placed on Black female sexuality. Historically, Black music culture has built its reputation on the hypersexualization of African Americans, and certain Black music genres, such as hip hop, generates large profits for record companies with sales and advertisements targeted at teenage listeners—e.g., ages 13 to 18 (Yousman, 2003). Commercial music uses controlling imagery treating women as exploitable sexual objects (Hunter, 2011; Sharpley-Whiting, 2007). It is such treatments of sexuality that further commercialize Black womanhood (Hunter & Soto, 2009). A prominent example of this exploitation is seen in the hypersexualized portrayal of Black women in many mainstream hip-hop and R&B music videos, where Black women are positioned as "video vixens" and reduced to accessories that enhance the appeal of male artists. This portrayal of Black women creates a feedback loop that impacts societal perceptions, as these controlling images continuously shape public notions of Black femininity, often to the detriment of authentic self-representation. Mako Fitts (2008) further complicates this narrative by adding that while Black women like the video vixens may control their personal sexuality, the

context in which they labor creates the conditions under which they form relationships with men and other women. These conditions structure an entertainment imaginary that defines Black female talent as "ho's" to be consumed, both in front of and behind the camera (p.221).

The consumption politics of Black music must be examined through the lens of race and gender. As the music industry is male dominated, Rhythm & Blues (R&B) is no exception to centering the male gaze (McMillan, 2022). Since its inception, R&B has been predominantly masculine with a magnified heteronormative culture. And although Jazmine Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* occupies this genre, she more closely exemplifies Gwendolyn Pough's (2004) point that Black female artists construct and articulate race, gender, and sexuality, in such a way as to nuance representations of Black womanhood. Black women's participation in cultural production can, therefore, resist the male gaze to more fully account for Black experiences. However, the music industry does generate profit from the hypersexualization of Black women and this must be acknowledged and accounted for in any analysis of music produced by this industry. My dissertation does this using the frame of Unapologetic Blackness.

Jazmine Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* exemplifies how racialized capitalism in the music industry not only shapes but also limits the reach of Black artists by confining them to genre categories grounded in race. As Arewa (2010) describes, the industry's race-based categorization system requires artists categorized as "Black" to first succeed within the Black music market before crossing over to pop charts. Sullivan's *Heaux Tales*, which openly addresses Black women's sexuality, desire, and vulnerability,

remains situated within the confines of R&B or soul—genres traditionally marketed to Black audiences. While the album’s success illustrates a demand for portrayals of Black womanhood, its placement within this category also demonstrates how record labels and consumers capitalize on the hypersexualization and commodification of Black women. This framework not only reinforces racial and gendered stereotypes but also underscores the economic motivations behind such categorizations, revealing how capitalistic systems profit from limited representations of Black women’s experiences while restricting their access to broader, mainstream audiences.

The separation and genre commoditization of Black music as race records operates as a “structure of stealing”—that is, overlooking or taking from Black talent and Black labor in the music industry (Kelley, 2002, p.7). Black people have long been cut out from receiving profits from music they created—for example, widespread use of cover versions of R&B songs by rock and rollers with no or few royalties paid by the record labels (Garofalo, 2002; Mahon, 2020).

In terms of audience consumption, “White listeners can consume the music and images of a corporate construction of Blackness while maintaining a safe distance from Black pain and institutional racism (Hunter, 2011, p. 18). An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the popularity of hip-hop and rap music among white audiences, especially with artists like Glorilla. Glorilla's mainstream success exemplifies how corporate constructions of Blackness are packaged for mass consumption, allowing white audiences to enjoy her music and persona while avoiding engagement with the systemic racism and struggles underlying her artistry. Her image and sound are marketed

in ways that emphasize entertainment over the deeper social and cultural contexts they emerge from, enabling a detached consumption of Black culture. Popular culture and media play a key role in perpetuating simplified and rigid ideas that keep racial divisions in place (Fraley, 2009). Because it's driven by commercial appeal, popular music—like other forms of popular culture—reflects this complexity, existing as both mass entertainment and as a reflection of public interests (Orgeret, 2008). Any commercially supported Black music can be suspect in terms of its potential exploitation or commodification, but it does not necessarily have to be, as it can still serve as a powerful platform for Black artistic expression.

The cultural music industry and the commercialization of Black music have influenced the evolution of musical genres in response to technological, demographic, and market changes, including commodification and commercialization (Frith, 1996). Even within the structure of stealing mentioned above, Black music remains popular and consistently influencing and creating new musical genres, from Negro Spirituals to Hip Hop.

Black musical generated praxis throughout the decades has also served as a response to hegemony. Black musical practices, often dismissed as "lowbrow," have consistently demonstrated resistance and inspired both imitation and appropriation by white audiences. The protest music of each era, for example, not only subverted dominant white ideologies but also fostered and empowered Black musical expression (McClendon, 2015, p.328). An example of this dynamic is the influence of soul and funk music during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, with artists like James

Brown utilizing their music to resist social oppression, as in his anthem "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud." This message of Black self-assertion resonated deeply within Black communities, while simultaneously captivating white listeners and led to widespread imitation and cultural appropriation in both music and fashion, often detached from its roots in Black struggle and empowerment. Jazmine Sullivan's EP *Heaux Tales* reflects this ongoing tradition of using music to challenge societal expectations and the commercialization of Black female identity, by centering unapologetic self-expression, particularly around the complex intersections of Black womanhood and sexuality in a way that resists both societal exploitation and stereotypical representations. Thus, each era of Black music signified a resistance to the intersectional oppressions of that era, and the contemporary era is no different.

Black musical expression has been enhanced by technology, specifically the internet and its ability to globalize each genre's reach, global impact, ability to be consumed by a multiracial/multi-ethnic audience, and change perceptions of Black representation. What was once the wax cylinder became the vintage LP, then the CD, the mp3, and now we are in the digital era of multiple music streaming platforms, such as Spotify and Tidal (Iverson, 2023). The contemporary music streaming service landscape is composed of multiple platforms, most of which are subscription based— and priced at a premium, such as Spotify, TIDAL, and Amazon music. While streaming services offer artists “an infinite exposure platform via curated playlists, listener analytics, and recommendations to similar artists to help build an international following and gain extra attention,” the streaming revenue does not always go directly to the artists, but rather to

record labels (Brewster, 2023). So while this technology can help rectify some of the political economy issues for Black artists now, there is still much work to be done. However, even within unfair systems, Black artists' genius has shined through in what I would term an Unapologetic manner. Yet, technology is not only changing the representation of Black music, it also affects other media genres and representations. Technology's transformation of Black music and other media genres aligns with Unapologetic Blackness by enabling Black creators to reclaim their narratives, amplify their voices, and assert their identity beyond traditional gatekeepers in a digital age.

### **Streaming Blackness: Platforms of Power, Representation, and Technological Visibility**

In the case of popular culture, visual discourse and visual texts are the currency from which representational ideologies of peoples, cultures, and artifacts become cemented in public memory. It is in this public memory that film and other media reinforce and reiterate archaic, skewed, and stereotypical imagery of African Americans. Mainstream media texts become sources of popular memory through their widespread circulation and through the legitimacy conferred upon them as historical resources elsewhere in popular culture" (Hoerl, 2007, p. 208). The use of "taste communities" and "niche marketing" and "cultural tourism" by digital streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Hulu, value or devalue certain social identities, by promoting predominantly white cast shows on their algorithms as opposed to shows featuring predominantly BIPOC casts. This is further complicated by the relationship between the political economy of media and production (i.e. ownership and revenue sources of streaming platforms, casting

decisions, what shows get greenlight or chosen by digital streaming services, and which shows get picked up for multiple seasons). Lopez (2020) argues that “the racial hierarchies that delimit genre can also play an increased role in obscuring content made by or about people of color due to the increasing power of digital algorithms in our media landscape” (p. 24). Thus, media representations of race historically point to “the experiences and communication patterns of whites ... as the norm from which Others are marked” (Nakayama, & Krizek, 1995, p. 293).

Expanding the dominant discourse and leading with minority voices and choices in the visual representation and depictions of their cultures may lead to a more holistic representation of minorities. One prime example of this is *Harlem*, an Amazon Prime series created by Tracy Oliver and premiering in 2021, which follows the lives of four Black women navigating their careers, relationships, and personal identities in contemporary Harlem. Historically, Harlem (the neighborhood) has been an epicenter for Black cultural production, most notably during the Harlem Renaissance, a period in the early 20th century that saw a flourishing of Black art, music, and intellectual thought. The show leverages this historical setting, not just as a backdrop, but as a symbolic and literal space where Black women are free to express themselves openly and pursue their aspirations freely. By challenging historical and contemporary visual exploitations, the series creates a more equitable representation of Blackness. This distinctive representation came to fruition due to streaming services and their influence on the contemporary digital landscape.

Streaming services, also known as video-on-demand services, are at the forefront of crafting new racialized discourse in media and culture. The entire world's media paradigm shifted with the inception of streaming services, such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, Disney+ or one of the smaller streaming services that seem to pop up daily. Streaming services have increased the accessibility to media content and have given viewers an almost unlimited amount of content to choose from for a monthly subscription fee. According to Mike Van Esler (2020), "the rise of VOD [video on demand] platforms weakened the power of film studios and expanded the influence of television networks and producers to bestow media prestige by giving consumers greater choice in the type of content they watch, as well as the ways in which they watch it" (p. 947). Such disruptions to traditional media models by streaming platforms is successful largely due to the convenience felt by consumers. On an individual level, as well as within social and cultural contexts, the streaming industry crafts a consumer convenience experience through surveillance, for example: repeat viewing—the act of watching a film, TV show, or other visual media multiple times—influences watch preferences, strengthens cultural bonds, and contributes to the lasting impact of certain pieces of media. However, to keep the consumer advantage these media giants are relying on driving audience analytics. Streaming giants such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ decide which shows should be licensed, produced, distributed, extended, and green-lighted (Carr, 2013).

The transindustrial structures of media conglomerates are driven by corporate profit and have created a convergence of corporate synergy and branding with mass customization marketing; this has evolved into "multi-platform storytelling [which] refers

specifically to texts where content appears in a coordinated way across many different media formats” (Edwards, 2012, p.1). Amazon Prime is a good example of this ecosystem of integrated media and content streams. Amazon Prime differentiates itself from other subscription video-on-demand platforms through “the embedding of its video platform within the larger umbrella of services that it offers (specifically its music platform, Alexa assistant and its wider e-commerce operations)” (Tiwary, p.88). This strategic approach allows for a “seamless vertical integration of its shopping, music, voice assistant and video platforms” which makes Amazon a distinctive player in an increasingly saturated streaming platform market (Tiwary, 2020, p.91). This synchronization fosters reliance on the entire infrastructure of services that Amazon offers.

The global reach of streaming and transmedia marketing contributes to the globalization of media and popular culture, and plays a role in shaping the contemporary entertainment industry. Lamphere (2017) posits that “as consumers, we control content more than ever” and we control our viewing of the content that we want to see. Big budget motion pictures, franchises, and television shows are finding streaming services as the new distributors. In addition, smaller specialized films and indie hits are also finding their audiences on streaming platforms because consumers are demanding more diversity and creativity from their content (Lamphere, 2017). Paige Albiniaak (2016) suggests that “Hollywood is still figuring out the best way to provide consumers with programming while maximally monetizing it.” This has created an even more apparent reliance on data

surveillance to determine market demand, trends, media consumption patterns, and the impact of merchandising on cultural industries, such as film and television.

Within this media environment, crossover or mainstream success for Black shows is often due to discourses of post race that decenter Blackness as a feature of the shows. Media scholars have noted that the inverse of the hypervisibility of race in the digital is termed post-racial. Post-racial discourses project an imaginary in which race can be rendered visible and invisible. King Watts (2017) argues that post-racial discourse is the erasure of race in service of idyllic harmony. As Squires (2014) explains “post-racial discourses are employed by media to reimagine and project an idealized multicultural nation, they are also prescribing how citizens should understand their own and others’ racial identities in the public sphere, in public policy, and in private life” (p. 166). In an attempt to combat racial conflict, media representations of post-racial discourses have overemphasized aesthetics of racial diversity by ignoring the visibility of race. A vivid example of this is cross-cultural casting to racially diversify many popular contemporary television series, in theory creating an equal playing field while simultaneously ignoring hegemonic systemic social, institutional, economic, cultural, racial, and historical power relations and their effects on individuals (Rogers, 2014). The media studies discipline has analyzed post racial aesthetics of cross cultural casting with multiracial casts, representations of interracial families, and social media responses to media contexts around post-racial discourses (Squires, 2014). The post racial fantasy discourse adheres to “color blindness” purposefully ignoring stereotypical tropes and serves to constitute the marketing of specific types of Blackness pitted against one another that Means

Coleman (2006) contests as an “overly reductive narrative of Blackness in America” (p. 88). However, media studies scholarship is now moving beyond the post-racial imaginary to explorations of its paradox; “a post-racial discourse is paradoxical in that it requires the existence of race in order to diminish its significance and locate it in the past” (Banks, 2018, p. 711). This is significant with the advent of social media borne surveillance, and a plethora of instances of violence against communities of color that is constantly filmed and shared in digital spaces.

Digital platforms, based on algorithms and other technical designs employ racial representational politics of visibility, hyper-visibility, and invisibility. In addition, the branding value of streaming services, both in distribution and production, in this era are in many ways based on intersectionality:

the value of stories by and about characters who live on the margins of the intersections between race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, disability, citizenship, religion, and so on. They attract underserved communities, encourage social media participation, and elicit critical attention for their novelty. (Christian, 2020b, p. 459)

In this manner, intersectionality is a strategy or tool utilized as part of the cultural imperialism accompanying the globalization of streaming services (Shattuc, 2020). Intersectionality can be read as a branding ploy utilizing an economy of visibility for mass audiences while failing to remedy actual diversity issues with the representation of intersectionality giving corporations surplus value in production and reception. But this value is rarely reinvested into the sustainable distribution and development of those

artists and communities because to do so would be “risky” at the scale of production and reception corporations need to secure profits to support their size (Christian, 2020a, p.469). While indie studios showcasing marginalized narratives certainly help, the networked distribution, financing, pre and post production, as well as marketing costs still need to be considered (Christian, 2020b).

With the money generated through this industry in the billions, it is in the financial interests of streaming platforms to diversify their content for diverse audiences. With megahits like *Harlem* (2021-present), it is safe to say that the strategy of diversity is paying off for streaming services. However, I want to challenge the idea that the only use of intersectionality is for profit. There is a reclamation of it by Black artists, producers, writers, directors, etc. As Courtney R Baker (2019) states “African American visual culture addressed itself to the decolonialization of memory, the body, gender, sexuality, ritual, the future, and representation itself to Envision not only new spaces but also New Black subjects who would inhabit these spaces” (p.95). Albeit past or present, Black women have been concerned with staking an ideological claim in crafting different narratives of who they are (or who they wish to be) through their influence on popular visual and material culture for some time” (Halliday, 2022, p.5). Aria Halliday (2022) uses the term “embodied objectification” to account for the “process through which Black women cultural producers infuse products for mass consumption with their experiences, aesthetics, and intraracial politics while specifically seeking Black girls and women as their target consumers (p.14). If considered at the helm of their own commodification, Black women then making their experiences reflected on screen serves to allow them to

capitalize on their own narratives. This is the nuance of Unapologetic Blackness. There is an intertextuality that occurs alongside the commodification.

However, Black visual representation in film media have always been modified as a response to issues facing African Americans in their social, political, and economic milieu. In the 1970s, there was an outpouring of Black cultural aesthetics in the form of Blaxploitation films including *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) (White, 2012). The Blaxploitation film era, visually represented Black people as powerful. Drawing on that time's social matters of contention, one could argue that the Blaxploitation film era paralleled visual representations of the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party utilized visuals of power, mostly through the imagery of guns, that drew on "embedded ideas about race, justice, heroism, and morality" (Gaiter, 2018, p. 309). However, it is important to note that all were pictured with natural hair and large afros drawing on visual cues of royalty, as with hair symbolizing crowns, and ideological cues of power.

In addition, one must note that these films utilized the subversion of violence against Black bodies, as was depicted in Civil Rights era documentaries. These documentaries and images of violence against Black people "acquired a high degree of representational power within the popular US imagination... and images such as these dominate popular US memory and shape our collective consciousness of these historical periods" that continue into the contemporary era (Brasell, 2004, pp. 6-7). Through the subversion of these tropes, Black cinema produced a new ideology which employed an oppositional gaze from the dominant social ideologies. These genre films, while problematic, gave many Black filmmakers a foothold in the Hollywood industry.

Blaxploitation filmmaking contributed to ideologies of Black nationalism, Black pride, and the rise of the patriarchial Black macho—with this gender binary flipping with Black female protagonists in later Blaxploitation movies (Benshoff, 2000).

Following into the 1990s, there was the “Blaxplosure” era, with movies such as *Love Jones* (1997) and *The Best Man* (1999), that helped craft a more complex subjectivity to Black narratives (White, 2012). Building on this ideology into the 2000s, Black cinema explored other traditionally belittled aesthetics, such as “ghetto”, through films like *Barbershop* (2002) that produced a re-interpretation of ghetto as fabulous and displayed protagonists with “the conscientious stewardship of Black heritage and history, sons and daughters of the community who hold the promise of a better future right there in the ghetto” (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 618). By turning a stereotypical trope on its head, Black cinema generates and occupies a space in which can challenge and produce new visual strategies in ethnic film making. The continual co-option and subversion of dominant White ideologies through visual strategies of Black cinema continues into the modern era. Currently, contemporary films, such as *BlackkkKlansmen* (2018), echo back to the Blaxploitation film era, while other films such as *The Photograph* (2020) parallels the Blaxplosure era. It is the constant pressure of this oppositional discourse that runs counter to social ideologies and institutes change.

When contextualized within and against dominant hegemonic cisheteropatriarchial ideological discourses, Unapologetic Blackness, in media, upturns the dominating power relations that represent Black women through stereotypical lenses and instead humanizes the experiences of Black women.

## Theoretical Background

Unapologetic Blackness results from “restorying” Black women’s lives in media representations using reclamation; this is in opposition to AfroPessimistic approaches shaped and situated by white supremacist historical tropes, legacy stereotypes, and the hegemonic structures and processes of racial and gender inequality and creates a better understanding of the ways in which Black women navigate the world through joy by decentering strife and struggle. Unapologetic Blackness reclaims Black women’s narratives from legacies of oppression. This reclamation focuses on restorying media representations in ways that highlight Black women’s joy and complexity, shifting the narrative away from Black women being viewed solely through the lens of oppression. Thus, this dissertation is grounded in the Afrofuturism tactic of restorying, Black feminist thought ala Patricia Hill Collins, and Stuart Hall and Herman Gray’s theories of representation. The combined insights of Hall, Gray, Collins, and various theories of the erotic and pleasure contribute to a rich understanding of Unapologetic Blackness by analyzing how *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* depict Black womanhood beyond narrow media portrayals based on white supremacist stereotypical tropes.

Stuart Hall (2006) argues that popular culture serves as a site for the negotiation and expression of Black identity. Negotiating the balance between achieving visibility and succumbing to hypersexualization or reclaiming sexuality versus resisting objectification is crucial to the ways in which Blackness is usually perceived. Herman Gray’s (2013) work on media visibility shows how representations are not only about individual images but about patterns that shape public understanding of race through the

tendency of media to focus on certain hypervisible aspects of Blackness, such as struggle or resilience while omitting or obscuring joy.

In conjunction with Hall's (2006) theorization, Gray's (2013) theory provides a lens for examining how *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* resist reductive narratives. From Black Feminist Thought, I use Crenshaw's (1989) theorization of intersectionality to emphasize how *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* capture the layered experiences of Black women, showing how race and gender intersect in their lives. I also employ Collins' (2000) theory on "controlling images" to demonstrate how these works reject historical tropes, such as the jezebel, and instead present Black women as multifaceted individuals with control over their sexuality. In this vein, I also use Audre Lorde's (1993) idea of the erotic to spotlight the pleasure of Black womanhood in spite of intersecting oppressions of gender and race. Instead, Unapologetic Blackness focuses on the politics of Black public pleasure as a space for reclaiming the erotic, challenging oppressive structures, and asserting the transformative potential of pleasure and joy. Black joy is the means in which Unapologetic Blackness restorys Black representations through reclaiming of mediated spaces for joy, pleasure, and self-expression within the broader socio-cultural landscape. Together, these theories illustrate how *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* use nuanced portrayals of Black womanhood to resist cultural limitations, embody unapologetic Blackness, and reshape the media's representation of Black women's lives. This theoretical framework allows me to focus on the nexus of race and gender outside of negative stereotypes or tropes, both in imagining forward, but also in a reclamation of representation today.

## **Representation**

Media scholars have long explored negative media representations of communities of color (Bogle, 2001, 2016). Additionally, scholars actively explore films, television shows, and other media productions from marginalized communities to understand how they articulate self, community, gender, and class. These representations have contributed to and reinforced stereotypes, racial hierarchies, cishetero-patriarchial ideologies, among other social hierarchies. To further explore this dearth of nuanced representations of Black women, in the vein of Stuart Hall, I am particularly drawn to visual representation, as the modern world is saturated in images, and these images are open to a variety of meanings. Herman Gray (2013) argues that “media are a crucial terrain on which techniques of power like self-regulation and management operate through capacities to increase the desire for and reach of visibility” (p.772). For Gray, this is significant because “in the new racial regimes, representations of abject and marginal groups have moved from outright invisibility, exclusion, and exaggeration to proliferation and hypervisibility” (2013, p.772). An example of this concept is seen in the portrayal of Black men in contemporary crime dramas like Starz’ program *Power*, where Black male characters are often depicted in roles associated with violence and criminality. This hypervisibility does not offer a balanced view of Black life, but instead contributes to a cycle of racialized assumptions. Thus, how race is depicted in media representations shape perceptions of racial identity; media representations can reinforce racial stereotypes, perpetuate racial hierarchies, and contribute to the marginalization of racialized groups. However, Gray (2013) also acknowledges that grassroots media, counter-narratives, and cultural activism provide spaces for alternative representations and forms of resistance against hegemonic discourses, as “differences of all sorts—racial,

gender, sexual, regional, religious, body type, and so on—abound and proliferate in the media spaces of television, the Internet, social networks, and music” (p.781). The convergence of media has allowed it to become a primary site for recognition and reclamation through representation.

John Fiske (1987) argues that “cultural commodities - including television - from which popular culture is made circulate two simultaneous economies: the financial and the cultural” (p.25). This is especially important when considering how Black cultural productions have continued to be a form of resistance for representations of Blackness. According to Kristal Zook (1999), as Black women gained recognition for their writing in literature and film in 1980s and 1990s, the narratives of Blackness often contained four key elements: “autobiography, meaning a tendency toward collective and individual authorship of Black experience; improvisation, the practice of inventing and ad-libbing unscripted dialogue or action; aesthetics, a certain pride in visual signifiers of Blackness; and drama, a marked desire for complex characterizations and emotionally challenging subject matter” (p. 5). Thus, “zones of representation such as television, film, and art as well as historiography and memory were terrains of contestation for Black artists” (Baker, 2019, p.94). Black women in writers’ rooms “presented the refreshing possibility that racial authenticity could be negotiated rather than assumed—or perhaps even done away with altogether” (Zook, 1999, p. 2). Where “commodities are valued for their symbolic significance[,] [c]onsumption is an active, creative and productive process, concerned with pleasure, identity and the production of meaning” (Storey, 2010, p.98).

My intervention with Unapologetic Blackness is situated within media studies, because media representations hold power for, among other things, restorying narratives of Blackness. Stuart Hall's (1993) theory of representation argues that media texts never have one true meaning, as meaning can always be contested by their receivers. Thus, although producers encode meanings within their media texts, viewers/listeners can describe them in a way that differs from the producers intent (Hall, 1993). Media producers possess social power and privilege and push their preferred messaging, especially when it comes to racial stereotyping. However, according to Hall (1993), representation enmeshes the audience in negotiating its meaning. Due to the polysemic nature of media texts, the multiplicity of meanings allows for negotiation and contestation, as audiences actively engage with media texts and make sense of them in relation to their own lived experiences and social contexts. According to Hall (1997, 2024) media representations are constitutive of meaning and are important for understanding how to contest hegemonic or stereotypical representations.

Stuart Hall's (1997, 2006) theory of representation and Herman Gray's (2013) insights into media portrayals combine to explain how *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* contribute to an understanding of Unapologetic Blackness by reshaping meanings of Black womanhood. Hall's (2006) theory underscores how media shape rather than merely reflect reality, suggesting that *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* not only depict Black women's experiences but also redefine public perceptions by presenting fuller, more nuanced portrayals of Black womanhood. Herman (2013) highlighted how stereotypes in media simplify complex identities, which would suggest that *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* do more

than depict Black women's experiences; they actively shape viewers' perceptions of these experiences. Instead of perpetuating reductive portrayals, Unapologetic Blackness reconfigures representation to dismantle fixed identities and present Black individuals with their complexities, and with multidimensional stories and perspectives.

Discourses of inferential racism and problematic representational politics are now expanded by digital platforms, such as streaming services and social media. Thus, in the current media landscape, media representations of race are not only serving as a means of control of Black representation, but also as a digital limitation of what Blackness can be online. The visibility of representations of race, and gender, and other social identities, now sits at the intersection of media and representation. However, the field of media studies is changing to move beyond understanding media solely as a means to “marginalize, criminalize, hypersexualize, and otherwise disempower people of color” (Lopez, 2020, p. 13). For example, *Pose*, a television show centered on the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ ballroom scene of the 1980s, highlights how media can portray the intersection of gender, race, and class from a marginalized perspective. This understanding is useful for examining Unapologetic Blackness, as it is imperative to note that a specific set of circumstances— issues of race, gender, stereotypes, and so forth— inform Black women's cultural productions, and the cultural productions about them, and that these differ from those of other groups of women. This intersection of media and representation invites us to reconsider how personal stories contribute to reshaping stereotypes into nuanced narratives; indeed, as Dillard (2000) suggests, embracing these

layered and affective portrayals is essential to challenging and transforming prevailing ideologies from stereotypical to nuanced.

Not much of Black studies, especially within the realm of media studies, has left room for the joy of the Black community instead of focusing on the despair and disparaging of the community (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Harris-Perry, 2011). Most of the study of mediated Black women involves examining negative stereotypical tropes and controlling images, often in relation to the influence these images have on Black women. Scholarship of this type includes Collins' groundbreaking work on controlling images and their implications on Black motherhood and reproduction, Waldron's conceptualizations of archetypes of Black women and the issues of mental health, and Porter and Byrd's work on the pressures of the term #BlackGirlMagic for young Black women (Collins, 2000; Waldron 2019; Porter & Byrd, 2021). This dissertation will bring into focus the ways in which Black women create media portrayals outside of and in the midst of disparaging stereotypes. In doing so, I examine formations of Blackness that are materially (i.e. media productions) and affectively (i.e. associated positive affects and emotions) unapologetic that exist.

### **Intersectionality**

From Black feminist thought, I will be drawing on theories of intersectionality. Though the origin of intersectionality is contested within Black feminist thought, there is general consensus that the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences are shaped by historically rooted relations of power, ethics, and other identity demarcations, such as

gender, race, and class (Collins, 2019, Crenshaw, 1989; Nash, 2008). Collins (2019) defines intersectionality to include the intersection of multiple vectors of identity: gender, race, sexuality, etc. Examples of prevalent stereotypes at the intersection of race and gender often lean into sexual fetishization that normalizes and justifies the devaluation of women of color. Prevalent stereotypes of Black women include the "Hottentot Venus," "Jezebel," "mammy," "welfare queen," and more (Hobson, 2003). These racialized representations of Black women are often linked to Black monstrosity or deviant sexuality. The origins of these controlling images are cemented in violence. As noted by Collins (2019), "violence provides a window into the connections among multiple systems of power" (p.236). Marginalized identities, such as those of Black women, are always prey to specific systems of power, such as misogyny or racism. As multiple forms of marginalized identities intersect, multiple systems of power add to the suppression of those identities, at times by violence. As a result, Black women tend to be situated further from sources of power than are White men or women, whose intersectional identities have granted them more privileged access to power.

Because intersectionality evolved from examining how people navigate multiple vectors of identity simultaneously, it makes sense that the concept's usage may vary in practice. However, it must be noted that

the foundations of intersecting oppressions become grounded in interdependent concepts of binary thinking, oppositional difference, objectification, and social hierarchy. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply

relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression. (Collins, 2002, p.71)

Foregrounding intersectionality helps unpack how Unapologetic Blackness challenges any notion of Blackness as monolithic by offering multifaceted portrayals of Black womanhood. Intersectionality is essential in examining *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales*, as both works highlight the distinct experiences of Black women navigating gender and racial identities. Collins' (2000) concept of controlling images helps identify how *Heaux Tales* resists reductive stereotypes by portraying Black women's sexuality, emotional vulnerability, and self-expression. Meanwhile *Harlem* similarly resists flattening its characters, presenting Black women with ambitions, flaws, and relational dynamics that defy simplistic stereotypical tropes. Crenshaw's framework shows how *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* are deeply invested in representing the intersections of race and gender with *Harlem* portraying different dimensions of Black women's lives, including career, friendship, and love, and *Heaux Tales* delving into sexual agency, vulnerability, and self-worth. By centering the specific experiences of Black women, these works reflect an intersectional lens, showing how race and gender intersect in shaping these women's lives and choices. Together, these theories reveal that *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* are not just entertainment; they are forms of resistance and reclamation. They allow Black women's stories to be told on their own terms, presenting layered narratives that counteract stereotypical portrayals and underscore the joy and challenges of Black womanhood.

## **Restorying**

In my analysis, Unapologetic Blackness is not based on negative things that have been done to Black people, but rather on the joy and celebration that Black people create despite historical struggles to be seen, heard, and valued. This dissertation seeks to intervene in critical feminist media studies by uplifting Black women in research discourse and not scrutinizing negative stereotypes or tropes or other issues that often plague media studies examination of Blackness. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo offer the idea of “restorying” as a means to recontextualize and characterize oneself through narrative or discourse to “collectively reimagine time, place, perspective, mode, metanarrative, and identity through retold stories” (2016, p. 318). I use this project to restory and reimagine Black women’s identities in media, outside of controlling images or stereotypical narratives. This dissertation seeks to investigate this unique intersection between restorying selected representations of Black women.

Restorying is not just important in combating stereotypes and in crafting new discourses, but in exposing what already exists. For example, because Black women have not been allowed to be vulnerable due to various sociocultural factors, this dissertation argues that the expression of Black women’s vulnerability in mediated representations is healing in its reclamation of the social pressure to be “superwoman” by elevating their socioeconomic, educational, and professional status. Rebelling against this glittery version of dysfunction (i.e. the Strong Black Woman mythos), vulnerability is a depiction of Black women’s softness. This expression of vulnerability is fundamentally oppositional to hegemonic representations of Black women; an example of this defiant vulnerability can be seen in Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales*, where Black women openly

express desires, struggles, and insecurities in ways that counter dominant media stereotypes of the "unbreakable" Black woman. As Williamson (2016) asserts "for Black women whose lives are inextricably linked to assumptions, both right and wrong, about the nature of their insurmountable strength, finding a space to wail is itself a significant intervention and form of sociopolitical critique" (p.72).

Unapologetic Blackness, then, is a deliberate act of producing and engaging with media that resist stereotypes and respect the diversity of Black lives by restorying the objectifying gaze that white-controlled media often imposes. A common form of restorying in popular discourse is Afrofuturism. Mark Dery (1994) coined the term Afrofuturism to define the self-conscious cultural artistic movement that reimagines alternative technological and cosmic futures centering and celebrating the experiences of Black people. This speculative artistic movement encompasses a range of creative expressions—literature, music, visual arts, film, and fashion—that explores both tradition and technology as a means to challenge an unquestioned reality (Van Veen, 2013). The cultural fusion of African diasporic folklore, technology, science fiction, and historical narratives often focuses on Afropolitanism and centers the cosmic (Samatar, 2017; Mbembe, 2007). The Afrofuturistic movement is often associated with musicians Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Janelle Monáe, with authors such as Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin, and Nalo Hopkinson, and films such as *Get Out* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and *Who Cloned Tyrone* (2023). Afrofuturism's exploration of identity, belonging, and cultural heritage "takes African American culture's already improvisational nature—making a way out of no way—and applies it to the project of imagining a new future" (Royster,

2013, p.169). Jabari Asim (2016) frames Afrofuturism as “imagination as resistance;” as a form of shared cultural imagination that bridges past, present, and future. Afrofuturism is not a corrective history set in the future; however, it “is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory, and the future conditional” (Eshun, 2003, p.293). Afrofuturism casting its gaze to the post-human offers a cultural critique on the equation of Blackness with social death, which is the norm of afropessimistic approaches to understanding Blackness (David, 2007). Afrofuturism, thus, can be understood as “the act of taking back one’s story – determining the public-facing narratives defining one’s lived experiences and worldviews – is in direct response to existing narratives that create and perpetuate damaging stereotypes” (Peattie, 2022, p. 168). By reimagining Black identities, Afrofuturism feeds into the restorying nature of Unapologetic Blackness.

In the domain of representation, Unapologetic Blackness mobilizes restorying as a critique and challenge to dominant media portrayals that often constrain Black representations to adhere to white conceptualizations of propriety, authority, and respectability. Rather than viewing Blackness in relation to or through the gaze of whiteness, restorying disrupts the disempowering narratives of marginalization and afropessimistic understandings of Blackness.

### **Away from Afropessimism...**

Afropessimism posits that Blackness is equal to social death, a condition in which Black people are denied their full humanity and are excluded from the social, political,

and economic realms of society (Sexton, 2016; Wilderson, 2020; Wekker, 2021).

Afropessimism asserts that due to the ongoing systemic impact of slavery, anti-Blackness is foundational to Western societies, and thus legitimates a pessimistic worldview about the prospect of liberation for Black peoples within the existing social and political structures (Wekker, 2021). Fred Moten (2013) critiques Afropessimism for its rigid focus on Black social death and its tendency to center anti-Blackness as an inescapable fatalistic condition that leaves no room for Black sociality, aesthetic practices, and fugitivity, and radical possibility.

Explained by scholars such as Charles Mills (2014), Andrea Smith (2015), and Cedric Robinson (2019), whiteness is a social construction. As such, every interpersonal interaction is based on a racial hierarchy that is reinforced systematically. Historically, this has meant that whiteness has become the norm and Blackness has become other. Smith (2015) furthers this point through providing the logic of white supremacy as a basis for othering Black people as property. Determining the economic worth of people through enslavement is what Mills (2014) describes as race translated into personhood and personhood into human political power. This transition into personhood is inherently and inextricably tied to ideas surrounding the human, who qualifies as human, and the guiding moral standards of humanity (Jackson, 2020; Robinson 2019). To follow this human biopolitic thread into discourse, one sees the bestialization, animalization, and thingification of what Robinson (2019) describes as the “inferior race(s)” and Mills (2014) calls “subpersons:” these are Black, indigenous, and other people of color. In this view, a human binary is constructed in a way that to be fully recognized, acknowledged,

and privileged as human, one must be white. Afropessimism can thus be read as a form of nihilism in deference to white supremacist ideologies; slavery, segregation, etc, may be in the past, but the implications of such are current (Carey, 2020).

However, many scholars have pushed back against this pessimistic paradigm. For example, Sadiya Hartman's (2019) examination of the archive has forwarded the idea of waywardness:

a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by smashing out, are foreclosed. It obeys no rules and abides no authorities. It is unrepentant. It traffics in occult visions of other worlds and dreams of a different kind of life. Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of what might be; it is an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe, when you have been sentenced to a life of servitude, when the house of bondage looms in whatever direction you move. It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive. (p.268).

Building on Hartman's concept of waywardness as an act of resistance and survival against systemic constraints, Unapologetic Blackness serves as a more radical evaluation of Black existence within a framework where survival itself is inseparable from enduring violence and dehumanization. Yet, "Black people are not subaltern subjects but nonhuman nonbeings whose very existence is predicated on death and violence. That said, Black social death as the afro-pessimists conceive of it cannot be neatly summed up

as the opposite of Black social life” (Williamson, 2016, p.14-15). Reframing Black women’s disenfranchisement, denial of personhood, and social death as existing within the fullness of Black social life, allows for an ontological reclaiming of Black women’s lives even bound within the oppressive systems in which they live. Thus, the revolutionary ideals of a Black woman just trying to live a “normal” life is revolutionary. My theoretical framing of Unapologetic Blackness sits within the Black Radical Tradition, which Cedric Robinson defines as “a revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people” (2019, 169).

Unapologetic Blackness does not diametrically oppose afropessimism, but rather adds variations to what can be considered the Black experience. Violence, oppression, and trauma-porn are not the sole indicators or representations of Blackness. Unapologetic Blackness focuses on healing rather than violence. Through the juxtaposition of pleasure with pessimism, we can use Black cultural productions to explore the erotic in whatever form that takes: sexuality, gender, and the spiritual—divorcing from the white-centric definition of Blackness. To devise one’s own humanity through imaginative resistance is not only an artistic movement, but a movement within the Black radical tradition. The purpose in Unapologetic Blackness theorizing away from Afropessimism and into joy is to help decolonize how we express love (LeMaster, 2020). I do not mean to demean the merits of Afropessimism, but point to other affects that can and should be associated with Blackness. The affects of joy, pleasure, and optimism have been vastly underrated in scholarly circles when discussing Blackness, even though it is gaining some momentum in colloquial circles, with social media hashtags such as #BlackBoyJoy and

#BlackGirlMagic rising in prominence (Porter & Byrd, 2021). This is not to assert that there aren't issues in overly endowing Blackness with an affect of joy or optimism. As Lauren Berlant aptly notes: all optimism "might not feel optimistic. Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing" (2011, pp.1-2). Optimism, with all its complexity, carries a transformative potential—one that resonates deeply within Unapologetic Blackness as a source of joy and segues into the erotic. As Audre Lorde (1993) has said "another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy" (p.89).

### **Into Black Joy**

The joy inherent in Unapologetic Blackness speaks to a form of liberation that is not a naive or passive emotion but a radical practice of affirming Black existence and dignity. I am speaking of joy as different from happiness. As Lauren Berlant (2011), conceptualizes it, happiness as a fleeting emotion, an attachment to fantasies of a good life shaped by social expectations, whereas joy emerges in moments of intensity, unpredictability, and embodied experience. Unapologetic Blackness embraces a multifaceted view of Black life that includes joy, in spite of systems of oppression. Black joy challenges trauma-centric narratives, asserting Black people's agency to resist imposed identities of victimhood (Hunter, 1998; Perry, 2018). This joy becomes a political act that affirms the wholeness and humanity of Black and marginalized communities, countering the colonial gaze that frames Blackness within the constraints of exploitation or subjugation (Negrón-Muntaner, 2020; Wanzo, 2021). Black joy resists the historical framing of Black identity through pain and suffering, instead positioning joy as

a political practice of reclamation and resilience (Crawley, 2020; Adeyemi, 2022). By framing joy as intrinsic to Black culture, Unapologetic Blackness emphasizes self-expression, care, and pleasure as acts of resistance that allow Black individuals to affirm their identities joyfully, beyond narratives of marginalization. In this framework, Unapologetic Blackness is not only about resistance to stereotypical representations but about the active creation of spaces where joy is accessible, celebrated, and recognized as a vital part of Black life. For example, in the rise of Black Joy on social media, with hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic or #BlackBoyJoy on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X which feature Black creators who highlight moments of joy, self-love, and humor, counteracting mainstream media's often negative portrayals of Black life. Additionally, events like the Afropunk Festival or Black Pride festivals showcase Black creativity, music, fashion, and joy, while rejecting mainstream, often limiting, portrayals of Black identity. This underscores the radical potential of Unapologetic Blackness to reshape understandings of what it means to live as a Black woman in a society that often seeks to limit these very expressions.

While there has been a plethora of literature theorizing the erotic, I will center Ebony Utley's (2010) definition of the erotic as "a deep, intimate, joyful connection within and among human beings. As a mode of communication, the erotic is a sensual capacity to feel deeply with others" (p.293). Audre Lorde (1993) uses the erotic as an assertion of creative energy that is spiritual in its formation of an affective bond with others. For this project, I examine Unapologetic Blackness through the Amazon Prime series *Harlem* and Jazmine Sullivan's EP *Heaux Tales* only as it occurs within a social

collective or what Rowe (2008) would term a politics of relation, a framework that emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual recognition, and dialogue among diverse identities and communities. It is through that collective or community that vulnerability and agency can be birthed; without the component of community Unapologetic Blackness does not exist. When I am speaking of a collective, I am not speaking of being in a crowded room and feeling alone or the loneliness that accompanies being with people that do not see or understand you, I mean being in a community that cares for you for your spirit for your well-being and being in an uplifting space that uplifting space does not necessarily mean a space where one is coddled but a space where one is understood. This is not a high theory argument, or at the very least it will not be considered high theory by those within the Black community. In fact, to Black people the argument of this dissertation may seem downright commonsensical.

In examining the concept of the erotic as defined by Audre Lorde (1993), bell hooks (2015), Adrienne Maree Brown (2019), Ebony Utley (2010), and Joan Morgan (2015), pleasure politics becomes a means of reclaiming power through joy, pleasure, and self-determination. This reclamation requires a lens of representation that actively dismantles stereotypes, allowing Black women to express pleasure, vulnerability, and autonomy on their own terms. Lorde's (1993) concept of the erotic as "a well of replenishing and provocative force" serves as a foundation here, viewing pleasure as a site of self-knowledge and power. Similarly, hooks (2015) emphasizes the importance of pleasure within Black feminist thought, where the pursuit of joy is revolutionary in a society that frequently denies Black women this possibility. *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales*

demonstrate how, through representation, Black women can reclaim joy by centering the erotic not simply as a sexual experience, but as a form of power, challenging respectability politics and asserting the value of Black women's voices and desires.

While I am for all forms of liberation for Black women, sexual or otherwise, I note that Unapologetic Blackness is not so much focused on the erotic, but more broadly on pleasure. As Adrienne Maree Brown (2019) expresses,

Pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy. Pleasure activism asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this. In this moment, we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression. (p.14)

Pleasure activism looks like Black women placing themselves and their pleasure first, ahead of decorum or oppression. Morgan (2015) describes pleasure politics as a liberatory framework that rebels against what Audre Lorde (1993) would call the pornographic which "defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need" (pp.88-89). As Adrienne Maree Brown (2019) adds that "pleasure activism is not about generating or indulging in excess," but rather about reclaiming joy (p.16).

In examining the erotic as a reclamation of power, in the form of joy, it is important to view this power through the lens of representation. Power dynamics

influence the production, circulation, and reception of media texts, and influence how marginalized groups navigate and resist dominant representations with and through the erotic. This is especially significant as multiple axes of identity intersect and interact in media representations, sometimes leading to complex and multidimensional portrayals of social identities. In this vein, Stuart Hall's theory of representation offers a critical framework for analyzing the role of media in shaping social identities, power relations, and cultural politics. This dynamic interaction allows for the potential transformation of dominant ideologies, especially within marginalized communities, who can reclaim and reframe narratives through alternative readings. Herman Gray (2013) furthers this framework through the articulation of the role of audiences in negotiating meaning, resisting dominant interpretations, and engaging in alternative readings of media texts that contribute to the construction of social meaning, representation, identity, and ultimately liberation. Collectively, Hall and Gray suggest that both the media's portrayal and the audience's response are essential in understanding how social identities and power relations are constructed, contested, and potentially redefined. Together, these theories underscore that while media representations shape social identities and power dynamics, the agency of the audience enables reinterpretation and resistance.

As a theory of power, Unapologetic Blackness emphasizes the active and dynamic relationship between media producers, texts, and audiences in the construction of social identities and reclamation of social power in the form of representations, which is demonstrated through the Amazon Prime series *Harlem* and Jazmine Sullivan's extended play *Heaux Tales*. The difference between "the power of the culture industries and the

power of their influence” are often conflated (Storey, 2010, p.98). While cultural industries exert much influence on media, the creation of the cultural products is important to Black representations. I argue that Black cultural productions lead a charge for liberation through what Stuart Hall (1993) would term negotiated meanings, or the way in which Black audiences can accept, negotiate, and resist the meanings of film, media, etc, based on their own positionalities. This situates the visibility of Black cultural productions within a certain liveness that comes from Black culture. Although I am reading liveness here as evocative of real time or with a format such as television being broadcast simultaneously, it is significant to juxtapose the idea of liveness with the idea of Black social death, especially as Unapologetic Blackness divorces the ontological alienation of Blackness (Peters, 2001; Hastie, 2007). In centering life, we open possibilities of centering the pleasures of life. In both *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales*, the concept of joy and eroticism as power is portrayed through a variety of Black women’s perspectives that showcase Black women not only navigating the nuances of pleasure and relationships but also wielding pleasure as an assertion of their own self-worth and agency. This reclamation of joy directly challenges mainstream media’s traditional portrayals of Black womanhood, which often center on trauma or stereotypes, and instead respects Black women, celebrates Black women’s sisterhood, vulnerability, and capacity for joy.

The idea of the erotic often shows up in Black cultural productions. As Benny Lemaster (2020) posits, “an erotic approach to lived and envisioned sexual experience and desire, thus, implicates the various ways intersecting structures of oppression

constrain sexual possibility,” - not only sexual, but also affective (p.108). For Black women, disrupting the politics of silence, or the forced silence due to white norms especially around sexuality, through what Evelyn M. Hammonds (2013) calls a “politics of articulation,” or a means of talking back against the silence, allows for Black women to express agency over their own narratives. As politics of respectability have typically been used as a form of sexual and affective control,

neither silence nor defiance was able to dethrone negative constructions of Black female sexuality. nor could these strategies allow for the unimpeded expression of self-defined Black female sexualities. Such approaches did not allow African American women to gain control over their sexuality. (Hammonds, 2013, p.176)

Because Black women have been suppressed by a society that commodifies them and dismisses their desires as primitive, Black women’s cultural productions allow expressions of agency and vulnerability. Black people, and especially Black women, have used autobiography as a means of resistance, especially within Black literature and other Black cultural productions (hooks, 2015). This affirms fellowship and allows for an intertextual fellowship to take place through the utilization of Black cultural productions. As Joan Morgan (2015) aptly observes, Black cultural productions serve as a peak into the interiority of Black female life and are employed as a tool for deciphering and decolonizing Black women’s experiences.

As I’ve mentioned, intersectionality plays a major role in representations of Blackness and Black womanhood, and this includes music. Especially for historically oppressed groups, music can be a resistive practice against the ideological conditioning

and restrictions of race and gender. For example, Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade*, openly addressed issues of Black womanhood, infidelity, and generational trauma, while simultaneously challenging stereotypes and reclaiming narratives around Black identity and femininity— with songs like "Formation" that directly confronted systemic racism, police brutality, and also celebrated cultural markers of Southern Black identity, such as natural hair and traditional foods. Therefore, the act of Black musical storytelling becomes a means of reclaiming identity and defying restrictive, imposed norms. Black cultural productions exhibit what Robert J Patterson (2019) would term a political imaginative possibility:

Black cultural production identifies sociopolitical shortcomings, intra-racial antagonisms, and or philosophical and or ideological blind spots and provides a radical solution that pushes conventional ways of thinking about the matter... [T]he solutions Black cultural production offers often require us to invoke our imaginations and think outside of the norms that the existing socio-political order disciplines us to call upon when we imagine or think about Black freedom. Black freedom, in many ways, remains a radical idea, and Black cultural production turns attention to how radicality does Not always completely reject the problematic idea, practice, or policy.... this consideration of Black cultural production foregrounds a matrix of intersections: where the sociological meets the artistic; the artistic meets the aesthetic; the aesthetic meets the political. (p.6)

Both Jazmine Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* and Amazon Prime's *Harlem* lean into the political imaginative possibility that Patterson (2019) explains, through their reclamation and use

of the erotic, as opposed to hypersexualization, claiming power and joy, and expressing vulnerability.

By focusing on the nuanced, joy-centered, and erotic dimensions of Black women's lives, *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* disrupt reductive stereotypes, making space for narratives that reflect the fullness of Black womanhood. Both works champion joy and pleasure as essential for Black womanhood. In *Harlem*, the characters explore relationships, sexuality, and friendship in ways that highlight pleasure as integral to presenting Black women as both unapologetically sensual and emotionally layered. Their interactions with each other and their own journeys of self-love illustrate Brown's (2019) pleasure activism as a path toward healing and liberation. The show challenges viewers to see Black women's joy, sensuality, and vulnerability as natural, powerful, and transformative aspects of their identity. *Heaux Tales*, on the other hand, provides a raw, narrative-driven exploration of love, desire, and vulnerability through the voices of Black women. Sullivan's EP uses spoken interludes where women openly discuss the realities of Black womanhood. In this articulation, self-expression becomes a space where pleasure and pain can coexist, highlighting the often contradictory dimensions of Black womanhood. Ultimately, both case studies illustrate how pleasure politics can function as a form of restorying.

I chose the Black cultural productions of *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* as my objects of study based on how they bring in the robust histories of Black communities through storytelling. Black peoples, across the diaspora, have long used oral traditions as a means of expression or assertion of their experiences (Prouty, 2006). In addition, there is a

robust written tradition in Black communities that has been a means of pronouncement and articulation of their lives. Such literature, especially when produced by historically excluded communities, has been a way to theorize lived experiences outside of the academy (Davis, 1998). For the purpose of this study, I am defining literature not only by books or other traditional written texts, but also by song lyrics, and other embodied forms of the written tradition. As a bridge between the oral and written traditions, Black music serves as an intersectional cultural production that produces racialized, sexualized, and class-sensitive disruptions to heteropatriarchal ideals and discourses (Ferguson, 2004).

It is the integration of Black cultural productions--fictitious film or televised representations, as well as media representations or portrayals of real people--that allows for a holistic look into what Unapologetic Blackness is or can be. Therefore, it is of great significance to examine the written cultural productions (e.g. songs, media representations) of Black women, specifically. Both *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* emphasize the radical nature of Black storytelling and illustrate how representations can restory representations of Black womanhood. *Harlem* aligns with Unapologetic Blackness by positioning Black women's experiences at the forefront, unapologetically highlighting their joys, struggles, and growth in a way that challenges dominant narratives and celebrates their self-defined identities. *Heaux Tales*, Jazmine Sullivan's 2021 EP, represents a musical exploration of Black women's intimacy, sexuality, and self-worth. In a tradition reminiscent of blues and soul artists like Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, Sullivan's work uses music as a space to express the complex inner lives of Black women. Through a blend of songs and spoken-word interludes, Sullivan presents the

stories of various Black women reflecting on love, pleasure, heartbreak, and self-reclamation. The historical context of Black women's voices in R&B and soul, genres that have long been spaces for emotional expression and social critique, underscores *Heaux Tales'* connection to Unapologetic Blackness. Sullivan's work acknowledges the struggles Black women face in a world that often commodifies their bodies and voices, but it also resists shame and embraces desire and self-love, celebrating Black women's agency and autonomy over their narratives.

Both of these media objects demonstrate how Black cultural productions lend themselves to Unapologetic Blackness. This project is focused on the representation of Black women, but also their creations: how their creations represent them, and what their creations say about them. Thus, this dissertation will explore the following research questions throughout its chapters:

- What is Unapologetic Blackness?
- What do practices of Unapologetic Blackness look like in *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales*?
- Does Unapologetic Blackness combat the pessimism in media studies on representations of Blackness?

Taken together, these questions push us to consider what narratives are being pushed forward in Black storytelling and what defines Unapologetic Blackness.

### **Research Design, Methods, and Data Collection**

This dissertation will incorporate representation scholarship, media examples, and embodied experiences to conduct a holistic analysis of Black women's cultural media productions and representations. This section will provide a framework for (A) explicating Unapologetic Blackness and (B) determining what the term looks like in media representations of Black women in media, whether celebrities, non-celebrities, or fictional characters. I believe that Unapologetic Blackness may be more robustly understood with a reflexive methodology. For this project, therefore, I want to maintain flexibility in understanding and analyzing the embodied experiences and media representations of Black women through the use of case studies, autoethnography, and critical discourse analysis.

To assemble the media objects for this dissertation, I conducted a comprehensive review of Amazon Prime's *Harlem* and Jazmine Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* (including *Heaux Tales*, *Mo' Tales: The Deluxe*). Between May and August 2023, I closely analyzed the selected media objects for this study, which involved both streaming and listening to the works in their entirety. For *Harlem*, I watched every episode, which spans two seasons and totals 18 episodes. I streamed each episode multiple times, each episode having an average runtime of about 30 minutes. This allowed me to observe the overarching themes, character development, and the nuanced moments that contributed to my understanding of Unapologetic Blackness in the series. Additionally, I watched and read various interviews that the showrunner and main actors gave during the course of the series which provided further insights to the themes of sisterhood, vulnerability, and self-respect.

In parallel, I listened to all the songs on *Heaux Tales* as well as the extended album *Heaux Tales, Mo' Tales: The Deluxe*, released in 2021 and 2022 respectively. This combined body of work includes 20 tracks featuring both songs and narrative interludes that provide insight into the experiences of Black women as articulated by Sullivan and her collaborators. I replayed and analyzed each track, paying particular attention to Sullivan's live performances and public appearances in support of the album, including her NPR Tiny Desk Concert, various interviews, and award show appearances, as these offered further context on how Sullivan connects the project's themes to broader conversations on Black womanhood, sexuality, and vulnerability. These combined media objects enabled a multi-faceted analysis that examines Unapologetic Blackness through diverse representations of Black women's lives, voices, and experiences. The mixed modal approach of case studies, autoethnography, and critical discourse analysis allows for an analysis that is built on embodied experiences, cultural productions, and media representations that will explicate a fuller conceptualization of Unapologetic Blackness.

### **Case Study Method**

Case study, as a qualitative method, is useful in examining specific instances of a phenomenon, as well as its meaning, and the human behavior driving the phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2001). My project will compare case studies of Jazmine Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* and Amazon Prime's *Harlem* to form a complex vantage point into Black cultural production and representation. It is important to compare the cases horizontally, to generate a wide field of observation. Thomas (2010) defines case studies as "analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that

are studied holistically by one or more methods” (p.513). As a case study is representative of a phenomenon, case studies are both preexisting and concurrent or constructed through the act of being researched (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2006; Stake, 2000, 2003). It is this dual construction that allows for insight into the margins by providing the opportunity to explore accounts of everyday experiences, knowledge, and activities. As Miles (2015) contends “case study calls into consideration the construction, bounding and representation of the case,” thus lending itself to being constitutive of a specific context and temporality (p.310). Methodologically, case study occurs through the construction and representation of the researcher, participant, place, and practices of a specific point in time for which the decisions of what information is to be highlighted or rendered as background (Miles, 2015). Within the bounds of this project, the case studies will be compared horizontally, utilizing a heterologous horizontal comparison, meaning a comparison of “entities that are categorically distinct...but are important in the unfolding of the phenomenon of interest” (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017, p. 52).

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a critically reflexive and relational practice. It primes both the interpersonal and cultural as topics of inquiry while situating and critically examining the researcher’s subjectivity (Denzin, 1996). Instead of striving for an unattainable objectivity, autoethnography privileges the researcher’s judgments, thoughts, memories, and desires as a form of reflexive praxis: “autoethnographers treat identities and experiences as uncertain, fluid, open to interpretation, and able to be revised” (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, p.110). The clarity or ambiguity of an embodied experience is key

to autoethnographic methods. The method is theoretically located in the researcher's sensemaking practices, cultural sensibility, and sociality derived from a part of their experience is also simultaneously a part of someone else's (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011). It is this narrative fluidity which enables the method to paradigmatically situate individual experience within the broader concept of Unapologetic Blackness.

The storytelling aspect of autoethnography can be used as reclamation, resistance, or relation. In terms of reclamation, autoethnography breaks constraints of culture or categories, academically derived or otherwise, which often constitute identities and dominant ideologies that privilege what and whose experiences or knowledge are considered legitimate and illegitimate, invisible or hypervisible (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Boylorn, 2017a). It is the transparency of sharing personal experience that challenges “the desire to name and claim stories—identifying who and what they're they know and might do in the world... [that] test[s] the limits of knowledge and certainty” (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, pp.108-109). As a form of resistance, autoethnography recognizes experiences typically outside of the threshold of white intellectual intelligibility and creates space for knowledge production and theorizations occurring through the uncovering and recovering of “unsanctioned” narratives through reflexive praxis (Alexander, 2009). I am using autoethnography to illustrate how my own embodied experiences reflect the themes found in the media objects I examine. In doing so, I am demonstrating how autoethnography can be seen through the lens of relation— in this case how my life relates to the cultural productions that I analyze. Through storytelling I, as a researcher, seek to “reconstruct the situated self in relation to other bodies—real or

imagined—within a particular context or historical moment to understand culture” (Durham, 2020, p. 24). It is the reconstruction of memory which creates the embodied theoretical contributions of autoethnography.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis “aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 3). Though critical discourse analysis was historically rooted in linguistic study, it has evolved to cover the social dimension of ideology, knowledge, and power (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Discourse analysis is done through a cocreated rhetorical exchange between the critic, the readers, and the writing (Haliliuc, 2016). This discourse tracing flows from a critical-interpretive and applied analysis of discursive practices across micro, meso, and macro levels of praxis (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). Utilizing a grounded theory approach, specifically a constant comparative method was employed to conduct a thematic analysis of the mission statements (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After performing an open reading of all of the episodes of *Harlem* and of all of the tracks on *Heaux Tales*, the data was classified and interpreted in accordance with Smith’s five-step process; the process involved openly coding the data manually while rereading and highlighting themes followed by examining and collapsing themes; finally, illustrative quotes were pulled to demonstrate each theme of sisterhood, vulnerability, and the demand for respect (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

### **Data Collection**

Jazmine Sullivan's project *Heaux Tales* and Amazon Prime's *Harlem* are the case studies used for this project. In the interest of this project, the comparative case study (CCS) approach employs the use of multiple case studies, as a comparative measure; this permits insight into varied and different examples of a phenomenon that may ostensibly seem different, but in actuality paint a more balanced look into the specific contexts in which the phenomenon occurs (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017). The media objects I examine from music and television rely on storytelling with histories in Black communities. Black peoples, across the diaspora, have long used oral traditions, such as narratives, to express or assert their experiences (Prouty, 2006). In addition, there is a robust written tradition in Black communities that has been a means of pronouncement and articulation of their lives. Literature, especially when produced by historically excluded communities, has been a way to theorize lived experiences outside of the academy (Davis, 1998). For this dissertation, I define literature not only as books or other written texts based on prose, but also as song lyrics. As a bridge between the oral and written traditions, Black musical lyrics can operate as an intersectional cultural production that produces racialized and sexualized disruptions to heteropatriarchal ideals and discourses (Ferguson, 2004). In addition, I analyze television program, *Harlem*, whose roots are in this tradition as well.

Because Black media offerings are voluminous, I limited the number of case studies to two. For the music case, I chose *Heaux Tales*, an album by Jazmine Sullivan, a Black woman who is both singer and songwriter, and that was released within the last five years. The television series I have chosen, Amazon Prime's *Harlem*, offers depth of material as a two-season series, with a total of 18 half hour episodes. I chose *Harlem* for

several reasons: it is on a streaming platform (which expands the reach and visibility of representations with high accessibility and rewatch value), has a Black woman showrunner, features an all-Black cast with a Black woman lead, and premiered within the last five years. Both *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* have been nominated for the NAACP Image Awards. Herman Gray (2013) emphasizes the importance of ritualized performances, such as Black award shows, as cultural investment in representation for their affirmation and recognition of individual talent, diverse representations of Blackness, and production of visibility of and for Black culture. Thus, I chose this award instead of the mainstream entertainment awards, such as the Emmys or Grammys, because the purpose of this project is to center Black experiences and the recognition of experiences within Black communities—particularly those of Black women. With this in mind, the case studies I analyzed are: from television—*Harlem* (2021) and from music—Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales* (2021).

## Chapter Outline

Each chapter of my dissertation is organized around a practice of Unapologetic Blackness and examined through the use of two intersecting media case studies: Amazon Prime's *Harlem* (2021) and Jazmine Sullivan's EP, *Heaux Tales* (2021). The following section briefly outlines each chapter:

### Introduction:

The introduction of the dissertation fleshes out my theoretical definition, explication, and conceptualization of Unapologetic Blackness, as well as what can be gained from its study. It also overviews the historical stereotyping of Black women, as well as illuminate how that has manifested into Black cultural productions and mediated representations of Black women, and provide background on the political economy of said Black cultural productions. This chapter also gives some theoretical context to afropessimism, as a theory which Unapologetic Blackness attempts to combat, and emphasizes how this dissertation will contribute to Black feminism, critical media studies, and offer a different conceptualization of Black women in media studies. Additionally, this chapter explains how the case studies were selected, how the themes were developed, and the historical genealogy of the case studies.

### Chapter 1:

The first chapter of this dissertation will explore the expressions of the collective and sisterhood through the Amazon Prime series *Harlem*. This chapter tackles the changing representations of Black women and their friendships on screen, as well as what that

sisterhood offers to Unapologetic Blackness. Additionally, this chapter explores some issues of political economy (e.g. revenue generation and commercial support, showrunners, and directors) and nuances of intertextuality that shape the representation of Unapologetic Blackness and what that means to and for the representation of Black sisterhood.

### Chapter 2:

The second chapter delves into the historical significance and political economy of Black women in contemporary music, as well as provides background on the importance of musical traditions and the expression of vulnerability through music. The chapter will examine vulnerability as a practice of Unapologetic Blackness through analysis of Jazmine Sullivan's project *Heaux Tales*. Finally, the chapter juxtaposes the Strong Black Woman myth and concludes with the how affects of vulnerability, as showcased through *Heaux Tales*, have significant implications for the representation of Black women, as well as elucidates my conceptualization of Unapologetic Blackness.

### Chapter 3:

The third chapter juxtaposes respectability politics and disrespectability politics to the respect that Black women demand through the analysis of both *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales*. I problematize respectability politics in *Harlem* not as an antithesis of Unapologetic Blackness, but as an alternative reading of how Unapologetic Blackness can be expressed under duress. Additionally, I utilize *Heaux Tales* to demonstrate the reclaiming of power

that is oppositional to respectability politics as another expression of Unapologetic Blackness.

Conclusion:

The conclusion of this dissertation summarizes the main points made throughout each of the previous chapters, and illuminate the thematic throughline of Unapologetic Blackness that flows the dissertation. This chapter will wrap up the argument of the dissertation and address the temporality of Unapologetic Blackness, with examples of alter egos as restorying the present and past, and afrofuturism as a way to restory the future. Finally, this chapter will provide insights on the implications of Unapologetic Blackness, including the expansion and development of current theoretical and methodological frameworks that address Black Studies. The chapter will also address the digital and aesthetic consumption and commodification of Blackness. As well as conclude with how the concept of Unapologetic Blackness can be expanded within media research, as well as outside of the communication discipline.

## Chapter One:

Sisterhood has entered the Groupchat: Analyzing the dynamics of Amazon

### Prime's *Harlem*

Community, or the act of communing with like minds, can be found and cultivated in a variety of social groups. However, I theorize that one of the ways Unapologetic Blackness may be more robustly understood is through the practice of sisterhood.

Enter the Groupchat: This is an excerpt from a personal group chat of mine, of Black women in their late twenties that has been edited for length, clarity, and confidentiality. This is one text exchange, but it is symbolic of the space that we, as Black women, hold for one another.


**TS**

Good morning peeps! Requesting prayers and peace of mind. I've been dealing with breast health issues for about two months and yesterday had to get a mammogram, a large possibility infected cyst drained on one side and a biopsy done for the other side. The appointment went well, just a lot of soreness. I should get my results back early next week. I'm pretty bad at letting my friends know when I have shit going on in my life. Trying to do better 🙌🙌😊


**CD**

Sending you love! Thank you for letting us know. This is something we probably all need to get better at - I appreciate you trusting us enough to try to get better with us



**ME**

Sending love  hopefully you get good health news. And I hope that the pain goes away

**KB**

Thank you for letting us know girl  Health scares can be so overwhelming, especially breast health scares. So it's totally understandable if you didn't let anyone know immediately. Sending love and health your way, homie.

**TS**

Thanks y'all.  And of course! Thank you for being people that I can trust. I've had off an on issues for the past few years or so, but nothing like this. It's been nerve-wracking to deal with and the word "biopsy" was scary and took me back to when my dad started getting sick. I was also anxious about doing this with totally new doctors. Luckily everyone has been great so far. Also my mom came down on Tues to "take care of her child". She's been a huge help physically and emotionally. Y'all are the best and I really appreciate your love. 

While this was a scary time for my friend, the fact that she could rely on us, the group, demonstrates how the bonds of sisterhood can affect Black women--in times of triumph, but especially in times of need. This type of exchange is not abnormal among Black women. Colloquial references and memes alluding to the group chat often make light of how much of life's struggles and strife are shared between the group. Fortunately, my friend was okay, and only needed some antibiotics. However, even if something was wrong, she knew she could rely on our group.

It's said that "art mimics life." Yet, stories of Black women supporting one another, like the text exchange above, are not prevalent in literature, film, or television representations. Thus, sisterhood as I intend to use it in this dissertation, is a reclamation from media representations of strife, as often seen on reality television, and illuminates the many ways in which Black women support one another, through their personal and professional hardships, both onscreen and offscreen—as detailed later in this chapter. Media often pit Black women against one another and show conflict rather than community. Robin Means Coleman problematizes these patterns and how they constrain media representations of Blackness; while she acknowledges that stereotypes, such as hypersexualized video vixens of hip hop culture and the misogynoir of gangsta rap, do require critical attention, it is the diversity of practices of Blackness, "which do not lend themselves necessarily to dichotomies between negative stereotypes and positive images" (2006, p.83). These hypersexualized reductionist stereotypical tropes have historically antagonized Black women; however, we cannot only read "representations of black women in mainstream media [as constituting] a venerable tradition of distorted and

limited imagery” (Bobo, 1995, p.33). Not only is this reading limited, it does not allow for the mess or fullness in the expression of Black women’s lives. Unapologetic Blackness asserts that there isn't a "right" and "wrong" way to represent Black women in media—because real life and real people are messy sometimes, these factors are often reflected in media. This messiness is depicted across Black cultural productions, in films, such as *Girls Trip* (2017), television shows, such as *Harlem* (2021-present), and even in reality shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-present).

Collins (2002) argues that by recognizing, reconstructing, and deconstructing what she calls controlling images, Black women can challenge and transform the systems that perpetuate their subordination. In this manner, by crafting mediated representations of Black women who were historically excluded from the ideological formation of femininity, “black writers presented these characters as perhaps freer to redefine themselves, or to ‘invent’ themselves,” (Harris, 1995, p.110). This freedom can be seen within the characters of *Harlem* and their inhibitions towards sex and sexuality, detailed later in this chapter. It is apparent that

the black woman's perspective must guide all attempts to represent her life in the media. failure to do so will result in the same stereotyped imagery that currently corrodes popular media. Black women's voices are unique and diverse and deserve appropriate attention. They can no longer serve as objects of sexual fascination, symbols of immorality, and cheap labor. (Gammage, 2015, p.152)

To oppose controlling images, Black women in media are reclaiming their stories and pushing back against destructive narratives.

Amazon Prime's *Harlem*, is one such show that pushes back against destructive narratives while simultaneously nuancing stereotypes. As the object of analysis for this chapter, *Harlem* embodies the ways in which sisterhood can work in the service of Unapologetic Blackness through its demonstration of Black women's solidarity and support for one another. As a framework for solidarity, sisterhood serves as a cornerstone of Unapologetic Blackness by cultivating spaces of support that enable Black women to confront and dismantle intersecting forms of oppression while demonstrating the multifaceted dimensions of Black women's identities and cultural representations. Examining the role sisterhood plays in constituting Unapologetic Blackness offers insights into the transformative potential of kinship and solidarity in nurturing individual and collective liberation.

*Harlem* represents a challenge to controlling images of Black women, both by showing Black women reclaiming their sexuality and nuancing the ways in which they interact with and support one another in spite of a multitude of oppressions. Black women endure similar multipronged systemic racial and gendered oppressions--historically and currently. As a constitutive element of UB, sisterhood fosters a collective consciousness based on similar experiences with such oppressions, while simultaneously providing space for individual affirmation (support in the midst of struggle or triumph), mutual aid (in times of crisis), and a range of affective experiences, from vulnerability to joy. According to Stuart Hall (1993) media representations produce a critical space where cultural norms, values, and ideologies are produced, disseminated, and reinforced; such a regime in the depiction of Black women uplifting each other through friendship in

*Harlem* illustrates and reifies the value of Black sisterhood, and works to constitute Unapologetic Blackness as a regime of representation.

This chapter argues that practices of kinship such as sisterhood are vital for creating and sustaining new understandings and representations of Black women in media. Building on scholarship from Black feminist thought, intertextuality, and political economy, this chapter focuses on the Amazon Prime Series *Harlem* as a case study representative of Black sisterhood in media and in Unapologetic Blackness. Although *Harlem* explores various types of relationships, this chapter focuses on the solidarity of the Black women cast members with one another. Such solidarity among Black women opens new understandings of representational power of kinship and sisterhood vital to the representation of Black women. The representational power of four different Black women characters shown in sisterhood, each with their own wants, needs, and issues, demonstrates a liberation from stereotypical portrayals that attempt to diminish or control the images of Black women. Seen from this perspective, sisterhood becomes a form of power operating in Unapologetic Blackness. In what follows I expand on how sisterhood is a constitutive element in Unapologetic Blackness and how *Harlem*'s representation of sisterhood offers opportunities for constructing new meanings of Black womanhood. By examining how *Harlem* has represented relationships among a female foursome on television, *Harlem*'s political economy, historical lineage, and intertextuality I will expound on *Harlem*'s role in constituting and circulating Unapologetic Blackness.

### **Sisterhood**

Let's first explore the idea of kinship as a structure of affect, affinity, affection, interdependence, and care that goes beyond the simple platitude of "friends are the family you choose." Communities of color who have suffered the destruction of relational ties due to chattel slavery and settler colonialism have developed their own social practices for forming kinship relationships. While blood ties may be taken as a metaphor of cultural legitimation beyond genetics that holds people together, "kin are intrinsic to one's own being, those in whom we prove to be intrinsic as well" (Butler, 2022, p.36). Especially within Black communities, kinship is key to Black social life and to the notion of living on *in spite of* intersecting oppressions that plague Black communities. Kinship encourages living on, especially in the aftermath of slavery when so many biological families were separated, formerly enslaved peoples relied on their kinship networks for support (Sharpe, 2010). This strong bond continues today. Terrion Williamson (2016) expands on this phenomenon:

To speak of black social life is to speak of this radical capacity to live—to live deeply righteous lives even in the midst of all that brings death close.... Black social life is, fundamentally, the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence but is the rich remainder, the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance and resilience that is expressed in black idioms, cultural forms, traditions, and ways of being. (p.9)

Such Black sociality is especially powerful as the "life" amplified through Black sociality breathes ideological power into the metaphysical and physical structures of Black communities. Shange (2019) argues that kinship is a form of sacred intimacy: "the kind

that bruises, transforming secrets into vulnerabilities, truths into weapons—an intimacy at war” (p. 44). This sacred intimacy is embodied through what Christina Sharpe conceptualizes as “monstrous intimacies:” the “set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in the like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous” (2010, p. 3). Black kinship as I’m using it is a social good that develops how intimacy has been weaponized by past and present ramifications of slavery. Sharpe (2010) argues that the wounds of racial trauma inherited by generations of Black women create and reify relationships of longevity. While I agree that racism, sexism, and colonial rule across the diaspora have shaped the need for these monstrous intimacies, I want to push back on the idea that kinship bonds are formed only through trauma.

To wit: Friendships that are not reliant on genetic ties can be a type of kinship. The link between kinship and friendship is a complex and multifaceted one, as both kinship and friendship are fundamental to human relationships and social connections. “Friendship—as an affective relation, as a form of alliance, as a way of life—has a central place in a genealogy of thinking that celebrates same-sex relations over heterosexual bonds” (Allen and Garrison, 2022, p.229). One type of friendship marked by significant communal experiences, is that of (non-biological) sisterhood. Sisterhood is based on choosing to spend time with people whose interests and values align with one another. On the subject of sisterhood, bell hooks (1995) posits that many women elevate and value their platonic bonds with other women, as much, if not more than, the bonds with their romantic and/or sexual partners. The power of Black sisterhood comes as a

form of support in a world that attempts to devalue and dehumanize Black women. In this vein, Black sisterhood

became yet another shield against reality, another support system. Their [white feminists'] version of sisterhood was informed by racist and classist assumptions about white womanhood, that the white "lady" (that is to say the bourgeois woman) should be protected from all that might upset or discomfort her and shielded from negative realities that might lead to confrontation. (hooks, 1995, 296)

Building upon, and perhaps queering this idea of kinship, I would add that sisterhood consists of complex and often deeply meaningful relationships among women, beyond biological or familial bonds. I use the term sisterhood to describe a system of collaboration and empowerment among women—one that fosters a sense of belonging and interconnectedness no matter the participants' geographical, racial, cultural, or generational locations.

My use of sisterhood in this dissertation sees it as an intimate social practice in which interpersonal tensions that arise can be resolved free from the matrices of oppression that Black women navigate daily. In this sense, sisters manifest deep and enduring bonds. In applying this term to Black women and their experiences specifically, Mukherjee writes that

Sisterhood also provides a framework to understand and articulate the experiences of womanhood in a given cultural situation. Sisterhood, if understood on the bases

of black experience could be redefined as a community of black women, who have the shared experience of being black and women in America. In this context sisterhood is a metaphor, which denotes collectivity. For African Americans, the term sister transcends gender solidarity and it is more of a marker of racial communion. In the black community, sisterhood does not imply a mere desire for a female exclusive community. Further, sisterhood provides bases of solidarity, which is rooted on specific racial experience. (2018, p.208)

Underscoring the significance of female relationships within the larger framework of kinship, sisterhood emphasizes and highlights the shared experiences and connections specific to the unique, gender-specific experiences and relationships among women. I would add further that sisterhood is nourishing for Black communities.

Kinship is a dynamic and evolving concept both within academic discourse and broader queer and feminist movements, and underscores strength that emerges from collective practice, mutual support, and solidarity. What does it mean for Black women to bind themselves together as a collective? What power comes from such a social collective? It is power that arises from navigating together sociocultural and sociopolitical issues that systematically affect our individual lives. Unapologetic Blackness advances the idea that a social collective is a site for building power. As an example, I want to harken back to the opening vignette of this chapter, as evidenced by that moment, the power of the social collective is in how it allows its members safety to be themselves. The kinship of the social collective is one key to the power of Unapologetic Blackness. This is especially significant for deconstructing white

supremacist hegemonic narratives of strife betwixt and between Black women. Furthermore, this kinship illuminates how deeply Black women love each other, and this, “to make kin under the sign of kinlessness is a radical act” (Bradway and Freeman, 2022, p.17).

The social collective, as I am conceptualizing it, is two pronged. First, it is concerned with the actual representation of sisterhood. Second, it is concerned with how that representation came to be—both materially and intertextually. If we take intertextuality, as a form of kinship, then the ensemble becomes the creators of the original text, as well as those inspired by that text. The representations fashioned after the original text may differ slightly, as the milieu is different, but retain the same essence; when one watches *Harlem*, one can see the echoes of *Girlfriends* or *Living Single*, because if these representations did not exist neither would *Harlem*. Amazon Prime’s *Harlem* is a good example of the practice of sisterhood in Unapologetic Blackness: it both illustrates the heterogeneity of Black women’s lives; the multidimensional characters grapple with issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, while simultaneously supporting one another and reflects an intertextual lineage of TV renderings of Black sisterhood from programs such as *Living Single* and *Girlfriends*. As I explain below, this intertextuality enriches and deepens an understanding of sisterhood as a form of resistance to anti-Black racism.

## **Harlem**

*Harlem* (2021-present) is a comedy series that tells the stories of “four stylish and ambitious best girlfriends in Harlem NYC” (Oliver, 2021). Over the course of its two

seasons, each of the four women deals with complex love lives, loss, and changing career trajectories. Created by writer Tracy Oliver, known for her multitude of works, including the web series with Issa Rae--*The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl*--the movie *Girls Trip*, and most recently the indie crossover hit *The Blackening*, *Harlem* examines sisterhood in the modern age (Ruff, 2021). The show follows four thirtysomething women who have been friends since college, and whose long history and sisterhood helps them overcome life's hurdles, from romantic partnerships, to professional obstacles, and even health issues. Professor Camille Parks, played by Meagan Good, struggles to find her footing both as an anthropology adjunct professor at Columbia, and in the dating pool. Jerrie Johnson plays Tye Reynolds, a lesbian tech entrepreneur always moving in the direction of the newest venture, whether in love or business. Quinn Joseph, played by Grace Byers, is an heiress and budding fashion designer struggling to keep her boutique afloat. Rounding out the cast is Angie Wilson, a confident albeit unemployed singer played by Shoniqua Shandai. A third season of *Harlem* has been confirmed (Cordero, 2024).

*Harlem* demonstrates sisterhood aligns neatly with how I have envisioned it as a constitutive element of Unapologetic Blackness. In an interview with In Creative Company (2023), Tracy Oliver explains that she has constructed *Harlem*'s sisterhood from interesting, diverse characters who share trust, loyalty, and history with another. While the show does feature conflict at times, it is not among the main characters, but rather in response to problems arising from outside of the group. For example, all of the characters have varying issues with their work colleagues, mothers, or even romantic

partners—whether they’re ex-boyfriends, one night stands, or friends with benefits— but, the issues are rarely with one another. Oliver emphasizes that she was tired of seeing women, especially Black women, fighting other women on screen, and steered herself towards writing a different narrative—one in which women love each other (In Creative Company, 2023). To counter the exploitation of and “attention paid to black struggle and black pain,” Oliver says that she “want[s] to leave behind a love story between women,” even if those characters are messy and don’t always get it right (Williams, 2023). Before delving into the character dynamics of the series, I first explore why the quartet of characters matters to *Harlem* and to the representation of sisterhood for Unapologetic Blackness.

### ***Foursomes on TV***

Television representations of women friend-groups typically depict sisterhood as a set of complex relationships that showcase the diverse experiences of the central characters using themes of kinship and empowerment. These depictions can be seen in Black shows like UPN’s *Girlfriends*, HBO’s *Insecure*, BET’s *Twenties*, VH1’s *Single Ladies* and Starz’s *Run the World*; all of which center Black womanhood and friendship. Burns-Adolino describes foursomes such as those in TV shows *The Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, *Living Single*, *Sex and the City*, *Girlfriends*, *Cashmere Mafia* and *Hot in Cleveland*, and explains that their on-screen relationships can encourage similar connections among their fans:

This solidarity of the female foursome Sisterhood is replicated in fan forums where fans who have never met share intimate details of their lives and

experiences with online friends. Self-identified avid fans, lurkers and critics in the fandom express how these female foursome characters resonate with their own lived experiences. Like each member of the female foursome, members on the online fandom find comfort and solace in the words of one another and enjoy the shared conceptual map provided by the female foursome shows. (2015, p.168-169)

Common in popular media, the female foursome allows for a variety of interactions among the foursome and explores different facets of their identities—whether that be boldness or recklessness, naivete or cynicism. Using this formula, each character may portray a different aspect of life, such as love, career, education, identity, and so forth, where “each of these characters provides another perspective, a different voice, and another lens through which fans may [view] social problems, issues and situations” (Burns-Ardolino, 2015, p. 20).

Drawing from the work of Meehan (1983), Kaler (1990), and Burns-Ardolino (2015), I want to point out that female foursomes characteristically demonstrate a Greco-classic view of women—that is, the Jungian archetypes of Kore, Artemis, and Diana (Kaler, 1990). These mythological women are associated with innocence, sexual awakening, and finally motherhood, each meant to encompass the experiences considered most important in a woman’s life. If we accept that the characters of female foursomes—Matriarchs, Naifs, Jezebels, and Virgins—are an allegory for the different eras in a woman’s life, then the portrayal of these characters hold significant representational power in their “critical evaluation of the stereotypes and tropes evidenced in these

shows ” (Burns-Ardolino, 2015, p.17). These four character archetypes are important to understanding the dynamics between the characters, as well as the invocation of femininity portrayed by these series. In the examination of a comedic series, such as *Harlem*, considering how these characters are constituted not only through the archetypes mentioned above, but also through the lived experiences of Black women, is central to my analysis.

However, although these four characters’ archetypes employ different brands of femininity and feminism, female foursome shows have also demonstrated “resistance to idealized traditional femininity and stereotypical militant feminism. In fact, the stereotyped foils complicate the longstanding binary between feminism and femininity” (Burns-Ardolino, 2015, p.33). This is complicated further when intersections of race are added to the foursomes. If one were to defer to an, arguably misguided, construction of these characters through the lens of controlling images, then Camille would represent the mammy caregiving figure, Tye would be the manhating (masc lesbian) sapphire, Angie would represent the lascivious jezebel, and Quinn would be reduced to the tragic mulatta. Yet, this interpretation limits these characters’ representations to stereotypes that prevent a view of who they could be, for themselves and for each other. Instead, the representations of sisterhood in *Harlem*, embrace a diversity of Black women's identities and experiences, and center the solidarity of the characters. In this context, solidarity means the show of support that the characters provide for one another, as I will explain below. My reading shows how the characters of *Harlem* exemplify Unapologetic Blackness, not only by representing Black women’s heterogeneity, but also by

demonstrating diversity in sisterhood: that our bonds with one another are multifaceted and therefore resistant to how images of Black women in media have been historically controlled.

### **The Women of *Harlem***

#### **Camille**

Camille offers the guiding narration at the beginning of each episode, in a way that reflects the class that she is teaching that day; she acts as the responsible and level-headed member of her friend group, performing a matriarch archetype (Oliver, 2021). For example, in the season one episode titled “The Strong Black Woman,” Camille begins the episode with narration on the origins of the term “strong Black woman” as she speaks, a presentation from her class plays images in the background. This is foreshadowing as seen throughout the episode with each of the characters facing situations that require strength—Tye with her ruptured ovarian cysts, Quinn not being financially stable enough for her mother, Angie struggling against microaggressions at work, and Camille herself fighting for tenure and for the love of her ex-boyfriend (Matt and Muhammed, 2021). As an anxious over achiever, Camille struggles to balance her professional life with her romantic relationships. Camille’s career as an anthropology professor at Columbia University is a source of pride and accomplishment for her, but also serves as a point of contention as she struggles to get a tenured position. Her primary issue over the course of seasons 1 and 2 revolve around her ex-boyfriend Ian, played by Tyler Lепley, and her

new boyfriend Jameson, played by Sullivan Jones (Oliver, 2021). Camille could be understood as the “educated black bitch:” beautiful, educated, and powerful, but often struggling in romantic relationships (Collins, 2004). However, this characterization is limited because although Camille may be educated and powerful, she is not more exceptional than any of the other main characters who struggle with anxiety and fear of failure. In fact, Camille’s neuroses make her vulnerable in all aspects of her life, as she tends to overextend herself professionally and blur boundaries in her love life.

Camille represents the matriarch of the foursome. The matriarch character represents the central female authority within the central foursome, “and serves as an anchoring fixture for other women in [ensemble] television series. The Matriarch protects, leads, and legitimates the sisterhood” (Burns-Ardolino, 2015, p.42). Camille can be seen acting as a matriarch by usually initiating the group's get-togethers or at the very least being the first present to the gatherings (Oliver, 2021). Additionally, Camille as the matriarch character plays a crucial role in decision-making, conflict resolution, and holding the sisterhood together.

## **Tye**

Tye is the successful friend with a sharp wit and sarcastic humor to match. Tye’s determination to succeed in a male-dominated profession is a hallmark of her character. She is a strong, independent, ambitious woman with a successful career as a tech entrepreneur with her App Q, for queer people of color, and then later her App Poly, for polygamous people of color (Oliver, 2021). Tye is often seen ignoring her own issues, whether that be physical or emotional distress, and at one point as she attempts to push

through work to make it to a conference, her pain becomes so overwhelming that she passes out at the airport and must be rushed to a hospital due to a ruptured ovarian cyst, polyps, and fibroids (Matt and Muhammed, 2021). Though her career is a source of pride, Tye hates working at relationships and often is searching for connection, usually sexual. As one of the more sexually forward characters on the show, she can be read as a new take on the sapphire. She is a ball-buster, but not necessarily interested in the emasculation of men, but rather in the equality of women. Tye operates as the advocate of the group, often seen championing gender equality, queer rights, and social justice. Though seen as a strong character, she is still portrayed as vulnerable especially when dealing with health issues pertaining to fertility in season two. At the hospital, the white male doctor dismisses her pain and even accuses her of wanting to acquire drugs, then on a return visit the same doctor immediately advocates for a hysterectomy—the most invasive procedure (Matt and Muhammed, 2021). Even amid Quinn advocating for her, Tye is still vulnerable to the health system and cannot have the emergency surgery without the approval of her (surprise) husband (Matt and Muhammed, 2021). This vulnerability is a juxtaposition to Tye’s normal brash demeanor.

### **Angie**

Angie is an artist in every sense of the word. As an unemployed singer who takes odd job--from working in Quinn’s boutique, to nannying, to a role in *Get Out: The Musical*--Angie remains a fiercely independent woman who is not afraid to speak her mind (Oliver, 2021). She provides comic relief through her witty one-liners, sarcastic humor, and amusing reactions to the various situations she encounters. For example,

while manning Quinn's boutique counter, she overhears one of the white customers lamenting how she wants a Jamaican nanny, Angie immediately puts on a fake Jamaican accent and lands the job (Free and Mendoza, 2021). Additionally, Angie has numerous sexual partners throughout the show, and although the vast majority are one-night stands, she does have a noteworthy friends-with-benefits situation with her bisexual best friend Eric, before getting into a serious relationship in season two (Oliver, 2021). Some of her notable sexual escapades include an Uber driver who lived in his car, and a man from a nail shop and his roommate—with whom she pretends to be an identical twin—and later admits to Quinn, he also had a “sexy” cousin she ended up sleeping with as well (Oliver, 2021).

Though apparently the “broke” friend, Angie's materialistic tendencies and desire for a luxurious lifestyle are recurring themes in the series; she also brings a touch of glamor and extravagance to the show's ensemble. She takes pride in her singing voice and is determined to achieve career success on her own terms. Her self-assuredness is juxtaposed with her struggles to deal with microaggressions in her work. For example, her forced apology to a white actress on set who was offended by Angie. While arguably the most sexually liberated character, Angie can be easily conceived of as the oversexualized jezebel. However, as the most full figured of the core four, her characterization pushes against white supremacist ideas of beauty.

## **Quinn**

Quinn is the emotional heart of the group, offering support and comfort to her friends when they need it. Though Quinn is a genuinely warm and caring individual who

values her friendships deeply, she is, in many ways, able to get by with her quirky behavior and her tendency to be somewhat ditzy, due to her rich parents (Oliver, 2021). Her eccentric whims are paid for by parents who support her financially while she pursues her various entrepreneurial dreams, the latest of which is to own a fashion boutique. Quinn is the naif of the group with her creative fashion ambitions and romantic spirit give her a naively optimistic outlook on life. At one point, she even asks to become a “hoe-printice,” a play on the words ho apprentice, to which Angie replies “Quinn you ain’t cut out for this hoe life” (Free and Mendoza, 2021).

While perhaps appearing to be a “tragic mulatta,” as the lightest member of the foursome, Quinn offers much more nuance to the perspective on mixed race or multiracial identity construction to the discourse. Quinn’s mother, played by Jasmine Guy, is of Caribbean descent and constantly tells Quinn that she is not good enough because she does not have a stable career, and relies on her to pay for her boutique (Matt and Muhammed, 2021). Ralina Joseph (2013) articulates a twist on the tragic mulatta, as “the volatile new millenniummulatta who uses race, or, more specifically, uses blackness, when she needs it” (Joseph, 2013, p.39). This new tragic mulatta stereotype is a woman who, in her desire for whiteness, is marked for tragedy, usually death, yet she refuses to accept such afro pessimism, thus circumventing her tragedy. Conversely, Quinn’s everlasting optimism not only positions her against the tragic mulatto trope, it also elevates her to the conscience of the group. Her character can be read as the naif or the daughter; as the foil of the matriarch archetype, this naive presenting character serves as the emblematic conscience for the other characters (Burns-Ardolino, 2015).

## **The Women's Dynamics**

I've described each of the characters as individuals, but the individuals truly shine in their ensemble. Although other relationships between black women are portrayed in *Harlem*, such as mothers and daughters, mentors and mentees (if one can call the relationship between Camille and Dr. Pruitt—played by Whoopi Goldberg—that) as well as other displays of kinship, I focus on the relationships between the main characters. Each dynamic demonstrated in *Harlem* is important to the sisterhood piece that constitutes Unapologetic Blackness, as each demonstrates how Black women characters need not succumb to stereotypes as they support one another and tend to their lives outside of the foursome. Furthermore, “it is the interplay between the foils and among the force them that evolves the most interest the quaternity—the representations of the four parts of a complete woman—is played out effectively in each of these programs” (Burns-Ardolino, 2015, p.24). For *Harlem*, this means that the portrayal of the main characters in duos, as foils of one another, produces a more nuanced portrayal of Black womanhood and sisterhood. While the characters together as a foursome do illuminate sisterhood, the characters are all shown individually in their own storylines, and often together in pairs.

### **Camille and Tye**

Camille and Tye have a strong friendship and when the two come together, the love is palpable on screen. For example, when Camille first introduced Jamieson, her new love interest, to the group, Tye is the first to ask him questions and assert that her friend was not to be trifled with (Watson and Muhammad, 2021). Both characters' shared professional ambitions and commitments to their friendships bond them deeply. Tye's

sharp wit and dedication to queer and feminist activism complement Camille's hard work ethic. The two women take pride in their careers and they often engage in intellectual discussions to provide support to one another. For example, when Tye is battling her commitment issues, she calls Camille to ask if she should buy a dog, to help her develop empathy. Camille proceeds to help her make a hilarious list of pros and cons, including "it's another living thing that would be dependent on you!" to which Tye replies "does that go in the pro or con list?" (Oliver et al., 2023). While a seemingly light moment, it depicts how much these characters value one another's opinions. Tye turns to Camille in that moment as she knows that Camille is best suited to provide logic in this moment of emotional anxiety. These characters' dynamic is demonstrative of the positive influence and encouragement that Black women give one another.

### **Quinn and Angie**

The two roommates are portrayed as being in the closest relationship on the show. Quinn and Angie share a deep bond, even though they have contrasting personalities. These two characters operate as the Jezebel and Virgin dichotomy of the foursome. The jezebel character operates as an exploration of female sexual desire (Burns-Ardolino, 2015). The virgin character need not be an actual virgin, but rather a play on the virgin/whore dichotomy: a character who may not be as openly expressive with her sexuality, but still very much in charge of her femininity (Burns-Ardolino, 2015). Angie and Quinn may serve as foils of one another, but their friendship is characterized by mutual support and love, and they often serve as each other's confidantes. Quinn's idealism complements Angie's materialistic tendencies, and their friendship endures

despite their differences. For example, when Quinn gets stranded on Long Island after a bad date, Angie comes to pick her up first thing in the morning (Oliver, 2021). Their differences do cause them to butt heads in quite a few episodes, but that never detracts from the friendship. For example, the two are shown having a blowout argument when Angie gets Quinn kicked off the Uber app for constantly booking and canceling rides in search of a man; but the argument blows over in a matter of minutes and the two are back to joking (Oliver, 2021). And when Angie finally moves out, Quinn begins to spiral into a depression, demonstrating the depth of love the two characters hold for one another.

### **Angie and Camille**

Though viewers don't get to see this dynamic much on screen, Angie and Camille demonstrate a bond of strength in uncertainty. Where Camille is seemingly more responsible, Angie is more free-spirited; but both characters are battling the same issues in different ways. Camille may have a steady job, but it is not progressing in the manner she wants (Oliver, 2021). While Angie balances different jobs—from nannying to working on a musical—her singing career is also not headed in the direction she would like (Oliver, 2021). Regardless, both are always there for one another. In the season two opener, “Takesie Backsies”, the two are shown hanging out, eating ice cream, and walking together while ducking from Camille's ex-boyfriend Ian, and Angie doles out romantic advice which Camille counters with her own read of Angie's romantic pursuits (Oliver et al., 2023). They revisit this conversation in the penultimate season two episode, where Camille once again pours her heart out to Angie who gives her sage advice before telling her even if she doesn't take the advice that she will listen to Camille is “story

again and again and again” (Byrd et al., 2023). This relationship dynamic is shown as more playful and in reading these two characters together, we see a parallel of self-discovery through their dissimilar personalities.

### **Quinn and Camille**

As the two hopeless romantics, Camille and Quinn embody the more optimistic side of the quartet. Both women care deeply for their friends and offer them guidance and support when they face challenges. Between Camille’s seemingly never-ending struggle to acquire a tenured, or at the very least tenure track, position at Columbia, and Quinn’s flailing boutique, both women are at career crossroads (Oliver, 2021). For example, while on their girl’s trip to Puerto Rico, Quinn and Camille have an exchange about overworking, with Quinn quipping “Girl you was trying to make me feel guilty about working when clearly you don’t have the time!” (Byrd et al., 2023). As Camille apologizes, the two share a moment about wanting to enjoy their time at the beach with their friends (Byrd et al., 2023). The nature of their dynamic offers insight into the idealism of the ensemble, as both represent the hopefulness of Black women —with Quinn’s hopefulness leaning towards romanticism and Camille’s hopefulness leaning towards professionalism.

### **Tye and Angie**

As the Kellys of the group (a reference to dark skinned women who, much like Kelly Rowland in Destiny’s Child, are often overlooked in favor of lighter skinned counterparts such as Beyoncé), they both combat the stereotypical discourse equating

darkness with ugliness. Regardless of the usual stereotypical aesthetic, these two characters own their sexuality in the series. Angie and Tye both have new or recurring sexual partners in almost every episode. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) contends that representations of Black women's sexual prowess may feed into hypersexualized stereotypes of black women in the form of controlling images, such as the "hot mama," "jezebel," or "vixen." However, the formation of the sexually forward personae in Black women characters on this show has been reconstructed as a display of agency. For example, at one point when the foursome are waiting on their usual reserved table and Camille mentions the word "cock," the waiter shows up at that exact moment to take them to their table; there, Tye jokes that the waiter finally arrives as soon as she heard cock, to which Angie jokingly responds if she heard cock that she'd come running too (Oliver, 2021). Angie's and Tye's sexual desires are not just blatant in conversation, but in action as well. The power of this duo lies in their reclaiming sexuality, as well as its opposition to hypersexualizing controlling images. Furthermore, they embody the African American saying of "the Blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice."

### **Tye and Quinn**

While apparent opposites, Tye's level-headedness serves to support Quinn's romanticism. The two follow similar trajectories, but like Camille and Angie, have different responses to similar issues. Both are entrepreneurs, but Tye has a greater level of career success than Quinn. Both struggle in the dating scene, and when Quinn questions her sexuality using a hilarious analogy about okra, Tye helps talk her through it (Oliver, 2021). Instead of directly asking about her attraction to a woman, Quinn likens

women to okra — a vegetable that she doesn't particularly like— and men to burgers, a food she usually loves (Oliver, Scott, & Barnette, 2021). Tye cuts the analogy and asks Quinn “is okra pussy?;” before offering a retort on how straight women sometimes like to experiment and that Quinn needs to “leave that okra the hell alone until you know what you really want” (Oliver, Scott, & Barnette, 2021). The two also go to pride events together because Quinn feels a bit lonely and lost after the breakup of her first same-sex relationship (Matt et al., 2023). Whether in crisis or not, these two always show up for one another. This dynamic illustrates a push and pull of optimistic and pessimistic responses to situations, while simultaneously highlighting the similarities of the situations Black queer women face.

### **The Ensemble**

The *Harlem* ensemble's friendships are not limited to one-on-one relationships. The group often gathers as a foursome and shares humorous moments, provides support, and navigates the complexities of life in New York City. All of the characters have been close friends since college, despite coming from different backgrounds and upbringings, and reflects a sisterhood based on both relationships with others and attention to self. And while the pursuit of the perfect man and the ups and downs in the world of dating and relationships are recurring themes in *Harlem*, the true love story is one between the four women. From watching “weather wives” (a satirical reference to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*), to eating at the restaurant, to all the women helping with Camille's Black joy project that showcases what Black joy means to each of the characters, the main characters regularly gather to support one another and enjoy one another's company

(Oliver, 2021). If we view these physical gatherings as an allegorical representation of the space that Black sisterhood creates, then the power of the individuals and of the collective is evident.

Unapologetic Blackness argues that the power of the sisterhood is in the joining together for support. In these restaurant gatherings, Camille, Quinn, Tye, and Angie, talk about their lives, their romances, their hopes, their dreams, and ultimately show support for each other by simply being present. While female foursomes have been common in television series featuring white women, some TV series have showcased and reflected the lives and stories of Black women. Notable examples in Black television include *Living Single* (1993-1998), *Girlfriends* (2000-2008), *Sistas* (2019-present), *Run the World* (2021), *Queens* (2021), and *Harlem* (2021-present). *Harlem* screenwriter Tracy Oliver conceptualizes the dynamic of the main characters in this way:

They as a foursome represent a lot of different aspects of blackness. They look different and come from different backgrounds, and I think they have incredible chemistry. And that's honestly because they love each other in real life...I think if those four didn't work, we wouldn't have a show. (Pop Culture, 2023)

Oliver's words illustrate the love at the heart of *Harlem*'s representation of Black sisterhood. In an interview with Sherri Shepard (2023) each of *Harlem*'s main actors defined what sisterhood meant to the show and to them individually. Jerrie (who plays Tye) mentioned that sisterhood is about loving each individual person as well as the dynamic of the group itself. Grace (who plays Quinn) pointed out that as women get older it becomes more important to treasure our sisters. Meagan (who plays Camille)

explained that the quality of her life is only improved by her sisters and concluded with “sisterhood is everything.” Building on this point, Shoniqua (who plays Angie) pointed to the “the safety that black women offer each other” through sisterhood and how it helps to navigate a world filled with injustice (Shepard, 2023). These responses indicate that sisterhoods such as that depicted with these characters, should be reproduced and circulated across even more media outlets.

### **The Sisterhood of Intertextuality**

Sisterhood is not only represented in the characters and their dynamics, but also in how it manifests behind the scenes in the entertainment business that produces *Harlem*. Intertextuality represents Unapologetic Blackness through the constitution of sisterhood among Black women creators, creating spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and collective action, especially in industries and entertainment spaces that are typically White and male dominated. Through sisterhood, Black women can amplify their voices, advocate for representational diversity, and mobilize for change in the face of systemic representational marginalization. Such solidarity and support are illustrated in *Harlem*’s on-screen rendering, as reflected in the words of the actors and Tracy Oliver.

Unapologetic Blackness is composed of a variety of cultural expressions of Blackness, some of which comes about as a result of intertextual references within and about *Harlem*. No cultural or media text exists in isolation; rather, each text is part of a broader context, and the interplay between texts is vital to deconstructing the multiple layers of meaning and influence that shape the creation and interpretation of cultural products. After a brief explanation of intertextuality below, I illustrate some of the ways

in which it works in *Harlem* to enrich the practice of sisterhood and its contribution to Unapologetic Blackness.

Intertextuality can be defined along two axes, commercial and generic.

“Commercial intertextuality is used to describe the production and interlinking of texts like blockbuster films or TV series with allied paratexts and products, such as spin-offs, reversionings, promos, online media, books, games and merchandise” (Hardy, 2011, p.7). This intertextuality is based in cross-media promotion that is most concerned with interlinking streams to produce profit. Hardy (2011) enumerates five categories of commercial intertextuality: 1) the megatext or original media text; 2) the corporate paratexts or transmedia storytelling; 3) corporate promotions of the original and paratexts; 4) official merchandise created for further promotion; and 5) retail. All of these tether narrative forms to transmedia politics. Hardy points out that intertextuality is bound up in complexities of “corporate ownership of texts, and of control, not in the sense of controlling meaning processes (‘readings’), but controlling the assembly and dissemination of proprietary communications” (2011, p.8). Disney products lend themselves well to examples of this commercial intertextuality.

However, the intertextual space extends beyond the corporate axis defined in Hardy’s categorizations. If textual space is based upon material content, then intertextual space expands the social communication fashioned around this content, such as social media discourse or memes following the release of content. Generic intertextuality relates to moments of relatedness between texts that signify they’re part of a genre. Such intertextuality reveals the interconnectedness of texts and their influence on one another

through references, allusions, and dialogues with other texts, whether from the same era or across different time periods and cultures. These intertextual moments can also highlight problematic social and political issues. For example, in examining *Insecure*'s use of theme songs, Vesey (2019) argues that the intertextuality of the theme songs invites examination of often racist and sexist industrial contexts, as the usually Black women singers of the theme songs are often overlooked in mainstream media (Vesey, 2019). This argument becomes more significant in the following chapter, in my examination of Jazmine Sullivan, the singer of *Insecure*'s theme song. With theme, tone, and the sensibilities of the milieu, the intertextual space signifies distinct representational practices that underscores the notion of uplifting and assisting Black and brown voices as important to the past and contemporary cultural moment (Vesey, 2019).

In examining the intertextuality of Black cultural productions, Robin Means Coleman (2003) suggests that intertextual moments can reveal intersecting oppressions within different milieus to reinterpret and co-opt ideological narratives of white supremacy. Stereotypical historical images still echo in the modern day: the hypersexualized Black woman, or the submissive Black woman, or the emasculating and aggressive Black woman have all served to capture and perpetuate society's prevailing stereotypes, prejudices, and misconceptions about Black women and maintain systems of ideological domination rooted in a history of misogynoir that has been deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness. Collins (2002) shows that controlling images prevalent in media, literature, and popular culture, actively contribute to the construction of Black women's identities by legitimizing their social, economic, and political subordination

using representations portraying them as inherently inferior to White people, hypersexualized, or deviant in other ways. These representations are not merely passive stereotypes; they warp the cultural production of Blackness, at all levels of production and distribution.

The shifting relations between black performers and the performance of “blackness”—and the consequent shifts in the balance of power—play out not just between the African American producer and the mainstream, white corporate structure but also, crucially, between performer and audience. (Maurice, 2012, p.192-193)

These meanings can dictate media users’ perspectives on Blackness, which have significant cultural implications.

*Harlem* demonstrates genre intertextuality across time, and also in its inception. In an interview with *Essence* magazine, Tracy Oliver says that when creating *Harlem*, she was inspired by comedy predecessors of TV’s Black Renaissance, circa the 1980s to the early 2000s, like *Living Single* and *Girlfriends* (Ruff, 2021). Oliver’s references to *Living Single* and *Girlfriends* show through in *Harlem*, especially with Quinn and Angie living together, as well as the constant gathering of the foursome at mealtimes—a prominent feature of the latter shows, demonstrates *Harlem* is a prime example of intertextuality (Oliver, 2021).

But *Harlem* struggled to come to fruition due to interlocking oppressions plaguing its creator. Although *Girls Trip* had been a box office success, its producers didn’t want

to hire Oliver at first, and she didn't make a high salary from the film because it was a "gamble" (Jackson, 2023). Even after becoming the first Black woman screenwriter of a movie that grossed over \$100 million--\$140 million for *Girls Trip*--Oliver still had to prove herself over and over again by constantly pitching to different studios even with a proven blockbuster success (Williams, 2023). Similarly, when developing *Harlem*, Oliver reports that her agents and manager said, "This is hilarious, but I don't know if we can sell it;" but after the success of *Girls Trip* the project was greenlit (Ruff, 2021). Oliver states that she's "looking at a lot of different opportunities, not only for myself, but also other writers of color, particularly women of color, in the comedy space. I think in a weird way, *Awkward Black Girl* paved the way for things like *Girls Trip* and paved the way for the Apple deal that I have—because we proved that Black women are not only worthy and talented, but they're also profitable" (Ruff, 2021). Oliver is now reportedly beginning a multi-year, eight figure production deal with Apple and her production company Tracy Yvonne Productions (Ruff, 2021). The mission of Tracy Yvonne Productions "is to advocate for authentic, impactful, and inspirational storytelling across mediums and genres, by centering diverse stories, amplifying unique voices, and improving inclusiveness within the industry" (White, 2021). Oliver's words echo those of predecessors Yvette Lee Bowser and Mara Brock Akil, the creative geniuses behind *Living Single* and *Girlfriends* respectively, and situate *Harlem* among other comedic Black foursomes in TV.

Academic industry studies of the relationship between media and representation have tended to focus on showrunners and/or producers, studios, or network platforms to

understand how industry dynamics shape media representations. But the writers' room is just as important in understanding the creation of Black women's narratives for the screen. Studios, production companies, and other media gatekeepers have historically excluded, underrepresented, or stereotyped Black narratives without giving full attention to the experiences of Black women (Christian, 2020a; Quashie, 2012; Williamson, 2016). Thus, as "cultural producers black women have taken on the task of creating images of themselves different from those continually reproduced in traditional works" (Bobo, 1995, p.45). The highly competitive employment on scripted shows demonstrates a certain cultural membership that can dictate representations for years to come (Henderson, 2011). With a deficit of multiracial and multiethnic writers in writing rooms, the representation of said groups also becomes deficient. However, multicultural hiring, while necessary, can pigeonhole writers into writing characters of their marginalized identity:

In other words, the more race, gender, and class are used to other writers, the less comfortable these writers are with expressing creative and cultural difference. In a uni-cultural world that limits its definition of multiculturalism to visual difference, all writers and all characters may not look alike, but they all mimic the dominant group because there is little acceptance of actual difference.

(Henderson, 2011, p.152)

This means that not only are there few writers of color, but those writers are meant to write and represent the entirety of that racial experience. Yet, without Black representation in writers' rooms, in the studios, and at every level of production there will

be representations of Blackness that rely on inferential racism and problematic representational politics that are now expanding on streaming platforms, which make these representations more accessible to larger audiences. However, when seen and valued as cultural producers and recorders of their own narratives, histories, and experiences, “Black women's perspective on their material conditions has impelled them to value the ways in which they represent themselves, for others’ characterizations have distorted their history and attributes” (Bobo, 1995, p.205). This means that Black women can move beyond stereotypical discourse when employed to take charge of their own representations outside of white dominated media depictions.

Intertextuality highlights the interconnectedness of Black artistic expression by allowing Black creators to engage with and then subvert existing stereotypical discourses; through referencing and remixing media texts, Black creators can reclaim and reinterpret them to reflect their own experiences and perspectives. Unapologetic Blackness draws upon this assertion of cultural connections to assert the intertwined sisterhood that occurs not only between people, but also between media texts, as well as the mediated expression of a variety of Blackness.

### **Conclusion**

In the character examples I provided above, we can read kinship in *Harlem* most clearly through the lens of power. If not for the collective, materially, as in the combination of writers, studios, producers, and algorithms, then the collective metaphorically, as in the characters themselves, would not have been born. Challenging stereotypes about division among Black women helps us to examine the discursive strategies that Black women use

to foil these depictions and the ideologies that drive them. These strategies—material and symbolic—are responsible for constituting media representations of Black women that contribute to Unapologetic Blackness.

I want to harken back to the beginning of this chapter and end with a group chat; this one from season two, episode six of *Harlem* (Cowan, Ford, Oliver & Vanderpoort, 2023):

**Quinn**

I know I've been telling you all I'm fine. I lied. I'm not fine. I need you. Come to my place.

**Angie**

Quinnie!!! On my way

**Tye**

Hang on sis. There in 10.

When the women meet at Quinn's place, Angie and Tye both feel bad that they didn't recognize the signs that Quinn was struggling or know sooner about her distress; meanwhile, Quinn was just happy that her friends showed up for her (Cowan, Ford, Oliver & Vanderpoort, 2023). As with my own friends, the group chat summons the sisterhood that we share with one another. The power drawn from this sisterhood is not only comfort and care (though both of those things are important), it is the permission to freely express vulnerability without judgment. In this vein, the dynamic between Camille,

Angie, Quinn, and Tye signifies what an Unapologetic Blackness sisterhood is all about: an inverse, and often more optimistic, response to an afropessimistic view of disharmony within Black communities. *Harlem* contributes to our understanding of the complexities of Black identity and the transformative potential of solidarity among Black women; it thus exemplifies how and why sisterhood is a vital practice of Unapologetic Blackness.

While I situate *Harlem*'s representation of sisterhood in the discursive formation of Unapologetic Blackness, I would be remiss not to mention reality television and its representations of Black women and sisterhood, or rather lack thereof. Because reality television intertextually informs mediated discourses of Black sisterhood, it is important to acknowledge this cross pollination and reality TV's brand of sisterhood. Reality TV relies on a formula that that relies on conflict rather than solidarity among its ensemble casts; reality TV programs that feature Black women are no exception. There is, however, another dimension of such programs to consider. While the ensemble's relationships with one another may be more volatile than they are harmonious, shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* also show Black women succeeding professionally, starting business ventures, and living messy lives (Sharpe, 2023). Kandi Burrell, singer-songwriter, mogul, and one of the stars of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, points out that on other Bravo franchise reality shows such as *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, the white women in the ensemble are depicted in an equally conflictual way, but the perception of in-fighting amongst Black women is considered taboo (Sharpe, 2023).

In redefining what success and respect mean to the social collective, we must first examine where and why hegemonic narratives about Black women persist. Lived

experience is foundational for understanding what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) refers to as “representational intersectionality” or the interdependent and interlocking ways in which narratives about race and gender are rendered into images and media texts. Crenshaw (1991) emphasizes that media and other forms of representation often fail to capture the nuanced experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. These narratives play into ideological systems that diminish women, and particularly Black women. As hooks notes

As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo. Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are “natural” enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood. (1995, p.127)

The sisterhood that hooks expounds on and that I draw from and analyze may play a part in reality TV shows with Black women ensembles, although it is not a central feature (as multiple scholars have documented e.g., Murray and Ouellette, 2004;

Williamson, 2016). Instead of examining these programs, despite their ensemble casts of Black women, I have chosen to analyze *Harlem's* depiction of sisterhood as a means of “reclaiming and reconstructing narratives authenticating black women's histories...to countermand other strategies working to oppress them” (Bobo, 1995, p. 203). For *Harlem*, being spearheaded by a Black woman creative, featuring a Black cast, and depicting representations of the variety and struggles of Black womanhood demonstrates the practice of sisterhood. By claiming certain popular cultural intertextual moments, Black popular communication crafts identities of shared experience, whether on reality television or scripted shows. Whether it be reality television or *Harlem*, Unapologetic Blackness invokes that sisterhood is ever-present.

Unapologetic Blackness recognizes the interconnectedness of Black women's struggles and experiences, through both strife and solidarity. Sisterhood in Unapologetic Blackness provides a space for Black women to share their experiences, validate each other's struggles, and collectively address systemic inequalities, both on screen and behind the scenes. All of the Black women mentioned in this chapter, fictitious or not, mediated or embodied, are productions of different milieux, different sociopolitical, geographic, and temporal moments. These women hold different occupations, different class positionings, and to some extent different social struggles. In *Harlem*, sisterhood emerges as a practice integral to Unapologetic Blackness. *Harlem's* sisterhood offers a space for its ensemble's collective empowerment, which allows its Black women viewers to express the fullness of their lives through mediated representation and envision narratives of unencumbered affects, not restricted by stereotypical discourse.



## Chapter Two:

### “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired”: Showcasing Black Women’s vulnerability through Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales*

Recently--and by recently I mean probably sometime in the last year but maybe it was the year before (I honestly don't remember clearly)--it was summertime and I was at a gathering at my sister's house. At this get together, a group of black women—maybe four or five of us—including myself, were all there attempting to recall a song that every Black person should know: the Black national anthem— “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” And for the life of us, we could not get the lyrics correct. Now someone would remember the first line, and I could recall most of the chorus, but none of us could get all the way through the song. We, of course, all refused to look up the answer because dagnabbit we were supposed to know it. Funny enough, whether because of our stubbornness or our refusal to admit defeat, it took us about an hour before we gave in and looked up the song lyrics. This moment reminded me of a conversation that I had with Dr. Danielle Brown: in that conversation we talked at length about what it meant to be in black community and what Jennifer Nash (2013) would call the “sacred possibilities” of that space. She said to me “we're all singing the same song, but we join in at different parts of the chorus” (Brown, personal communication, 2022).

I think this is an apt description when thinking through Unapologetic Blackness. Oxford Languages (n.d.) defines chorus in the following ways:

noun

1. a part of a song that is repeated after each verse, typically by more than one singer.

2. a large organized group of singers, especially one that performs together with an orchestra or opera company.

verb

(of a group of people) say the same thing at the same time.

In this vein, my sister, her friends, and I were all part of the chorus, and we could only join in at certain times with certain lyrics of a song that supposedly represented the sum of all of us. Unapologetic Blackness repeats throughout time and looks different in different times. But, what remains the same is that we all join in the chorus. Even now I still cannot recall the lyrics without having to look it up every single time. But I can admit that. It is a vulnerable thing to cast oneself into the unknown and have others witness your uncertainty.

Oxford Languages defines vulnerability as “the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally” (n.d.). This marks vulnerability is a crucial aspect of Unapologetic Blackness, as it fosters connection even through those risks. And while one might argue that there isn’t much vulnerability in admitting that you don’t know a song lyric, there is something to be said about that level of affective control. It is a funny anecdote that we could not recall the lyrics of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. But it is very telling in what we consider vulnerable. Vulnerability can be read in a multitude of ways. For instance, when I first heard Jazmine

Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* I was entranced. I could hear the vulnerability, the fear, the shame, and in the midst of that the joy in every woman's voice featured on the EP. The project illustrated a humility involved with not only willing to learn and grow from experiences, but also to share those painful and perhaps shameful moments openly that is crucial to the expression of vulnerability. Additionally, I think it is a beautiful thing that every woman at the gathering could sing Jazmine Sullivan's *Pick Up Your Feelings* all the way through, including the ad-libs, with no assistance.

I share this anecdote to illuminate how certain affects expressed by Black people may be illegible to white people—who have been emotionally suppressing Black people for so long—because anything outside of normative stereotypical discourse (i.e. anger, hypersexuality or asexuality, etc) is rendered invisible. I argue that the full-bodied expression of Black affect and emotions is one of the hallmarks of Unapologetic Blackness. When we laugh, we take off running; when we are angry, we will “get loud;” our joy, our pain (which I'd argue perhaps is overly emphasized and attended to) as with all of our emotions, demands presence and recognition. However, “black girls are all too often admonished for the memorable stylistic and always recognizable way they emphasize tonality with expressiveness. As a result we remain clueless about what they said” (Brown, 2013, p.185-186). Once again, the control of Black expression creates an image of Blackness that is indicative of only part and parcel of Black experience. As Stuart Hall (1993) intimates, media representations play a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing hegemonic white supremacist ideologies by naturalizing them as common

sense and shaping cultural norms and values. In this sense, the expressiveness of Black women is predicated upon cultural control.

Unapologetic Blackness stands in opposition to this cultural control by rejecting the societal expectation for Black people to suppress or regulate their emotions in order to conform to Eurocentric standards of behavior. Vulnerability, as a practice of Unapologetic Blackness, exemplifies the freedom of embracing and affirming the full range of human affect and experiences within Black culture. Instead of harping on emotions such as anger or strife, vulnerability shown by Black women, both challenge white supremacist societal expectations of Blackness and assert the right of Black women to express themselves, acknowledge pain, and seek support without shame or stigma. In media, stereotypes of the strong Black woman or the angry Black woman serve to dehumanize Black women through the unyielding misrepresentation of strength. However, Unapologetic Blackness shifts the focus of the legacy tropes of strength, usually depicted through anger in media, to one of vulnerability.

Therefore, the display of vulnerability by Black women allows for an alternate perspective of Black women's expressions of affect, beside the hegemonic narratives focused on anger or strength. By exploring the relationships between Unapologetic Blackness and vulnerability, I will articulate how the affective expressions of Black women have been policed as a means of control through sexual commodification, gendered domination, and race. Examining *Heaux Tales* as a case study is significant as it challenges the limits placed on Black female affective expressions. In this chapter, I first detail the importance of vulnerability, the affective control exerted over Black women

and its relation to the Strong Black Woman myth. Following this I discuss how affective control can be broken through the expression of vulnerability. On a communal level, Black vulnerability can be espoused through cultural productions, specifically music. I will then detail the use of Black musical practice to demonstrate vulnerability by analyzing Jazmine Sullivan's EP *Heaux Tales*, specifically the interlude "Amanda's Tale" and the song "Girl Like Me".

### **Vulnerability**

I want to offer a few definitions that guide my use and understanding of affect as a confluence of embodiment (bodily sensation) with thought and emotion, especially as these pertain to the affect of vulnerability. Linda Åhäll (2018) offers affect as a politics of emotion, with the focus on bodies and energies transmitted through encounters. In Åhäll's (2018) conception of affect, the social is excluded because affect refers to a precognitive impulse that exists before emotions. However, cultural phenomena linked with affect, such as trauma, especially racial trauma, are encoded into society and individuals; thus, race, gender, and sex all influence the affective response to certain bodies (Ahmed, 2013). Harkening back to my point on the social collective, I am viewing affect as Sara Ahmed does. Ahmed (2004, 2013, 2020) argues that affect would not exist without the social contact with objects and others; the world we inhabit is thus suffused with meaning due to our engagement with one another.

Vulnerability results from peeking into one's own emotional, physical, or psychological experiences and then expressing those experiences to trusted others. For Unapologetic Blackness, vulnerability as a practice attends to the expression and

representation of Black women's interiority. By interiority, I am following what Allen and Randolph (2020) conceptualize as spaces that are "self-reflective, confidential, or invoked hidden feelings or places" (p.51). The often gendered expressions of private life in public is an expression of interiority--one that requires vulnerability; this is especially true for Black women as Black interiority is often threatened by the outside world through stereotypical perceptions or affective policing, which I will detail later in the chapter (Irving, 2011; Quashie, 2012; Crawley, 2016; Allen and Randolph, 2020).

In my theorization of Unapologetic Blackness, vulnerability relates to the expression of collective identity, not that of the individual, and shared experiences of the Black community. Francesca Polletta and James Jasper (2001) conceive of such expressions as, "a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity" (p. 285). As Black women are often held to and imprisoned by societal standards, vulnerability, as a show of strength, offers release from affective control and allows for the acknowledgment of one's own mistakes, owning responsibility in one's life choices, and being accountable to one another. While vulnerability often carries a connotation of fragility, Black women's open expression of their emotions, fears, and insecurities is an especially powerful tool in the face of societal constraints, not to mention the exposure to harm or risk—not only involved in the mental sense of opening oneself up to uncertainty or discomfort—but also, in the potentiality for societal backlash or repercussions.

Yet, music marks a safe space to express interiority. Herman Gray (2013) emphasizes this point in his argument on the agency of marginalized communities to contest and subvert dominant representations through cultural productions and cultural politics; Gray underscores the ways in which symbols and signs can be mobilized and contested in the construction of social identities, power relations, and cultural meanings. In this sense, Black musical expression can be seen as combating the oppressive cultural politics inherent in the affective restraints placed by dominant white representations. An example of these restraints can be found in Beyoncé's recent *Cowboy Carter* (2024) Country Music Award snub; for a Black woman expressing vulnerability, even as a popular artist, breaking from the restraints of a white artist dominated genre proved futile (Romano, 2024). This further proves the necessity of Unapologetic Blackness which privileges a multitude of affective expressions, and foregrounds that vulnerability is required and demonstrative of communities expressing and bearing witness to one another's experience.

But what does it mean to bear witness to Black experiences? What does it mean for Black women to bear witness? Bearing witness complicates the conception of truth. For Unapologetic Blackness, the practice of vulnerability is what allows for this truth. What does it mean to speak "your truth" and have others witness it? If as John Peters (2001) asserts, witnessing bridges the gap between truth and account, between the physical manifestation and the discursive manifestation, between the mediated and the embodied, then "to witness thus has two faces: the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying" (p.709). This is exemplified within *Heaux Tales*, where the women

featured on the EP are witnessing for each other in an embodied sense, but I as a listener am witnessing in a mediated sense.

As a term, witnessing serves as a double pronged idiom. As a noun, to be a witness can mean “(1) the agent who bears witness, (2) the utterance or text itself, (3) the audience who witnesses... A witness can also be the performance itself” (Peters, 2001, p.709). As a verb, witnessing can be either a sensory experience or the discursive act of sharing one’s experience for an audience absent from the experience itself (Peters, 2001, p.709). The link between vulnerability and witnessing lies in their mutual recognition of the importance and the complexity and depth of Black women’s experiences and the vulnerability that accompanies expressing those experiences.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, sisterhood creates a space where women feel safe to be vulnerable with one another, knowing that they will be met with understanding and support. This trust forms the foundation of sisterhood, allowing individuals to share their vulnerabilities without fear of judgment or betrayal. In Unapologetic Blackness, sisterhood encourages affective intimacy and open communication, providing a platform for Black women to express their vulnerabilities and struggles without reservation. In these relationships, vulnerability is seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

Witnessing allows for vulnerability in providing a collective space in which a full range of Black affect can be expressed and rendered visible. What does it mean to be rendered visible, not as a marker of difference or oppression, but as a result of witnessing? Visibility as a result of witnessing for one another, allows for the safety to

express vulnerability. While Blackness has always been visible, the affective inner-workings of Black people have often been reserved as testimony or witness within the community, except for expressions through Black cultural productions. Popular culture narratives about race and gender hold the power to craft dominance over musical representations of Black artists and perpetuate misogynoir through the stereotypical portrayals of Black women, in oftentimes demeaning ways, such as the video vixen— a more modern take on the Jezebel. As the complexity and depth of Black affects have typically been restrained by white supremacist perceptions— stemming from slavery— and the liberation of these constraints through the expression of vulnerability assert a reclamation of power and control over Black bodies and the representations of those bodies. However, there are and have been many barriers to the affective liberation of vulnerability. Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales* disrupts these barriers by embracing the fullness of Black womanhood, through asserting sexual agency, vulnerability, and joy. Through her storytelling, Sullivan creates a space where Black women’s experiences, often reduced to stereotypes in mainstream media, are not only seen and witnessed, but also celebrated for their complexity. In doing so, *Heaux Tales* exemplifies the reclamation of Black female visibility and vulnerability, offering a narrative of empowerment that is both personal and collective.

### **Barriers to Vulnerability: Discourses of Strength and Affective Control**

*“Making a Way Out of No Way”: The Mythos of the Strong Black Woman*

The phrase “making a way out of no way” is most demonstrative of the ways in which Black women have been forced to play superwoman. Not only in terms of societal

definitions, but by their own self-valuation and self-definition. In response to the historical oppressions, Trudier Harris (1995) forwards that “if Black women could be attacked for being promiscuous, they certainly could not be attacked for being strong. If they could be criticized for acquiescing in their own debasement during slavery, they could certainly not be criticized for taking their burdens to the Lord and leaving them there” (p.110). This sentiment ultimately inadvertently perpetuates another seemingly virtuous stereotype of Black womanhood— that of a superhuman strength. Michelle Wallace (1999, p.107) offers a definition of the Strong Black woman:

a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less “feminine” and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman.

Harris (1995) laments that perceived superhumanity deprives Black women of their humanity:

These superhuman women have been denied the “luxuries” of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, feeling human beings. They must swallow their pain, gird their loins against trouble (the masculine image coincides with the denial of traditional

femininity to them), and persist in spite of adversity, they “keep on keeping on.”  
(p. 122)

There has been a plethora of scholarship on the Strong Black Woman trope and how it came into existence; scholars have extensively analyzed the myth's impact, including Melissa V. Harris-Perry's (2011) critiques of it in media, Trudier Harris (1995) highlighting its use to dehumanize and justify societal neglect of Black women's other affects, and Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2007, 2009), explorations on its influence on Black women's mental health. In the face of overwhelming societal odds stacked against Black women, the concept of strength is meant to combat these external issues with an “irrepressible spirit is unbroken by the legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p.184).

Yet, this myth has also been reclaimed by Black women, “as a controlling image of Black womanhood, a re-appropriated term used for socialization and survival of Black women and girls, and/or a reclaimed word for Black women's resilience and self-reliance, the word strong is deeply rooted within Black women's histories and everyday lives” (Browdy, 2017, p.7). This myth can be read as a form of punishment that a white supremacist world weaponizes against Black women or a more complex coping mechanism Black women use against the world.

The embodiment of the Strong Black Woman has become an identity marker, as well as a mark of solidarity with other Black women who feel the same (Davis, 2015).

This is reflective in popular culture and media, with songs such as Alicia Keys' “Superwoman” (2007) leaning into the Strong Black Woman mythos, while other songs

like Karyn White's (1981) "Superwoman" pushes back against the discourse. However, the danger of living up to this cultural myth positions Black women as durable and unfazed by the multiple atrocities thrown at them (Harris, 1995). Trudier Harris positions the Strong Black Woman myth as one that dominates the lives of Black women and manifests in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, "symptoms of superhumanity, introspection, and keeping one's own counsel" (Harris, 1995, p.111). However, there are conflicting assessments of the Strong Black Woman myth.

Browdy (2017) suggests that when Black women assert their strength and embrace an identity shaped by both their experiences of oppression and their acts of resistance, it serves as a tool in navigating public settings and daily life. However, it is important to recognize that not all Black women define or express this strength in the same way, nor do they necessarily use it in both public and private spheres. Additionally, Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) warns that this self-definition can become a prison. By embracing the myth of the Strong Black woman, African American women inadvertently contribute to the creation of expectations that they must be self-reliant caregivers. This ideal not only reinforces harmful historical stereotypes of Black women but also places unrealistic demands on them, expecting them to be unwavering, resilient, and naturally strong, which can be both confining and reductive. These points run in opposition, yet both speak to the issue of self-imposed secrecy caused by the systemic dehumanization of Black women. Unapologetic Blackness, however, challenges these society and self-imposed narratives, challenging the demand for strength, whether that strength is seen as a curse or a blessing, and nuancing expressions of vulnerability as strength.

*“A hoe never gets cold” and the Affective Control of Black Women*

Cardi B became an instant viral sensation on the now defunct social media platform, Vine, with her apt phrase “a hoe never gets cold” (Butler, 2021). While seemingly innocuous and crass, and ultimately hilarious, the idea that women, especially Black women (who are already seen as “hoes”) cannot fully express their emotions, even to temperature, points to a larger ideological system. As an Afro-Latina, Cardi B in this moment is effectively embodying the idea of the Strong Black Woman through her refusal to get cold. Therefore, the inability to be weak, even to temperature, is thus seen as the benchmark of Strong Black women. White supremacist understandings of Blackness, historically and arguably contemporaneously, places ideological and cultural boundaries on Black women’s affects. Unapologetic Blackness challenges these harmful discourses by asserting that Black people have the right to express the entirety of their affects in ways that are genuine and true to their experiences, without being policed or judged by societal norms.

For example, historically, the origin of the term barrel of laughs comes from the fact that enslaved African peoples were forbidden from laughing on plantations; thus, they would stick their heads into barrels to laugh unconfined and unobserved from their white enslavers (Brown, 2020). However, this was not the only measure of affective control by enslavers. During slavery, hush harbors were places where the enslaved would go pray or worship or sing or express themselves freely outside of the white gaze, as they would be penalized for doing so in front of their enslavers (Allen & Randolph, 2020). This affective control of Black people through the restriction of laughter and other

emotional expressions carries over into contemporary society, when we consider controlling images and myths, such as the Strong Black woman, which restrict Black people, and especially Black woman to a singular story confined by temporal, racial, and gendered hegemony.

As discussed earlier, the affective control of Black women preys upon discourse and self-valuation. However, there has always been refutation of such control, historically and today. One can see the descendants of hush harbors—these free unencumbered spaces to exist in all fullness—in music. Thus, music is the perfect medium in which to begin an inquiry into the affective nature of Unapologetic Blackness. I chose Jazmine Sullivan specifically as an example of Unapologetic Blackness, not only due to her talent, but also because her artistry often reflects the realities, experiences, and struggles of Black life in a manner that is not affectively restrained; additionally, she has been understudied in critical music literature. The vulnerability showcased through Sullivan’s music, and especially through her latest EP *Heaux Tales* is a testament to Unapologetic Blackness. By utilizing her platform to address and express the social issues affecting Black women, alongside other Black women, Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales* reflects Unapologetic Blackness in its embodiment of vulnerability through witnessing, with its narrative interludes, and its demonstration of openness and honesty through sisterhood; all of these allow for a sense of interpersonal connection with the artist and other Black women.

### **Jazmine Sullivan**

Jazmine Sullivan is a highly acclaimed Black singer-songwriter known for her powerful vocals, emotional depth, and versatile musical style. She was born and raised in

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she grew up with a heavy church influence (Sullivan, 2022). She comes from a long line of artists. Her grandmother was a poet at their church, Jazmine usually was the opening act, and her mother was the lead singer in the choir (Sullivan, 2022). Sullivan credits her mother as her first fan, saying that where “some people heard noise, she heard a gift,” and in nurturing that gift her mother planted the seeds of how she emotes in her performances now (Sullivan, 2022). Sullivan is widely recognized and acclaimed for her exceptionally soulful rich voice and her ability to convey and translate emotional depth in her lyrics (Paige, 2023). Her artistry is characterized by her ability to infuse emotion into her music, and it is no surprise that she considers her voice as “carry[ing] the pain of a Black woman” (Sullivan, 2022). She is known to vocally navigate various musical genres with ease, and seamlessly blend R&B, soul, gospel, and hip-hop influences in her music. With a voice that spans genres and generations, the powerhouse music veteran changes every performance subtly with different ad-libs or vibrato, etc. Even if you’ve heard a song a hundred times, you never know what to expect from a Jazmine Sullivan performance other than greatness.

Unconcerned with technicality (though certainly more than robust on that front), Sullivan has “always been about authenticity and doing what feels real” (Sullivan, 2022). This may be why she is known for taking long hiatuses away from the spotlight and returning triumphantly with new music every few years. Her evolution as a woman and a R&B artist is evident in her music. In an interview with *Elle Magazine* (2023), Sullivan shared what the genre of R&B meant to her:

It has taught me to fight for myself. It has taught me to be honest with myself.

You know, having grown up listening to R&B in my latter years and just listening to women be strong and even in their weak moments—in the moments where they feel bad about a relationship or being in a relationship that has beaten them down emotionally or whatever—they still find the strength within them, and I think that’s something that I wanted to give in my music as well. There are times when life is hard and life will beat you down. That’s what life is, but you have everything within yourself to stand, to get up and keep moving. And that’s in any part of this life.

Sullivan often mentions how she writes from an aspirational point of view and wants to embody confidence in her music even if she does not always feel that way (Sullivan, 2022).

As one of the greatest voices in R&B (this is my *factual* opinion and not up for contention), Sullivan draws inspiration from other artists who’ve come before her. Sullivan has cited multiple musical influences from R&B legends like Aretha Franklin to Mary J. Blige to Erykah Badu, or Gospel legends such as Yolanda Adams or Kim Burrell (Caraballo, 2023; Sullivan, 2022). Her impact on the R&B genre and her ability to connect with a broad audience have solidified her position as a standout artist in the music industry. As a skilled songwriter, known for her poignant and relatable lyrics, Sullivan’s music often explores themes of love, heartbreak, money, empowerment, and self-discovery. Her storytelling prowess is evident in her ability to craft conceptually diverse narratives that resonate with large audiences. Sullivan has released several

concept albums that showcase her storytelling abilities, such as *Fearless* (2008), *Reality Show* (2015), and most recently her extended play (EP) *Heaux Tales* (2021).

### ***Heaux Tales (2021)***

Jazmine Sullivan's critically acclaimed 2021 conceptual EP *Heaux Tales* is an innovative project consisting of eight tracks, each accompanied by spoken-word interludes (Jazmine Sullivan, 2021). The EP's narrative interludes feature real women sharing their personal stories in their own words. Sullivan thinks of these spoken word interludes as just as important as the songs, not only because they serve as the foundation of the EP's cohesive structure, but more so because they provide different perspectives on relationships, love, and self-discovery (Caraballo, 2023). Sullivan is very careful in all interviews/podcasts/other interactions in referring to *Heaux Tales* as a project and not an album. Length notwithstanding, through the project Sullivan weaves a narrative that explores the complexities of reclaiming Black women's narratives and challenging societal expectations around love, sexuality, and self-worth. As a cultural touchstone, the EP showcases Sullivan's versatility and powerful vocals with the incorporation of various musical genres, including R&B, soul, and gospel, as well as highlighting the importance of community, through its multiple features and interludes.

*Heaux Tales* received widespread acclaim from critics for its bold conceptual approach, honest storytelling, and of course Sullivan's vocal prowess (Harris, 2021). The project has been celebrated for its contribution to the R&B genre and its impact on conversations around feminism, sexual autonomy, and the complexities of modern relationships. The deluxe version, *Heaux Tales Mo Tales*, released in 2022, features an

additional five songs and five interludes (Jazmine Sullivan, 2022). Her *Rolling Stone* interview highlighted the communal nature of the project, both prerelease—in the song features and narrative interludes—and post release, with the outpouring of fan support, especially on social media platforms like Instagram, and with industry recognition, as this EP marked her first two Grammy wins (Conteh, 2021). In her Grammy acceptance speech for Best R&B Album, Sullivan mentions being grateful not only to the Recording Academy but for the project itself, which she proclaims “ended up being ... a safe space for black women to tell their stories. For us to learn from each other. Laugh with each other. And not be exploited at the same time” (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs, 2022).

I also want to point back to the thread of community, as singer HER ecstatically jumping up and down and hugging Sullivan as she moved towards the stage seeming a bit dazed and in disbelief at the win. This safe space for vulnerability that Sullivan mentioned in her acceptance speech obviously extended beyond the project. When she won the Soul Train Award for Album of the Year, before she could even get to the stage, the audience began chanting her name; seemingly overcome with emotion, one man from the audience screamed out “Let him use you” (BETNetworks, 2021). Echoing the call and response of the African American gospel tradition, this moment allowed for a transcendent affective space in which Sullivan felt comfortable sharing her truths.

### ***Amanda’s Tale and Girl Like Me Analysis***

For this chapter, I want to home in on the interlude “Amanda’s Tale” and the song “Girl Like Me” as a direct challenge to the affective control of Black women. This interlude and song are the ending of the project and provide a cohesive and emotional

sentiment. The interlude is a poignant, introspective, spoken word narrative that captures the fears and vulnerability of its speaker, Amanda Henderson, one of Sullivan's friends featured on the EP (Jazmine Sullivan, 2021). The song is known for its raw and honest lyrics with Sullivan's powerful vocals taking center stage in conveying vulnerability and strength simultaneously, with the feature by H.E.R only adding to the affective impact. The song was written by Jazmine Sullivan, Gabriella Wilson (H.E.R), Tarron Crayton, and Uforo Ebong, and was produced by Ebong aka Bongo ByTheWay (Jazmine Sullivan, 2021) The track captures the emotional rollercoaster of a longing for a relationship, with Sullivan's delivery exploring the complexity of dating, and the internal struggle to find someone. The lyrics of "Girl Like Me" delve into the aftermath of self-doubt, as Sullivan and H.E.R reflect on the pain, regrets, and self-realizations that come with wanting to find a significant romantic partner. Both tracks provide a peek into vulnerability through engaging with sisterhood, through narrative delivery in the interlude and through the combination of voices, with the feature of H.E.R in the song.

### Amanda's Tale

[Spoken Words: Amanda Henderson]

It's a little hurtful that I can't just be confident and...

In being with one person

That I gotta look over my shoulder

Looking at these girls on Instagram and...

It's hard sometimes because, I don't have all that that they have

And the sex has become my superpower

It's like sex is where I, I'm finding my worth

You know it's, that's the one thing that I know

I can make you keep coming back to me

But at the end of the day

Even if you don't really want me, I know you gon' want that

In one way it's empowering, in another way it's, it's sad

I feel moments of sadness knowing that, you know

Just me alone and who I am is not enough

(Jazmine Sullivan, 2021)

Amanda speaks candidly of her past relationships and the lessons she has learned along the way, as she grapples with the challenges of finding love and acceptance in a romantic relationship. This spoken word tradition echoes the self expressive nature of the Blues tradition. Blues music as a form of social or ideological production that creates, affirms, and reaffirms a means for African Americans to express themselves. However, within the realm of middle-class respectability politics based in Judeo-Christian discourse, “the blues appeared to be shocking, particularly so at the time when euphemistic phrases and winsome lyrics were the norm, as they still are today to a certain

extent in contemporary pop culture” (Watson, 2006, p.334). Just as Amanda’s words may seem shocking or as a detriment to her self-worth, expressing that she is only worthy through sex, the vulnerability of her truth offers her solace as she navigates life's challenges.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Blues women used music to claim freedom not afforded by their race and gender, both ideologically and lyrically. Often criticized for its vulgarity, Black women used the blues as an ideological means of circumventing racial and gender oppression through explicit lyrics, some of which are still criticized today. Considered music of the working class, the Blues disrupted traditional ideas of normative sexuality and foregrounded unfulfilled desires, socially and sexually; thus, causing the genre to be perceived as vulgar, therefore disregarded and cast aside (Davis, 1998). Yet, to reflect on Black women’s own experiences and complexities, whether through spoken work or a classical musical tradition, demonstrates vulnerability in a world that often oversexualizes and represents Black women as Other to white supremacist ideologies of womanhood and femininity (Ferguson, 2004; Davis, 2011; McClintock, 2013).

Amanda’s interlude serves to highlight the vulnerability in exposing Amanda’s own insecurities and self-esteem issues, as well as the importance of owning one's narrative—whether that fits into a perceived stereotypical discourse or not—and embracing one's truth, which is ultimately Unapologetically Black. As I’ve mentioned, sisterhood can arise from shared experiences, whether they be cultural, social, or personal. These shared experiences create bonds of empathy and understanding, enabling vulnerability. “Amanda's Tale” offers a glimpse into the lived experiences of Black

women and the self doubt that can plague them. Through Amanda's deeply personal reflection, listeners are invited to bear witness to her vulnerability as if they were present in the room where the interlude was recorded.

The often ignored affective turmoil of Black women is brought to the forefront in “Amanda’s Tale” as the penultimate track on the project. This is further emphasized by “Girl Like Me”, the final track of the project.

### Girl Like Me

[Verse 1: Jazmine Sullivan]

Yeah, I made a profile on Tinder

Since you left me to be with her

I think that means I'm gettin' desperate

Wish I could return to sender

But you don't love me no more

And I don't even know what for (Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)

[Verse 2: Jazmine Sullivan]

Knew it was real when you blocked me

Now I sit at home judgin' my body

Wondering what I did to lose you (What I did to lose you)

Why in the hell you ain't choose me?

Why you don't love me no more? Yeah

And I don't even know what for (Nah, ah-ah)

[Chorus: Jazmine Sullivan]

You must've wanted somethin' different

Still don't know what I was missin'

What you asked I would've given

It ain't right how these hoes be winnin'

Why they be winnin'? Yeah (Why they be? Why they be?)

No hope for a girl like me, how come they be winnin'? Yeah

(Why they be? Why they be?)

And I ain't wanna be

But you gon' make a hoe out of me

(Jazmine Sullivan, 2021)

Like the preceding interlude, the first few verses of the song lean into a Blues-like tradition, in which the highly expressive musical form “never acknowledges the discursive and ideological boundaries separating the private sphere from the public” (Davis, 1998, p. 25). Sullivan croons to the audience, as if she is talking directly to her

former lover. In this scenario, the song's honesty about this lost romantic connection is both emotionally resonant and reflective, creating an intimate atmosphere that allows listeners who may have experienced similar situations to affectively process their own experiences. This vulnerability disrupts heteronormative, gendered and racial barriers of social freedom for Black women in its resistive practice of “negotiating the boundaries between private and public, identity and difference, desire and punishment, self and other [which can be a] lifelong activity fraught with peril” (McClintock, 2013, p.263). Through this verse, Sullivan’s lovelorn pleading challenges stereotypes that depict Black women as invulnerable or emotionless. By embracing vulnerability, she reclaims agency over her narrative, even if that narrative is messy and seemingly weak. Additionally, as the mythos of the strong Black woman evokes strength from a place of stoicism, vulnerability as an affect completely rejects the notion that Blackness must conform to stereotypes of affective restraint, as evidenced by Sullivan’s impassioned lyrics.

Furthermore, the jazzy beat that underscores the chorus only adds to Sullivan’s poignant delivery. According to Prouty, jazz “is not merely [an] oral tradition that imparts...vitality;” it can express the “unique histories and environments” of relationships (2006, p. 331), as Sullivan’s repetitive rhetorical questions do. This portion of the song can be taken as a form of Black feminist love politics, as articulated by Jennifer Nash (2013): “black feminist love-politics asks how affective communities can themselves be a site of redress” (p.15). This form of redress not only elicits empathy but also demonstrates a manner of responding to the outside world, and illuminates the ways in which people adapt and/or preserve themselves in response to emotions such as

heartbreak or shame. Although in Western societies Black women have been oppressed and controlled by stereotypical narratives for centuries, to articulate a longing for and expression of pleasure is in and of itself revolutionary. Thus, “acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible” (hooks, 2000, p.380).

The insistence that Black bodies offer provocation to White masses, the commodification of otherness, and the traditional white supremacist understandings of Black womanhood furthers the pervasiveness of heteronormativity, cisheteropatriarchy, and other racialized and gendered oppressions that constructs Black women as deviant (hooks, 2000; Asante, 2020). Through these lyrics, Sullivan is taking ownership of her own experience in the relationship, in the termination of the relationship, and in the aftermath of the relationship. In having confidence or trust enough to share this regret, Sullivan exhibits a hopefulness that sharing will open and hold affective space for other Black women.

This demonstration of vulnerability ultimately provides an orientation towards what could be or what could have been. As Sullivan notes, the affective process largely remains ongoing, in this case, for the former romantic partners, even if one of them feels regretful in the aftermath (Genius, 2020).

[Verse 3: H.E.R.]

Yeah, you gon' make me a gold digger (Gold digger)

Maybe I should look like a stripper

Wearin' Fashion Nova dresses

All these dudes be so pressed and impressed with it

You, leave me with no choice (Oh, oh)

I can't do this good girl shit no more

(Jazmine Sullivan, 2021)

By likening herself to a gold digger or a woman who wears Fashion Nova, an inexpensive brand known for revealing clothing, H.E.R is addressing the concern of being considered another hypersexualized Black woman. The profit driven “myth of black women as lascivious, seductive, and insatiable was a way of reconciling forced public exposure and commodification of black women’s bodies with the Victorian ideals of women’s modesty and fragility;” this served not only as a means of sexual exploitation, but also as a sociopolitical and socioeconomic legitimization of white men’s right to use Black women’s bodies (Harris-Perry, 2011, p.55). If Black women cannot be feminine, then it follows that they certainly cannot be victims of sexual violence.

However, in the case of Black women, the ties to vulnerability have been in many ways severed. Since slavery, the refusal of Black women’s femininity has not allowed them to be seen, perceived, or be vulnerable (Hine, 1989, Carby, 1987). This can be traced historically as “the promiscuity myth [that] has its roots in Southern slaveholding society, which operated by a gendered and social code. The Victorian ideal of true

womanhood required strict adherence to a code of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—virtues, believed to be inherent in feminine nature.” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p.55). To deny Black women femininity, then, is to deny them rights outside of their own commodification and creates a necessity for private expressions shared only among intimates:

Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle. (Hine, 1989, p.915)

Thus, the collective shaming of Black women, driven by the white commodification of Black bodies and the refusal to align Black women with traditional ideals of femininity, has caused immense harm.

In contrast, H.E.R vents her frustrations as a reclamation from this collective shaming, by defying the narrow portrayals of Black femininity imposed by White society:

[Chorus: H.E.R., Jazmine Sullivan, H.E.R. & Jazmine Sullivan]

Oh-oh, oh-oh, I just wanted somethin' different

Still don't know what I was missin'

What you asked I would've given, yeah

It ain't right, how these hoes be winnin'

Yeah, they be winnin' (Why they be? Why they be?)

No hope for a girl like me, how come they be winnin'? (How come they?)

(Why they be? Why they be?)

And I ain't wanna be

But you gon' make a hoe out of me

[Bridge: Jazmine Sullivan, H.E.R., Jazmine Sullivan & H.E.R.]

Y'all niggas be makin' us sad (Makin' us sad)

Then say y'all don't know why we mad (Know why we mad)

So we start actin' like we don't care

'Cause y'all niggas be takin' us there (Ooh-oo, ooh-oo)

'Cause you don't want us no more (Ooh-oo, ooh-oo)

It breaks us to the core, woah, woah, ooh

[Chorus: Jazmine Sullivan, H.E.R., , H.E.R. & Jazmine Sullivan]

Boy, you must wanted somethin' different

Still don't know what you was missin'

What you asked I would've given

It ain't right how these hoes be winnin'

Why they be winnin'? (How they be? Why they be? Why they be?)

A oh-oh, no hope for a girl like me (Why they be?)

How come they be winnin'? (Why they be? Why they be?)

I ain't wanna be

But you gon' make a hoe out of me, ee-ee, ee-ee, ee-ee

[Outro: Jazmine Sullivan & H.E.R.]

A hoe I'll be, yeah (Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh)

Yeah, ayy

That's what you wanted, that's what you get (Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh)

A hoe I'll be (Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh)

Look what you did, kid (Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh)

Yeah, a hoe I'll be, hmm-hmm, hmm (Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh)

See what you did to me? (Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh)

Ooh

Ooh-ooh, ooh

Ooh-ooh

Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh-ooh

(Jazmine Sullivan, 2021)

The second half of the song is sung by both singers. The duo begins an interactive call and response to one another, paralleling the Gospel music tradition. Gospel music, in large part, draws upon the African American church tradition of call and response. As a musical and cultural practice, the rhythmic and melodic interplay between the leader and the audience invite a communal participation and interaction which engages a sense of unity, communal identity, and shared experience. In the Black church tradition, the preacher often asks “can I get a witness?”--someone to testify to the strength and truth of the message. Zolten (1996) contends that “African American gospel is one of the nation's true folk music forms, a pure product of culture, an artistic expression born out of the need for both audience and performer to dissipate stress, foster hope, and renew the spirit in the face of ongoing oppression” (p.185). In the context of this song, Sullivan and H.E.R act as witnesses for each other’s struggles through their lyrical back and forth.

In keeping with W.E.B. Du Bois’ theory of double-consciousness— gauging oneself using the perspective of others--Jennifer Stoeber (2016) articulates a double-voicedness defined by diasporic struggles between self-agency and white supremacist division, both economic and ideological. The concept of double-voicedness permits for self-expression outside of and in defiance of white controlled cultural formations. The double voicedness is amplified by the two voices on the track, and acknowledges the

unique vulnerabilities that women face based on their intersectional identities as Black women. The song lyrics are not merely demonstrative of an individual affect, but rather are representative of collective feelings of vulnerability by Black women as a communal affective experience. This is significant because openly begging a person not to move on is a clear acknowledgment and critical examination of some bad behaviors, or at the very least, some questionable coping mechanisms. But the dismissal of shame in this entreaty acts as a vulnerability that it is honest and true to the heart. Voicing their concerns and sharing their vulnerabilities with one another, invites support. It is such sisterhood that creates space for all members to be seen, heard, and supported in their vulnerabilities. Both the interlude and song demonstrate how sisterhood and vulnerability are deeply intertwined, with sisterhood providing a nurturing environment for vulnerability to be expressed and affirmed; such expressions of vulnerability can foster collective healing. Unapologetic Blackness affirms the importance of vulnerability as a natural and essential aspect of the human experience; expressing vulnerability can challenge hypersexualized stereotypes and misogynoir (Schneider, 2011).

Cultural narratives attached to affective control of Black women, can be broken with the radical expression of vulnerability, especially through a cultural production such as *Heaux Tales*. As Morant points out:

It is through Black popular music that the struggles, faith, and joys of a people are expressed. More than mere entertainers, Black musicians serve as the village griots, the revisionist historians, and the voice of a people. African American music solidifies the message of the societal concerns of a period by offering

snapshots of social conditions and historically defining moments within a society.  
(2011, p.72)

In this vein, Sullivan's articulation of vulnerability is a practice of affective and communicative freedom. Embracing vulnerability, especially in the face of long-established historical scripts that constrain Black womanhood, affirms the fullness of Black women's lives and the full range of their affects as valid and worthy of expression.

### **Conclusion**

Vulnerability can be a source of empowerment, as it allows Black women to reclaim agency over their narratives and experiences by maintaining that Black women are multifaceted and dynamic in affect, with the capacity for joy, love, fear, frustration, anger, and sadness. By acknowledging vulnerability expressed in media narratives, as well as in real life, Unapologetic Blackness calls for the healing of shame, trauma, oppression; resistance to dehumanizing narratives; and affirmation of multiple and varied Black affects. By expressing vulnerabilities, Black women can resist mediated affective control and cultivate autonomy over their affective displays.

*Heaux Tales* stands in opposition to affective control by rejecting the societal expectation for Black women to remain silent, and to suppress or regulate themselves in order to conform to Eurocentric discourses of strength. This is significant, as the problem of affective conformity exemplifies what Hine's (1989) deems as dissemblance, "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their

oppressors” (p.912). Davis (2015) pushes back on this claim and posits that while such lauded strength impedes emotional expressiveness, it also can enable refuge from hostilities through the social support of other Black women; “the collective does not attend to feelings and emotions, but is more concerned with restoring self-esteem, self-identity, and generally strengthening the woman’s sense of self. In essence, the primary goal of the group is to provide support that reaffirms strength and to avoid support that exposes weakness and vulnerability” (p.31). Black women’s avoidance of expressing vulnerability, due in part to the Strong Black Woman myth, and interlocking systems of oppression, has created affective control over Black women and their outward expressions of anything other than anger or stoicism.

In her Audible episode (2022), “The Art of Confessing,” Jazmine Sullivan emphasizes the issues with the Strong Black Woman trope: “Black women [are] going through life being taught to be strong. We’ve had to endure pain for so long that we’ve been conditioned to believe that our resilience should be a part of our life experience” (Sullivan, 2022). She attempts to opt out of that mindset and showcase vulnerability, which she believes comes from sisterhood (Sullivan, 2022). In an interview with *Complex Magazine* (2023), Sullivan stresses that she wants women “to be free of societal standards, our own baggage, and the weight we carry,” and does her best to showcase healing in her music. Particularly through *Heaux Tales*, Sullivan used the project as a chance at self-reflection and growth, by “not being afraid to tell my story, share my experiences in a different way other than my music” (Caraballo, 2023).

In an interview with *Vulture Magazine* (2021), Sullivan mentions wanting to “write as if she were in the moment” and give voice to things that the “women in her life feel deeply but wouldn’t necessarily say [aloud]” (Sullivan, 2022). While Sullivan gathered her closest friends and invited them to share their “tales,” she relied on her mother to gather a group of older women to share theirs (Harris, 2021). In *Heaux Tales*, Sullivan rallies against the collective shame embedded in Black women regarding sex and their bodies (Hope, 2021). Sullivan wanted the project to “be a part of the revolution and evolution of women owning who they are,” so it was imperative that she have real life testimonies, that even the women were still sometimes processing as they recorded (Hope, 2021). Sullivan mentions how proud she was that everyone was brave enough and comfortable enough to share their stories not only in the intimate recording session, but with the world at large; as she puts it “because it takes a lot to be honest,” especially about sensitive subjects of shame and regret (Martin, Wakeam, and Ermyas, 2021). Such vulnerability truly resonates with audiences and highlights the ways in which Black women’s affective expression has been shaped by broader social, economic, and political forces.

Unapologetic Blackness involves embracing one's imperfect self as a means of creating communal spaces where vulnerability can be acknowledged and honored. In her “Still Watching Netflix” interview (2021), Sullivan talks about how grateful she feels to still be recognized in the industry after taking hiatuses, to which hosts Scottie Beam and Sylvia Obell replied “do you know who you are?!?” (2:44). This recognition is at the heart of allowing vulnerability to blossom within a communal safe space. Sullivan

mentions that when she needs to cry or release her emotions she goes to her mom or her girlfriends (Beam and Obell, 2021), thus demonstrating the freedom that being within her social collective allows. She can express her vulnerability or any emotion freely, without fear of judgment from her community. Even when talking about the project, Sullivan underscores that the best part was coming together with her village (Beam and Obell, 2021). By denying reductive affective narratives of Blackness, through sisterhood, Sullivan demonstrates the courage required to be vulnerable in a world that often seeks to invalidate or exploit Black affect. This idea is best emphasized within the opening moments of the interview when the hosts proclaim the interview as a “no judgment zone” while the audience applauds loudly (Beam and Obell, 2021). This highlights in part a rally against the need to be strong or to put on a brave face in all interactions.

Unapologetic Blackness argues that vulnerability is birthed through sisterhood, and that embracing vulnerability allows for the mutual support of one another through shared struggles and triumphs. Moreover, the intertextuality of this sisterhood can span temporally as well. And while *Heaux Tales* is an amazing project on its own, I would be remiss not to mention a thematic predecessor of the project. *Heaux Tales* is in many ways reminiscent of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, the groundbreaking 1998 solo debut album by African American singer and rapper Lauryn Hill (Beachy, 2022). The album blended elements of R&B, hip-hop, soul, and reggae, while showcasing Hill’s powerful and emotive vocal prowess. The autobiographical content of the album draw from Hill's personal experiences, including her views on love, motherhood, and the challenges she faced in the music industry: “Hill’s expressions of experiences resist and call attention to

the action that names misrepresentations of Black women's agency in America as part of an emotive response to rhetorical exigencies and critical reflection" (McGee, Love, Waters and Evans-Winters, 2019, p.5).

The album's introspective and socially conscious lyrics addressing personal experiences were also coupled with skits, or narratives, "which acted as a kind of glue for the album, [that] were about love as defined by young children, and they were juxtaposed with Hill's words, serving as a kind of generational dialogue about love" (Beachy, 2022, p.90). Hill used the album to contradict prevalent stereotypes while "creat[ing] space for anger without pleading or sadness, which Black women were discouraged from expressing in popular music before this point... presenting a complex portrait of Black womanhood" (Beachy, 2022, p.95). Its enduring popularity is a testament to Lauryn Hill's artistic prowess and the album's continuing cultural significance (i.e. its widespread critical acclaim, commercial success, and numerous awards). In the same vein, *Heaux Tales* leans into a legacy of Black music that encompasses the zeitgeist of the culture.

By speaking openly about their lived experiences, especially within a collective, Black women affirm their humanity and declare visibility in the face of narratives seeking to diminish their affective worth without fear of judgment or reprisal. In her acceptance speech, Sullivan noted her discomfort with being "seen," and made a promise to herself not to hide anymore (BETNetworks, 2021). She then dedicated the award to women, saying "I wrote this project for women to love themselves no matter what stage of life they're in. You have to love yourself, especially because society would have us, and especially black women, not love anything about ourselves. So I realize I can't just

talk about it, I got to be about it” (BETNetworks, 2021). When ending her speech, Sullivan says to the crowd “I love you so much and we’re in this together,” to which the crowd echoes back to her with “we love you too” (BETNetworks, 2021). This show of love is especially important as it validates the expression of vulnerability shown throughout the project, as well as in the speech itself. In essence, Sullivan used *Heaux Tales* to once again render herself visible and allowed those who listened and those who appreciated the music to bear witness to her vulnerability.

To conclude, I want to address what it means to bear witness for one another by offering a recent mediated example of Black women extending vulnerability to another Black woman. In 2020, rapper Megan Thee Stallion was shot by fellow rapper Tory Lanez, who has since been sentenced for his crime (Tsioulcas and Veltman, 2023). In response to the shooting, many memes and other hateful messages were directed against Megan Thee Stallion for speaking out. However, a collective of activists and philanthropists called the Southern Black Girls and Women’s Consortium, penned an open letter to Megan Thee Stallion in the wake of the social media maelstrom. The letter details how the culture has failed her and how gossip perpetuates stigma against black women both in and outside of the Black community (Southern Black Girls and Women’s Consortium, 2022). The letter reiterates Megan’s bravery and how she deserves “to be heard, to be believed, and most importantly, to be safe” (Southern Black Girls and Women’s Consortium, 2022).

I chose to talk about this example, not to draw attention to the apparent genealogical lineage of gendered violence against Black women, or the refusal to allow

Black women to be victims of violence; rather, I want to emphasize the letter itself. A group of Black women came together as a collective to hold space for another Black woman's vulnerability. While the expression of all emotions is valid, Unapologetic Blackness holds up the expression of vulnerability, specifically, because for so long it has been prohibited for Black women. This expression of support and love demonstrates what Brown posits, that when you "listen to black girls in relationships with black women, what do you hear? Knowledge" (2013, p.186). This knowledge can only be fostered within community and within a state of vulnerability.

If community is what allows Unapologetic Blackness to come to fruition, then vulnerability is the first expression of Unapologetic Blackness. We've all heard the phrase "it takes a village to raise a child." And I'd like to add, it takes a village to sustain an adult. An old family friend of my mother's, Mr. Caleb Mayo used to say "You can't live in this world by yourself." Thus, it is important to pay attention to

black female social intimacy and the spaces where it is enacted. That is, these are not utopic spaces free from the tensions of everyday life or the imperfections of everyday people but complex sites wherein black social life can and does become unfettered from "the conundrums of the public sphere" that work to wrangle the passions, frustrations, sentiments, and ultimately, histories of black women into consumable, manageable parts. (Williamson, 2016, p.72)

The comfort derived from the collective and from the cathartic release of emotion, opens the door to possibilities of poignant exchanges for Black women, free of societal affective control and myths of superhumanity, while simultaneously allowing room for

vulnerability and ultimately for liberation, a politics of love, and what Black feminists would term an ethic of care.

This ethic of care advocates for the needs of Black women, especially in a white supremacist world that polices the affects of Black communities. Interrelatedly, the prevalence of the term “soft life” on TikTok and other social media platforms have demonstrated the yearning Black women hold for comfort and leisure (Holt, 2022). Soft life encompasses practices typically denied to Black women due to historical societal power dynamics of privilege, as well as stereotypical discourses shaping Black femininity. Black women are often denied access to affects that demonstrate mental, emotional, and spiritual strain, and when they do they may be punished. However, the provision of mutual support and respecting Black women’s vulnerability involves recognizing and honoring their boundaries. It means refraining from exploiting or weaponizing their vulnerabilities and instead treating them with care, sensitivity, and empathy. The intersection of vulnerability and Unapologetic Blackness comes without minimizing or dismissing Black women’s experiences through the show of respect, which I will delve into in the following chapter.

On her famous song “I’m Everywoman” (1978), Chaka Khan sings “I’m every woman, it’s all in me;” I believe this sums in totality the collective affect that this chapter fleshed out. Ostensibly, the lyrics to “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales*, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* and an open letter to Megan Thee Stallion have no connections outside of the fact that they are related to Black women and music. Yet, it is not only embodied experience, or mediated representation, or written cultural

productions that demonstrate a thematic throughline, but rather it is the combination of this archive which cultivates insight into expressions of Black communal affect.

## Chapter Three:

### Respectfully, You Gonna Respect Me: *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* as

#### Responses to Respectability Politics

When I first attended Elon University, a private, primarily white institution (PWI), the primary microaggression I noticed was silence. I would attend classes and work group projects with some of my white peers, and if they saw me anywhere outside of that class they did not know me. I was rendered invisible by these peers, unless I was with one of my white friends who they knew and acknowledged (and thus acknowledged me as well). However, I realized that I was hypervisible to their gaze because at the time only about a tenth of the students at the university were Black. Yet, while I was, in fact, present at my university, I was unseen. Such white peers did not deem me, a Black woman, respectable or esteemed enough to be visible in their eyes. Now, to juxtapose this, I have a cousin who attended a historically Black university or college (HBCU). Her experience was vastly different from mine. She lauded feeling seen for something other than her race and that changed the way that she was able to view the idea of respect, and ultimately, respectability politics.

Such differing experiences led us to talk about code-switching. We concluded that those who have attended PWIs can codeswitch at the drop of a hat, while it takes those who've attended HBCUs a bit longer. While I can put on a face that is palatable for my white colleagues at any given moment, almost as if I am wearing a second skin, my cousin, of course, can code-switch as well, but it is as if she is wearing an ill-fitting mask.

We noted that even with whatever advantages each school presented, as Black women, we are forced to contend with a multitude of oppressions.

That Black women face a multiplicity of oppressions is not a novel assertion. King (1988) posits the idea of double jeopardy that Black women face to refer “not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well” (p.47). The intersection and interaction of multiple social identities create complex systems and form what scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and countless other Black feminists have long brought to the fore: that Black women do not experience discrimination in isolation but rather as a result of the intersections of their multiple social identities. Intersectionality does not privilege one identity marker over the other, as both race, class, gender, and other social identities affect Black women’s status. Contexts in which Black women are situated can make one identity marker and the oppression associated with it more prevalent than another; racism can exert itself more than sexism in some contexts, whereas sexism may be more present in another.

Together intersections of identity markers situate people in differential proximity to power. The idea of modifying oneself in the face of oppression is a phenomenon that W. E. B. Du Bois (1897) refers to as double-consciousness.

This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged

strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) labels this the “outsider within” to describe the unique positionality of Black women within systems of power and oppression: Black women navigating hypervisibility must navigate the tension between asserting their identities while also protecting themselves from the negative consequences of being hypervisible in a society that often criminalizes and demonizes Blackness. It is this ever-present gaze that plays into the formation of self-policing behaviors like respectability politics. But the connection between Unapologetic Blackness and respectability politics is complex, and the concepts are often thought to represent opposing approaches to navigating societal expectations and challenging systemic racism.

Unapologetic Blackness critiques respectability politics for blaming Black individuals for their oppression based on their perceived adherence to middle-class values and behavior. However, Unapologetic Blackness also acknowledges the validity and dignity of all aspects of Black identities, regardless of whether they conform to respectability standards; a self-protective mechanism that does not necessarily diminish one’s Blackness and certainly not one’s self-worth. This chapter argues that the white gaze informs a spectrum from respectability politics to disrespectability politics. We see in *Harlem* the characters leaning into respectability politics whereas in *Heaux Tales*, the lyrics embody disrespectability politics; however, both respectability and

disrespectability politics resist efforts to erase or diminish Black identities and, in their own ways, demand respect, recognition, and representation for Black communities.

The spectrum of respectability politics and disrespectability politics can be thought of as what Stuart Hall (1993) would term “floating signifiers” as they carry their meaning according to contexts in which they appear, and embody historically specific cultural values, beliefs, and power dynamics; their interpretation thus reflects broader social struggles for Black acceptance to “respectable” society at a given historical moment. Thus, the idea of respect can carry cultural and ideological significance, serving as a site of contestation and negotiation over the meaning of respectability for Black communities.

While the term respect is commonly invoked in conversation, its meaning for Unapologetic Blackness requires that respect be inherent in the assertion of Black humanity and in the rejection of degrading stereotypes and narratives. This chapter delves into the nuance of respect as a practice of Unapologetic Blackness, its ties to the gaze and respectability politics, as demonstrated by *Harlem*, and disrespectability politics, as demonstrated by *Heaux Tales*. Oxford Languages (n.d.) defines “respect” as

#### Verb

1. admire (someone or something) deeply, as a result of their abilities, qualities, or achievements.
2. have due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of.
3. avoid harming or interfering with.

4. agree to recognize and abide by (a legal requirement).

In the context of Unapologetic Blackness, respect is not about seeking validation from others, but rather rejecting internalized racism and societal messages that seek to diminish the worth of Black people. Differentiated from disrespect, or the opposite of respect, the transformative nature of respect can be read as a form of Black feminist refusal. Rooted in the framework of intersectionality, Black feminist refusal emphasizes a collective resistance against systems of oppression and a rejection of societal norms that perpetuate racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination and disrespect. Respect is essential for Black women, as it embodies a refusal to have their Blackness compressed and oppressed without any articulation of agency and autonomy. For a population that has been traditionally disrespected, disavowed, and disquieted, it is no wonder that Black women demand freedom from the gaze and subsequent policing by whiteness. As Aretha Franklin (1967) famously sang “All I'm askin' Is for a little respect. R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to me.” For Unapologetic Blackness, respect operates as a reclamation over how Black people, especially Black women, define themselves in the face of historical and societal attempts to marginalize, misrepresent, or erase Black identities. Black creators now have more control over their own images than ever, and while Blackness has always been viewed, it is very rarely seen.

### **White Gaze, Black Problems**

Popular culture routinely finds new ways of circulating controlling images and promoting these images (Collins, 2002). This calls into question the agency we, as Black women, have over our representations and those not our own – representations created

and disseminated by others. However, Unapologetic Blackness allows the community to assume control over this mediated visibility. Race and gender have always influenced the visibility, invisibility, and hyper-visibility of communities of color. Dubrofsky and Wood (2014) note that gendered and racialized visual surveillance practices have long been a concern of feminist media scholars through foundational ideas such as the “male gaze” or the hypervisibility of Black female bodies. The pornographic eroticism of race and gender in media has developed into what Stuart Hall (2015) deems inferential racism: the naturalized representations of race that underpin the media landscape. Patricia Hill Collins (2002) expands this theory by positing a matrix of domination that utilizes stereotypical imagery to misconstrue, manipulate, and construct oppositional realities for audiences: “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 69).

The gaze is a dominating act involving the positioning of oneself in a superior relation to another, whether to objectify through the racist, colonial, etc gaze (Campt, 2023). Laura Mulvey (2014) offered the classical definition of the gaze in terms of a gendered form of spectatorship in which women were objects to be gazed upon, and the white male viewer was the bearer of the gaze. In the realm of visual structures of dominance, the white gaze reflects the inherent bias in cultural products, institutions, and societal norms that are shaped by and centered around the perspective of white men. Mulvey’s (2014) work extends beyond film to popular culture, reflecting power dynamics that position men as subjects and women as objects. This idea of the gaze is crucial to

understanding representation and the complex ways that media can perpetuate societal norms, and limit identities beyond gender. The white gaze is not limited to visual media, and its pervasiveness is reflected in dominant cultural narratives and images, which tend to reinforce and perpetuate white norms, standards, and marginalize, misrepresent, stereotype and dehumanize Blackness. For example, sundown and lantern laws operated as an extension of the supervisory racialized surveillance, marking

black, mixed-race, and indigenous people as security risks in need of supervision after dark. In this way, the lit candle, in a panoptic fashion, sought to extend to the night the security of the day and through the forced illumination of any unattended slave via lantern the black body, technologically enhanced by way of a simple device made for a visual surplus where technology met surveillance....[W]hite enterprise and encoded white supremacy, as well as black luminosity, in law. (Browne, 2015, pp. 78-79)

Such Black luminosity is reflected in some of the critical oversights of Black women that manifest through respectability politics, as I will detail later in the chapter.

The white gaze not only perpetuates stereotypes but also influences socially constructed ideals of respectability and deviance. It influences the hypervisibility of those who deviate from these norms, especially in relation to Blackness. Black people, especially Black women—who face both the racist and sexist gaze—may therefore internalize the gaze and adopt self-policing and self-censoring behaviors to align themselves with respectability politics, fearing the consequences of being perceived as deviant or inferior. This internalized judgment is often based on material consequences of

scrutiny, stigma, marginalization, discrimination, or exclusion. Recognizing the power dynamics inherent in the gaze is crucial for understanding how respectability politics operates and how it can be challenged by representations of respect in Unapologetic Blackness. *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* both offer insight into how Black women navigate respectability politics, in conforming or flouting expectations of decorum.

### **Defining Respectability Politics**

To understand respectability politics, we must look at the factors that necessitated it in the first place. Respectability can be read in the ways in which Black women are trapped and bound by stereotypical representations. As Black women have been constructed as commodifiable sexualized Others since the time of chattel slavery, race and sexuality are inextricably linked for Black women. Thus, respectability politics challenges stereotypes of Black people, especially Black women, as hypersexual, immoral, and lazy (White, 2019). Because “historically, black women have reacted to the repressive force of hegemonic discourses on race and sex that constructed [their] image with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility” (Hammonds, 2013, p. 171). Challenging this legacy of invisibility is a tough task, as Black girls defining Black girlhood and Black women defining Black womanhood may not fit into stereotypes as “props, property, and perpetual victims” (Brown, 2013, p.205). In Unapologetic Blackness, the practice of demanding respect involves Black women crafting versions of themselves that are not defined through a white gaze.

Because respectability politics shape Black bodies through the white gaze, and through the racialized surveillance I detailed earlier, Black people act in ways that are

socially acceptable. I am not arguing that some of these mannerisms cannot be a form of pride or are always a response to the white gaze; but when considering respectability politics, it is important to note that “since the social goal of racial uplift initially drove the cultural politics of respectability, the bid on black uplift and social recognition turned on black Americans collectively putting forward an imagined best black self”(Gray, 2016, p.193). Racial uplift discourse has been conferred as a form of respectability since W.E.B Du Bois first posited the idea of the talented tenth. Harris (2014) argues that respectability politics as a strategy of Black progress and Black freedom:

Uplifting stories that leave out structural barriers, let alone the need for political struggle to correct those barriers, can gloss over the enormous challenges the poor face in an era marked by downward mobility. Respectability politics can have the effect of steering “unrespectables” away from making demands on the state to intervene on their behalf and toward self-correction and the false belief that the market economy alone will lift them out of their plight. (Harris, 2014, p.36)

The policing of the self and of other members of the minoritized race serves as part and parcel of manners or morality in search of racial uplift. The “lift yourself up by the bootstraps” American Dream mantra stems from an elitist aspiration for “economic uplift in black communities, which suggests why the politics of respectability has such mass appeal across social classes” (Harris, 2014, p. 34). The articulation of contemporary respectability politics, even through ideologies of Black excellence, remains intrinsically linked to the white gaze.

Originally coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), the phrase “politics of respectability” was used to describe black women in the Baptist Church at the turn of the twentieth century who attempted to mimic white middle-class norms to challenge white supremacist stereotypes about them. In a more colloquial sense, *Urban Dictionary* defines respectability politics as “attempts by marginalized groups to police their own members and show their social values as being continuous and compatible with mainstream values rather than challenging the mainstream for its failure to accept difference” (Urban Dictionary, n.d.).

The behaviors and actions associated with respectability politics are based on hypervisibility. A clear example of respectability politics tied to hypervisibility can be seen in *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), which showcased an upper-middle-class Black family—the Huxtables—led by parents who were a doctor and a lawyer. The show emphasized success, family stability, and academic achievement as a response to negative portrayals of Black life, as the Huxtables were portrayed as well-educated, financially secure, and morally upright; they thus embodied a model of Black "respectability" that emphasized mainstream values, dress, and behavior and aimed to uplift the Black community's image. Owen (2019) posits, “as a form of normativity, the politics of respectability are highly problematic as a system of value, likewise, they shift responsibility for racism away from systemic forces and onto black people themselves” (p.239). Furthermore, the self-policing of marginalized groups to gain favor from the dominant group serves an ideology that presents an issue of moral responsibility rather than an issue of race. By ignoring racism as systemic, respectability politics as a

normative logic provides a set of societal rules to follow: around manner of dress, hair styling, make-up, educational aspirations, socioeconomic standing, etc.

Crockett (2017) defines respectability politics as a set of actions that “mobilizes a diffuse array of constantly shifting display-oriented (consumption) objects and tactics to generate a counternarrative to stigma” (p.557). Respectability works by equating blackness with specific displays of cultural capital, such as socioeconomic standing or property ownership. Thus, the societal expectations, based on achievements, set in place by respectability politics necessitate code-switching. For Unapologetic Blackness, code-switching can be seen as a response to navigating predominantly white spaces, highlighting a different strategy in dealing with racialized expectations. Code-switching, a term that derives from linguistics, details the behavioral process of adjusting oneself and changing between corresponding identities. Code-switching mainly occurs in spaces where the sociocultural norms of appropriateness run counter to stereotypes of blackness (McCluney et al, 2019). The history of negative perceptions of Blackness, stereotypes and controlling images, along with the severe discrimination and systemic barriers have catalyzed racial or cultural code-switching in deference to respectability politics.

### **Twice as hard, for half as much: The Influence of Respectability Politics in *Harlem***

Respectability politics manifests variously in contemporary media. One of the most popular forms of respectability politics occurs through the ideology of Black excellence. Black excellence is a term that typically celebrates and recognizes the outstanding achievements of Black people, especially in terms of academic accomplishments and professional success, although it can be broadened to include

cultural and artistic contributions. Although typically viewed as a positive affirmation and acknowledgment of talent, the concept of Black excellence can be seen as a response to the white gaze, as societal perceptions influence and contribute to discourses of “having it all:” career, love, etc. Black excellence also informs “hustle culture,” which is especially lauded in late-stage capitalism. Emily Lordi (2017) notes that it is not enough for Black people to have a spectacular work ethic; they should also adopt a market-oriented point of view and be enthusiastic about working. This has “popularized, secularized, and politicized black performative labor,” and is especially harmful for Black women (Lordi, 2017, p.136). However, Black elites and the Black middle class attempting to erase stereotypes and ascribe morality to Black people, and especially Black women, was thought to be a good thing. However,

the overall belief was that each person represented the race, and so the individual actions and behavior of one, reflected upon all. In order to disprove and fight stereotypes, these women fought to prove and demonstrate “ladylike” behavior and morality, qualities that were only afforded to white women. As such, they emphasized that black women had good manners and morals, were clean, did not indulge in drinking, or sexually pure, Thrift, modest in dress, and also fought for racial equality. And pushing a specific set of characteristics and behaviors on blacks, respectability politics in many ways blames blacks for socioeconomic status and unfair treatment by putting the sole burden on them. (White, 2019, p.49)

For Black women, especially, respectability politics involves intersectional power relations based on race, class, and sex (Dazey, 2021). The women in *Harlem* are prime examples of striving for Black excellence while struggling against ideas of respectability. In this section, I will focus on the professional aspect of respectability politics, showcased through struggles faced by characters Angie and Camille. Other characters also struggle with respectability, but Angie's and Camille's are most visible.

An adage that has been passed down through generations of African Americans, goes like this: “you must work twice as hard to get half as much of what they have” (the “they” here being white people). In the dichotomy of this maxim, there is an inherent power differential based in both race and labor. For example, Angie, the most outspoken character of *Harlem*'s foursome, has a rambunctious nature that makes her a target for microaggressions. Respectability politics primarily considers behaviors outside of hegemonic standards of decorum (aka white-defined norms) to be not only negative, but also a form of civil disobedience (Higginbotham, 1993). Targeting individuals' behavior shifts the responsibility for oppression—whether that be racism, sexism, microaggressions, etc. —onto the oppressed (Rosner, 2021).

Case in point: in season one, episode seven, “The Strong Black Woman,” we see during the course of rehearsals for *Get Out the Musical*, Angie is confronted by her director, as she has seemingly offended one of her white cast members, Kate (Matt et al., 2021). A typically self-assured character, Angie grapples with what to do in the face of this microaggression. Although she is confident in her singing skills, Angie's issue comes when confronted with having to code-switch in favor of her white colleague's comfort.

For Angie, choosing not to code switch could result in negative effects at work. By this definition, code-switching is a form of protection, and Angie needs to keep her position in the musical. She is ostensibly creating the most positive outcome of code-switching by keeping her job, yet there is much personal sacrifice involved.

Ultimately, Angie caves and issues an apology to her castmate, but not before the audience gets to see an alternative version of the interaction play out for the cast. She addresses the entire production cast and says,

Fuck you Kate. Fuck your microaggressions, fuck your white tears that you use as a weapon to distract from your racism. Fuck the history of white women like you who got people who look like me harmed or killed because you were too weak to admit your own fucking shortcomings. Fuck you for being another black man complicit in some racist bullshit against a black woman. Fuck you for engaging in respectability politics, which we all know has never and will never get us equality. You cool sis. And fuck you for asking me to forgive this shit. (Matt et al., 2021, 24:21-25:22)

In this alternative version that plays in Angie's head, she can draw a protective boundary around herself and protect her integrity. However, in actuality she is forced to cave.

A similar version of respectability politics also can be seen through the character, Camille. Camille, arguably the most anxious member of the foursome, struggles to get professional recognition, both in trying to get tenure at Columbia, and to get recognized by her peers. As a public-facing scholar, Camille doesn't have any academic

publications, although she has plenty of non-academic articles (Matt et al., 2021).

Obtaining tenure requires one to “publish or perish,” specifically by building a significant body of scholarly work. Camille seems to enjoy teaching, and her students seem to enjoy her classes as well; as she mentions, her classes are always filled (Matt et al., 2021).

However, Camille loses significant support for her tenure bid when her white department head, Robin, is forced out of the department and replaced with Dr. Pruitt. Dr. Pruitt, the Black mentor Camille admires the most, calls her unprofessional and berates her not only for her Twitter fingers, but also a lack of activism (Matt et al., 2021).

Professionalism refers to the pressure individuals face to meet the technical and social norms of their field (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Ibarra, 1999). The technical aspects of professionalism refer broadly to acquiring specialized knowledge and capacity to meet the demands of the professional community, which also includes specific forms of self-presentation, physical appearance, and communicative practices (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Roberts, 2005). These values and norms guide sociocultural expectations of status and power in one’s given field (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006; Roberts, 2005). These demands of professionalism are especially devastating for a character like Camille, as the person holding her to this standard of professionalism is another Black woman.

When reading professionalism as a form of respectability politics, it is important to note the amount of emotional labor involved. This idea of “appropriate” seems problematic for a variety of reasons. Professionalism has been socially and politically constructed in a way that preferences whiteness. Regardless, it is still unclear if code-

switching actually permits Black employees to be recognized as “professionals” (McCluney et al, 2019). Since Camille often displays her frustrations online, she is seen as disrespectful and unprofessional. By the professional standards of her occupation, Camille is often not considered “respectable,” as she vents online about the gentrification in Harlem and often points to the different structures of oppression within her neighborhood. Camille struggles with reconciling her identity as a scholar with her passion for community activism, as it seems that one cannot be considered respectable in her field without assimilating into the academic-professional complex (Matt et al., 2021). Because America considers itself a meritocracy—from its “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mantra to the enduring legacy of the American dream—this ideal bleeds into all other industrial cultures, including higher education.

Creating a better work environment for both Camille and Angie, would simply start with allowing both women to exist as they are without policing their actions. After all, what is respectable about respectability politics? What is so disreputable about demonstrating a social behavior outside of the norm, especially if that behavior does no harm? Both of these examples show a policing of behavior dictated by different professional institutions. For both Angie and Camille, there is a push towards a politics of respectability, whether that be code-switching or professionalism, in order to achieve some form of Black excellence. However, the issue with this is, as Rosner states— for many girls and women the ideology “translate[s] respectability into the issue of behaving nicely” (Rosner, 2021, p.191). Moreover, refusing to adjust oneself to respectability politics or codeswitch to fit the gaze of professionalism becomes a matter of disrespect.

Following this trajectory, both Angie and Camille are silenced in terms of their way of existing professionally.

In this framework, the mediating context of race, gender, and positionality serves to complicate how Black women can show up Unapologetically. I do not want to assert that being Unapologetically Black is solely about defying social norms and perhaps facing consequences, such as potentially losing one's job, as evidenced by *Harlem*. Rather, I want to point out that the connection between Unapologetic Blackness, visibility, and hypervisibility lies in the complex relationship between asserting Black identities, challenging stereotypical discourse, and navigating the material consequences of what is perceived as disrespect. Unapologetic Blackness acknowledges the validity and importance of all Black perspectives, even if these stances fall into respectability or disrespectability politics, because all of these media representations shape complex understandings of diverse Black identities and experiences.

### **(Dis)Respectability Politics**

Black women are among the most disrespected people on Earth (Malcolm X, 1962). For Unapologetic Blackness, this means that Black women must demand respect and reclaim it whenever possible. However, when they are perceived to be disrespectful in return, it poses a problem. If a white gaze that dictates how Black people need to conform to mainstream or white standards of behavior, appearance, or values in order to be respected or accepted, then disrespectability politics is a counter-narrative that rejects traditional respectability politics and emphasizes radical forms of self-expression and self-assertion—even if these are seen as unconventional or disruptive to societal norms.

Disrespectability, in this sense, conveys the “social costs for experiencing the full range of [Black women’s] emotionality,” whether or not those emotions are incompatible with hegemonic standards of decorum (Davis, 2018, p.287). Dazey (2021) conceptualizes disrespectability politics as a means of social transformation via rejecting assimilation ideologies and disregarding normative rules of decorum and reputation. In this context, the gaze positions the Black experience as one of being dominated rather than led:

In Black communities, those who deviate from respectability...politics by participating in non-normative or non-conforming sexualities, including queer, contractual, or public sexuality are promptly censured. They are accused of undermining African-American claims to citizenship and belonging based on sexual respectability, and of giving calls to harmful discourses of black pathology. (Miller-Young, 2014, p.ix)

Additionally, this gaze prioritizes male consumption and criticizes female assertiveness about their own sexuality. This relationship began with the commodification of Black bodies during slavery and continued into modern times in part due to the internet, which provides the foundation for examining criticism of the use of sexuality through the lens of commodification (Utley, 2010; Keller, 2014). For example, the harsh criticism of Cardi B’s song “WAP” by various conservative pundits demonstrates how Black women are often punished or discouraged from making music that is expressive of their explicit emotions (Gunter, 2020). However, other similarly explicit sexual songs by white artists, other people of color, and even Black men go unremarked. This suggests that there is a certain cultural and political significance around

media representations of Black female sexuality. The performance of the artists' sexual identities through techniques of explicit lyrical presentation informs these artists' reputation and self-presentation and the discourse surrounding them in popular culture and politics. Through the inspection of historical stereotypes and controlling images of Black women in popular culture, and in music specifically, it is apparent that gender dynamics center conservative ideals of Black women's sexual assertiveness.

*Heaux Tales* and its use of disrespectability politics seeks to subvert power dynamics that privilege certain identities and behaviors over others. The EP challenges hierarchies of respectability that reinforce social inequalities and marginalization, advocating for the vulnerability and respect of Black women's lived experiences. Black women historically have been seen as a commodity subject to exploitation following the legacy of slavery, where their bodies were literal property (Pough, 2004). The exploitation expanded into controlling narratives and depictions of Black women. Stemming from the Judeo-Christian image of the temptress, the controlling image of the Jezebel portrays African American women as stereotypically lascivious (Monahan, Shtrulis, & Givens, 2005). Griffin (2014) asserts that controlling imagery, like that of the jezebel, signifies that Black women are sexually deviant. Additionally, the perpetual nature of the stereotype of Black women as sexually deviant, in the media produces more stereotype-consistent judgments about Black women (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005). Further, Black women have long faced criticism for speaking out against such judgments on their gender and sexuality. It is difficult for women, especially Black women, to enter or gain respect in a masculine discursive space. For example, in terms of gender

performativity in hip hop, male rappers typically embody the black super macho stereotype, in which women are objects to be conquered (Grealy, 2008). In contrast, “the Black female performing artist is given two old tropes with which to play: the Afrocentric “queen” and “righteous” woman, or the modernist, Eurocentric “whore”” (Paradigm Smalls, 2011, p.89). Compounding this point, female rappers often assert their independence with lyrics about sex: “they discuss their skills in bed—getting and giving good sex—and the importance of men paying to be with them” (Moody, 2011, p.55). As female rappers continue to assert their sexual independence, they face the risk of being labeled deviant, reflecting how these damaging stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of Black women in media.

Griffin (2014) notes the media are primarily controlled by white men and as such perpetuate the masculine white gaze. However, even Black cultural discourses typically skew towards masculine ideologies. Therefore, Black women’s speech and actions have always been criticized in terms of masculine ideologies; the bold use of sexually explicit language by rappers or other musicians has fed into persisting systems of oppression designed to repress expression (Pough, 2004). Black women speaking out, or what bell hooks (1989) calls talking back, are an attack on the heteropatriarchal gender norm of docility, as well as an affront to masculine power. This was seen in critiques of the sexually explicit lyrics of Black Blues women singers of the 1920s and 1930s (Davis, 1998). As I’ve previously mentioned, the genealogy of vilifying Black female artists and their explicitly expressed sexuality in music is longstanding. Thus, the significance of *Heaux Tales* comes from its negation of hegemonic discourse about Black women

distributed by mainstream media. By presenting an alternative narrative of Black women's sexuality, one that does not cater to the white gaze, Sullivan's EP attempts to steer discourse away from respectability politics and into respect—respect for the breadth of activities and beliefs of Black women, whether those representations are free from the constraints of respectability or fall into societal conformity.

### **(Dis)Respectability Politics in *Heaux Tales***

*Heaux Tales* is a reclamation of respect in representations of Blackness, especially those that seek to police Black women's sexuality. Instead of functioning inside of societal norms of respectability politics, Jazmine Sullivan, and the other women featured on the EP, openly express sexuality in opposition to societal norms that impose the archetype of the respectable Black lady. As Wahneema Lubiano (1992) asserts, the Black lady of respectability politics signifies a moral, upstanding, middle-class woman, whose overachievement threatens Black men. In the African-American imagination, the Black lady is a morally upstanding, Southern Christian woman, preferably a mother, who is regarded for her role of representing the race positively (Thompson, 2009). However, for Black women Sullivan's lyrical exploration of sexuality is an especially powerful challenge to this construction of the Black lady. As Michael Awkward (1999) notes,

a key to successful objectification of the female body is persuading women of the benefits for them in masculinist formulations of women's erotic utility. The cultural imposition of notions of appropriateness and inevitability of the female body's figurations is the site of recreational phallic desire, in other words,

depends on the success of phallocentrism's institutionalizing of its perspectives to the extent that they are unquestioned by large numbers of receptive female accomplices. (p.59)

Thus, the reductionist hypersexualized stereotypes of Black women lie in the intersecting ideas of gender and sexuality with respectability politics. Emerson (2002) posits that constructions of Black womanhood are in part established through popular culture and media imagery that is exploitative and objectifies women of all races and reiterates that the strategy of sexual representation may reflect an acceptance of said controlling images. In essence, Black women have been gazed upon and objectified for ages, which continues through contemporary media. Hammonds (2013) argues that respectability, synonymous with sexual control, was set against promiscuity by Black elites in an attempt to assimilate with white understandings of respectability; this resulted in "middle class black women engaged in policing the behavior of poor and working class women and others who deviated from Victorian Norm, in the name of protecting the 'race'" (p.175). Respectability politics thus functions in the public sphere as a means of internalizing the white gaze. Sullivan, operating in opposition to respectability politics, acts as a counter agent to those societal norms.

*Heaux Tales* significance lies in its performance of black womanhood that is oppositional to societal norms in its vulnerability and demand for respect, even in the midst of complicated representations of sexuality. However, Sullivan is not the first to do this: there is a lineage of respect-demanding Black women musicians that Jazmine Sullivan and *Heaux Tales* are part of. Black female hip hop artists, Neo Soul artists, and

R&B artists, such as Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, or groups such as En Vogue or TLC, depicted themselves as masters of their own desires despite the prevalent misogynistic representations of Black womanhood in hip hop at the time (Emerson, 2002). Emerson (2002) argues that these performers construct their sexual positionality for themselves and not as a display for men: “while this is not articulated as a complete role reversal, which would ostensibly alienate male audiences, it is instead expressed as a mutual pursuit of sexual pleasure and satisfaction” (p.132). This allows Black women to simultaneously decenter the masculine narratives surrounding female sexuality and center a call for respect in their reclamation of the representation of Black womanhood.

The reclamation of full affective self-expression in *Heaux Tales* is both an artistic and political act. Because autobiography is integral to African American sexual experience, especially for Black women because they can freely discuss sexual matters in detail with others in their community, “contending with sexual exploitation and racial stereotypes remain prominent themes for Black female autobiographers. The act of writing about their sexual experiences, however, has freed black women writers then and now from the silence imposed around sexual matters, especially among women in the middle class” (Thompson, 2009, p.101). As *Heaux Tales* is in part autobiographical, this is especially significant. Autobiographical excerpts are not limited to literature, but can appear in any mediated expression, including songs. The implication of the autobiographical form denotes a form of sisterhood that exists both intertextually and temporally. For *Heaux Tales*, this sisterhood existed in the formation of the EPP, with the

spoken word features by other Black women, and temporally for the Black women who listen and relisten to the EP even today.

Black women can identify strongly with a project such as *Heaux Tales* precisely because it does straddle those two worlds, mirrored through the structure of the EP with both songs and narrative interludes. This can be seen as a representation of Black women's reality: sometimes messy, unfiltered and raw. This reality includes monologuing to oneself about bad decisions, as Jazmine Sullivan begins in the intro track of the project: "Bitch, Get it together bitch" (2021a). While perhaps a bit self-deprecating, the sentiment is both captivating and thought-provoking in its confession of ignominy. Sullivan's monologue could be seen as what GerShun Avilez (2020) calls an injury bound subject: "a subject who desires, a subject defined not solely by injury but by desire (i.e., affection, unrestrained pleasure, freedom of movement, self-definition, and unencumbered embodiment), and it is the threat of injury that often informs the investment in disruptive desire" (p. 5). In narrating experiences often deemed taboo or inappropriate, Sullivan's monologue in *Heaux Tales* moves beyond mere confession; it becomes an act of resistance against stigmatization, transforming vulnerability into empowerment. Through this lens, the monologue challenges the shame that society frequently imposes on Black women's desires and choices, especially regarding sexuality and autonomy, and creates space for Black women to reclaim narratives that have traditionally silenced or shamed them.

*Heaux Tales* also seeks to break down shame, with interludes such as Antoinette, Ari, Donna, and Issa's Tales, as well as other songs such as "On It", "BPW", "Tragic",

and “Put It Down” that emphasize the complexities of women's sexual experiences (Sullivan, 2022). In *Antoinette’s Tale*, Antoinette claims that men “cannot handle if a woman takes the same liberties as them. Especially with regards to sex. Like our society teaches them to be so wrapped up in themselves, and their own conquests that they forget we're sexual beings as well” (Sullivan, 2022). In this narrative interlude, the expression of sexuality intersects with race and gender to create double standards concerning the nature of Black women’s desirability, sensuality, and erotic utility. This is exemplified in *Girl Like Me*, where Sullivan (2021b) questions barriers created by respectability, singing

It ain't right how these hoes be winnin'

Why they be winnin'? Yeah (Why they be? Why they be?)

No hope for a girl like me, how come they be winnin'? Yeah

(Why they be? Why they be?)

And I ain't wanna be, but you gon' make a hoe out of me

It is not her worthiness that she questions, but her sense that sexually expressive women are winning. The dichotomy of shame and reclaim is a key part of Unapologetic Blackness.

Respectability politics is a form of affective control. Davis (2018) points to a complicated history of policing Black women’s emotionality, and the offsetting of affective privileges enjoyed by white women and Black men. Thus, the emotional costs of respectability politics must be noted. For Black women especially, narrative exposition

of this emotional and behavioral policing operates as a challenge to the dominant discourse. This is exemplified in the name of the project as it plays into the EP's negotiation of power. The title *Heaux Tales* is a play on the word "tales" and "ho," a derogatory term used to slut-shame women. As Miller-Young (2014, p.145) notes, "no single positive representation can undo structural stereotypes like the ho;" however, I argue that the recovery of a representation like that of the ho serves as a form of Black feminist refusal. It rejects or at the very least reclaims respectability politics, which seeks to dictate how Black women should behave or present themselves to be deemed worthy of respect or protection. In reclaiming Black sexuality, *Heaux Tales* encourages unapologetic self-expression and the embracing of one's authentic self, however that is understood. This concept is not solely about negation; it also involves envisioning and working towards a world where Black women can thrive and be liberated from systemic injustices. It calls for transformative change and collective action to dismantle the oppressive structures that marginalize Black women and police and limit their opportunities for affective expression.

In today's media ecology, women's identities are often tied to the presentation of their bodies, and this presentation is often based on sexual objectification (Williams, 2016). Additionally, the sexual subjectification of Black women is especially violent, due to the historical commodification of the Black woman's body through slavery, as well as stereotypical depictions of the Black woman as grotesque, unnatural, and inhuman (Mowatt, French, and Malebranche, 2013). While "invisibility is a fundamental aspect of being Black in a white-dominated society. The Black body comes into view, however,

when conceptions of sexual-subjection or social disparities are discussed” (Mowatt, French, and Malebranche, 2013, p. 645). Thus, the spectacle of racial and sexual fetishism in US media today “magnifies the ways in which racially liminal bodies are always scripted as ‘public’ and spectacular and that they are made into objects of desire through the Gaze” (Thompson, 2009, p.132).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) identifies three primary controlling images, or representative stereotypes of Black women: the mammy, an asexualized subservient maternal figure; the jezebel, a hyper-sexualized promiscuous woman; and the Sapphire, an angry man-hating woman. This is significant, as these controlling images provide a gateway into the erotic or pornographic male gaze that has centered Black female disempowerment through the commodity consumption and sexual objectification of black womanhood (Hunter& Soto, 2009; Mukherjee, 2006). These portrayals reinforce societal expectations and limitations imposed upon Black women, reinforcing their public positioning as spectacle. In this context, the Gaze serves not only as a means of fetishizing Black women’s bodies but also as a tool to reinforce controlling images that deny Black women the complexity and humanity afforded to others. These hypervisible and sexualized representations reinforce racialized scripts about Black femininity, positioning Black women as both hypervisible and socially confined, as their desirability becomes commodified within limiting frameworks that influence how Black women are perceived in real life.

Throughout the decades, these controlling images have been modified and coded for the times. To give an example, the Jezebel evolved into the video vixen. One of the

most famous examples of the modern-day jezebel in media was Karrine Stephens, aka Superhead, who used sexuality to become one of the first video vixens (BLACK FEMININITY TV, 2021). However, when she became a whistleblower about the alleged relationships with rappers, moguls and athletes, her memoir was trashed by famous men who were featured in the book (BLACK FEMININITY TV, 2021). In her famous *Tyra* show interview, Stephens noted, “it bothers a lot of people that I’m not ashamed,” and this discourse of “don’t kiss and tell,” only furthers sexual exploitation and repressed representations of Black women and their sexuality (BLACK FEMININITY TV, 2021).

On the other hand, the normalization of sex-positive behaviors, especially when pertaining to Black women, and especially on social media can be considered pro-hoe instead of empowering. However, “Black women artists have reappropriated explicit Black female sexuality in the aesthetics of their own work as a means of reclamation. It is undeniable that sex sells, but to be in the position of power in the transaction — the autonomous owner of the body — effectively alters the cultural dynamics” (Khong, 2020, p.9). The demand for respect for Black womanhood and Black female sexuality is inherent to breaking down stereotypes and tropes that have historically shaped representations of Black people. Black women unapologetically asserting their identity and sexuality, disrupts notions of affective control and declares their complexity, vulnerability, and demands respect for their humanity.

The white gaze dictates the surveillance of Black bodies and spaces, polices behaviors and affect, reinforces racial biases, perpetuates stereotypes, and increases the visibility of Black individuals and communities in public spaces, media, and cultural

representations, all of which led to the rise of respectability politics. However, Unapologetic Blackness challenges that this hypervisibility is always detrimental, as Black people, and especially Black women, may use visibility to demand respect for their voices to be heard and for Black experiences to be validated regardless of respectability politics. The argument of Unapologetic Blackness sits in this nexus, that while controlling images do exist at the confluence of what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) deems a “matrix of oppression,” the reclamation and disruption of the stereotypes and representations that have historically shaped and continuously constrain the ways in which Black women are perceived and understood in society is not solely afro-pessimistic but rather a way in which Black women can reclaim agency over their narratives and redefine their identities beyond the limiting frameworks imposed by society. *Heaux Tales* explores the tension between sexual objectification and sexual empowerment, through complicating the gaze by offering narratives that challenge racialized scripts about Black femininity, positioning Black women as both hypervisible and socially confined, as their desirability becomes commodified within limiting frameworks that influence how Black women are perceived in real life. In *Heaux Tales*, Jazmine Sullivan confronts societal expectations that deny Black women the complexity and humanity afforded to others.

### **Conclusion: From Respectability Politics to “Put Some Respect On My Name”**

An important cultural moment in Black media history takes place on April 22, 2016 when Birdman, a rapper most famous for co-founding the label Cash Money Records, comes onto the popular morning radio show, *The Breakfast Club*, and proclaims that he has been disrespected. He claimed that the hosts needed to “put some respect on

his name,” and after a few other iconic lines, he proceeded to walk out of the interview after only two minutes of being there (Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM., 2016). The point of including this interlude is to illustrate an abject refusal of perceived disrespect as a deliverance from respectability politics. *Heaux Tales* demonstrates Sullivan’s own reclamation of respect as being representative of the Unapologetic Blackness that Black women proclaim. Unapologetic Blackness is about respect. In a world of white supremacy, Unapologetic Blackness centers the experiences of Black people and amplifies their voices in the face of disrespect that permeates media.

I have set up this chapter’s focus on respect and respectability politics to fully articulate the boundaries within which Unapologetic Blackness is still possible. I also want to point to the language shift from the politics of respectability to respectability politics. The politics of respectability refers to the deliberate actions and choices made by marginalized groups to conform to mainstream societal standards in an effort to gain acceptance or avoid discrimination. While respectability politics, on the other hand, involves the broader societal expectation that marginalized individuals must meet these standards to be valued or treated with dignity. While politics of respectability can be a strategy for survival, respectability politics imposes these expectations onto individuals, often reinforcing inequality and exclusion. This shift is indicative of how thoroughly nuanced these issues can be. Higginbotham (1993) asserts that the politics of respectability function as a means of gatekeeping through behavioral decorum, especially in terms of linking sexual propriety with worthiness. In this vein, the right to respect would be garnered only if one acted respectably. However, Black women have

historically been denied respect for their humanity no matter if their actions are deemed respectable or not. As O'Connor (2021) points out, Higginbotham is not solely concerned with the normative interpretations through which the church women were trying to assimilate, but also with the agency in which these women were “independent self-fashioners and products of the values of [their] time” (p.160). Following, Unapologetic Blackness illuminates Black existences within and outside of the boundaries of respectability politics. Considering this conceptualization, respect-worthiness comes not only from those who view, but is also co-created with those are being viewed. While it is true that the white gaze fashioned and often continues to fashion ways in which Black people police themselves, in-person or through media representations, it is not the sole indicator of how Blackness is expressed.

I've made the argument that code-switching is a form of respectability politics, so any Black woman falling into this category would seem apologetic. Yet, while Angie and Camille performed a version of code-switching, it does not necessarily exclude them from Unapologetic Blackness. My argument about *Harlem* is that respectability politics is a nuanced concept that cuts across different ideological facets, some of which are reflected in Angie's and Camille's experiences. While Higginbotham posits a politics of silence— a strategic choice employed by Black women deliberately withholding certain thoughts, emotions, or actions to protect themselves, and maintain dignity—as a way of dealing with respectability, and Hine suggests a culture of dissemblance—where Black women create a public façade to conceal their true thoughts, emotions, and experiences—as a defense mechanism against racist and sexist ideologies, ultimately the production of

silence does not dethrone negative representations of Black women. However, it is the choice of silence that indicates Black women claiming agency over their voice, in this case the choice of not using it. The commitment to valuing Black women's humanity and dignity, even if that means silence, is a form of respect that Black women hold for themselves. In theorizing respectability in this manner, it is as Stanlee James suggests,

Although Black women are often characterized as victims, theorizing is a form of agency that provides them with opportunities to learn, think, imagine, judge, listen, speak, write, and act – and which transforms not only the individual (from victim to activist, for example) but the community, and the society as well. (James & Busia, 1993, p. 2)

While the *Harlem* characters' actions were forced by external measures beyond their control, Unapologetic Blackness allows for the range of human experience to be expressed. While the characters in *Harlem* may at times play into the politics of respectability (e.g. Angie's apology), Jazmine Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* shifts the ideas of respectability into a reclamation: a reclamation of sexuality, of expression, and of Black existence. Essentially, in this lyrical expression, Jazmine Sullivan is calling out the shame from weaponizing of respectability politics and telling it to put some respect on her and really all Black women's names. The fact that both of these media artifacts came into existence concurrently and within the same social context and media landscape shows that there are still complications of reading Black luminosity, Black invisibility, and Black hypervisibility—which still impact representations of Blackness.

### **Towards A Black Gaze**

Unapologetic Blackness focuses on shifting perspectives from an outside dominating gaze, to a gaze that disrupts disrespect. Unapologetic Blackness seeks to disrupt the traditional, objectifying gaze imposed by dominant cultures, replacing it with a perspective that insists on dignity and self-respect—especially when it comes to representing Black women. *Heaux Tales* embodies this shift, pushing back against narratives that shame or belittle Black women’s desires and complexities. Herman Gray (2013) argues that the media thrive on cultivating difference, often through superficial visibility that commodifies identities and reduces them to marketable features. This commodification often ignores true liberation and respect, focusing instead on easily digestible representations for broader audiences. For Black women especially, the commodified gaze of slavery has now translated to the commodified gaze on Instagram or other social media sites. Yet, Dubrofsky and Wood (2015) note that while white women have control of their objectification on social media (see Kim Kardashian), Black women become makers of meaning, as opposed to markers of it.

Historically, media have policed Blackness, striving to control its meaning, especially at intersections of gender and class. Black artists using music, film, and television have actively subverted respectability politics, showing experiences that counter the narrow scripts imposed by the white gaze. Starting with early race films, Black cultural productions have illustrated Black life on Black terms, directly challenging the moralistic limits imposed by respectability. By replacing respectability politics with an assertion of respect, Unapologetic Blackness resists marginalization and reclaims narrative power on behalf of Black communities. Unapologetic Blackness changes how

we gaze and ultimately shifts the ways in which Blackness can be expressed freely. As the internalization of controlling images can take a toll on Black women, disrupting white gaze is of the utmost importance. Black cultural productions, such as music, film, and television, have the power to demonstrate racialized experiences that are not mentioned or shown in white-dominated media output.

Sullivan's *Heaux Tales* goes beyond superficial representations of Blackness, employing both music and storytelling to convey an unapologetic portrayal of Black womanhood. In doing so, she counters the commodified, objectifying gaze of mainstream media and refuses to allow Black women's stories to be filtered solely through a lens of shame or societal approval. As Tina Campt (2023) describes in her concept of the Black gaze, Sullivan's work refuses to reduce its subjects to objects for voyeuristic pleasure; instead, it demands respect and acknowledgment of their full humanity. Through her raw lyrics and narratives, Sullivan positions the listener as a witness rather than a judge, fostering an intimate exchange that calls for empathy rather than evaluation.

Unapologetic Blackness calls for a fundamental shift from respectability politics to a framework rooted in respect. This shift reframes how Blackness is perceived, moving away from externally imposed standards and controlling images. bell hooks (1999) introduced the concept of the "oppositional gaze" to emphasize that Black female spectatorship becomes powerful and transformative only when Black women actively resist dominant, objectifying views. Manthia Diawara (2012) reinforces this by describing the "resisting Black spectator," who does not passively accept prescribed

narratives but instead reclaims perspective. In this way, Unapologetic Blackness refuses to settle for mere visibility, pushing instead for a perspective that demands respect.

Unapologetic Blackness actively shifts the gaze from one that commodifies and subordinates Black identities to one that disrupts disrespect and centers Black voices on their own terms. In *Harlem*, for example, this shift becomes clear: the show unapologetically focuses on Black women's friendships, ambitions, and challenges, reframing Black womanhood beyond respectability politics to provide a fuller, multidimensional portrayal of Black life – even when characters code-switch as a survival tactic. The concept of Unapologetic Blackness operates against a backdrop where, as Herman Gray (2013) explains, media channels often amplify “difference” and “visibility” to tailor content for demographic consumption, commodifying identities rather than celebrating or accurately representing them. Yet, *Harlem* offers an alternative by representing Blackness not as a fixed spectacle for outside consumption, but as something complex, self-defined, and affirming. This approach rejects the imposition of the "white gaze" that typically seeks to dominate narratives, wherein the characters in *Harlem* embrace a "Black gaze" that transforms viewers into witnesses of a nuanced and multifaceted Black experience, free from the distortions of white normative standards.

The liberation of Black women’s images, affects, and extrication from disrespect serve as reclamation. Unapologetic Blackness forwards call for the deflating of the ideology respectability politics, and for an inflation of the ideology of respect in which to center discourses of Blackness. It is apparent that moving from respectability politics to putting some respect on my name is a shift of great magnitude—from Black spectacle to

the he Black spectacular--that delimits the ownership and control of Black representations by non-Black communities. Respect is an affect that asserts the right of Black women, as well as Black individuals and Black communities, to be seen and heard in all spaces and contexts. It challenges systems of oppression that perpetuate disrespect, marginalization, and erasure of Black voices and experiences. Unapologetic Blackness, while based in solidarity and vulnerability, ultimately demands respect.

## Conclusion:

### Was. Is. Will.

I hate being late to things, a trait undoubtedly passed down from my mother—who is a stickler for punctuality. However, the lingering notion of colored people's time, colloquially known as CPT, underscores some of this aversion I have. Throughout my life, I've quite often heard, "Black people are late for everything" or "Black functions never start on time" or "Black people can't ever be on time;" and I've quite often seen this happen in my life. While a running joke and partial truth, I often wonder if I'm playing into respectability politics by caring so much about punctuality, when it seems that most of my people do not worry as much about time. Perhaps being late is not so much a waste of time, but rather a giving of time back to oneself. Perhaps, CPT is about the agency to recover time that has historically been taken from us. Therefore, maybe Unapologetic Blackness is simply a manner of reclaiming time: time lost while enslaved, time lost while segregated and separated, time lost while trying to garner respect, time lost while just trying to exist in a white supremacist world that would prefer Blackness as subservient or nonexistent.

In the now infamous House Financial Services Committee hearing, Democrat representative Maxine Waters, when questioning Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, decided to deal with a procedural interruption by stating, "reclaiming my time" (Romano, 2017). The clip took the internet by storm, with a plethora of memes and videos reenacting and modifying the phrase for different situations (Romano, 2017). The remixing and recirculation of this clip demonstrates how Unapologetic Blackness is and

can be echoed throughout time in different modalities and in different forms. The concept of time only became valued once it was situated in a monetary system; capitalism, industrialization, and working hours serve as a pipeline to viewing time solely as linear (Doane, 2002). Coupled with the lineage of commodification of Black women, from slavery, to underpaid labor, to the stereotypical depictions of the welfare queen to the video vixen, Black women's time, and labor, has never been considered valuable in the United States.

Unapologetic Blackness, on the other hand, asserts that Black women's time has always been valuable and that we have always been reclaiming our time. Media disrupt linear time because they can capture time in a moment; time becomes contingent. For example, cinema's capacity to record time, archive it, and make it legible allows for the cataloging of memory that we can watch and replay infinitely (Doane, 2002). So, depictions of Black women in media have the capacity to reclaim our stories and restore our representations for time to come.

Tamika Carey (2020) conceptualizes Waters' procedural performance as an act of repossession, not only for herself, but in the instantiation of Black women who have historically been dispossessed. Therefore, its continued usage and the new life each alteration produces only persists in Black women repossessing and harnessing their autonomy over their time. One of the many ways in which Waters' audio found new life, was from its insertion into Jazmine Sullivan's track *Tragic* (2022), which elucidates how the artist was reclaiming her time from a situation that no longer served her. This is important to note, not only because I examined *Heaux Tales* over the course of this

dissertation, but also because in the reclamation of time, it is clear to see that Black women are acting without shame, without contorting themselves to fit crooked rooms; instead we are in a space of becoming, or simply being, Unapologetic. The fact that Waters' lament about wasting time is echoed and paralleled across multiple media only serves to further prove this point.

Blackness has been and will always be Unapologetic, forevermore. While Black women have been deemed anachronistic by white supremacist understandings of progress, there has been continuous evidence of the many ways in which Black women have made a way out of no way and rebelled against institutions and people who would rather see them oppressed. As I have expressed throughout this dissertation, in media representations and in real life, Black women have expressed Unapologetic Blackness through their sense of community, expressions of vulnerability, and demanded respect. The ways in which Black women have been able to do these things may have changed throughout time. However, in queering time, or engaging with non-linear temporalities, we can truly understand that the more things change, the more they remain the same. This conclusion argues that media representations of Black women's complex relationship with temporality are nuanced by repetitive patterns, usually tempered by white cultural reproductions of legacy tropes. For example, the trope of the mammy has persisted from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to *The Help* (2011) and into today's media offerings. Both of these movies garnered fame and accolades for the Black women starring in them, further demonstrating how Unapologetic Blackness is nuanced by its adaptations to its

sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. Unapologetic Blackness is centered on the present moment, which in queering time is influenced by both the future and the past.

### **It's Always the Right Time for Unapologetic Blackness**

Temporality belies all of the tenets of Unapologetic Blackness that I have laid out thus far. In chapter one, “Sisterhood has entered the Groupchat: Analyzing the dynamics of Amazon Prime’s *Harlem*,” I explored sisterhood constructed in *Harlem* as a means to reread the intertextuality of community. The community of Black sisterhood that partially constitutes Unapologetic Blackness is based on the

social, temporal, and material networks that affect how we identify ourselves, relate to family, and conceptualize our present moment with past and future are linked to and ... are lodged in and mediated by the everyday practices of social, material, and temporal norms, create a specific “we” that controls who we are, how we make sense of our life course, and whom we can relate to. (Çalışkan, 2022, p.72)

In the case of *Harlem*, this is exemplified by how the main characters define themselves in struggles of their careers, especially in regard to microaggressions, but also in terms of their relationships --with romantic partners and more so with their friendship-- which I have argued is the heart of the series.

The fluid temporality of sisterhood follows not a genealogy that echoes kinship felt in real life. For example, in an interview with Sherri Shepard (2023) each of *Harlem*’s main actresses touted the importance of their real-life friendship, as well as their characters’

friendship on screen. This kinship is reflected in the present moment of *Harlem*, and is rooted in the sisterhood of ensembles that have come before it. Unapologetic Blackness argues that sisterhood can be the site of redress: a safe space where affects other than Black trauma can be experienced. *Harlem* demonstrates this safety of sisterhood in every scene where the women turn to each other to face struggles of reproductive health, microaggressions, and complex love lives. As Herman Gray (2013) asserts, the people in power from dominant groups (typically white men) utilize media to perpetuate stereotypes that reduce the humanity of Black and other marginalized peoples. This underscores the importance of showcasing a collective, or a variety of Blackness, rather than a singular identity of Blackness. It is the kinship that denotes the “spectorial pleasure” of seeing oneself onscreen (Dunn, 2008). Sociality thus plays a role in the building of fostering support and solidarity both in the representation itself and in the process of creating the representation (Christian & White, 2020, p.146). Without the historic participation of Black communities, the current and future iterations of Unapologetic Blackness would be nonexistent.

In chapter two, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired’: Showcasing Black Women’s vulnerability through Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales*,” I analyzed Black women’s vulnerability, and specifically how that vulnerability is expressed through music. The tradition in which music allows for the expression of vulnerabilities that might otherwise be oppressed, especially in Black women, has continued in work by Sullivan and others like her. While historical accounts tend to minimize, diminish, or render the contributions of Black women invisible, “Black women artists have played

crucial roles as archives, as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in for and as the memory of a people” (Brooks, 2021, p.4). Brooks continues: “Quiet as it’s kept, Black women of sound have a secret. Theirs is a history unfolding on other frequencies while the world adores them and yet mishears them, celebrates them and yet ignores them, heralds them and simultaneously devalues them” (2021, p.1). Jazmine Sullivan’s *Heaux Tales* disrupts stereotypical discourses of Blackness by concentrating on the affect of vulnerability felt, and perhaps often repressed publicly, by Black women.

In chapter three, “Respectfully, You Gonna Respect Me: *Harlem* and *Heaux Tales* as Responses to Respectability Politics,” I explored respectability politics as a means of complicating how Black women situate themselves in the world and respect as a reclamation of autonomy for Black women. Manifestations of respectability politics have sociocultural and sociohistorical impacts which bridge past and present cultural tragedies. While respectability politics, as with its spinoffs and remixes, such as code-switching and professionalism, primarily emerged as a survival tactic, the norms which it asserted point to spaces of collective historical trauma. This is true of real life and mediated portrayals.

From the time of the Black press encouraging social responsibility and racial uplift, Black media have continued to combat negative or overall false representations of Blackness and Black people (Hutton, 1993). Yet this process has resulted in an overrepresentation of Black people in positive media images, i.e., acting in respectable professions such as doctors/lawyers/etc. In attempting to combat problematic scripts and stereotypes, respectability became synonymous with overly optimistic, culturally recognizable representations. Media representations of Black women have been caught in

cycles of struggle around stereotypes. In engaging with temporality, I elucidate how past, present, and future representations are informed by respectability politics and respect. Unapologetic Blackness repositions respectability politics not as an ideology that needs to be escaped from, but rather as positionality that allows for the survival of Black women. This civil society is not civil to Black women, who are often relegated to its margins. Deeming Black women as worthy of respect and viewing them as inherently respectable is the antithesis how Black women have been disrespected and oppressed throughout time.

### **Afrofuturism as Restorying the Future, Present, and Past**

If Afropessimism equates Blackness to deficit--as in Black peoples are merely subordinated oppressed individuals to be subjugated and dehumanized--then there is a reduction of Blackness to being a pipeline to and from slavery. Afropessimistic attention to socially oppressive conditions disadvantages any affect displayed by Black people other than trauma. This does not leave room for vulnerability, joy, or other affects. In chapter three, I fleshed out the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of Blackness, and the afropessimistic view would denote that “we are supposed to not-see ourselves or to see ourselves through not-seeing; we are, indeed, supposed to fear—and hate—our black selves” (Quashie, 2021, p.5). Hartman (2012) utilizes a similar perspective to highlight how acknowledging what has been lost can also foster a sense of unity through the collective memory of trauma. However, I argue that trauma does not have to be the sole remembrance of Blackness; the souls of Black people also hold joy despite our trauma.

While this pessimism may be, in my opinion, overstated, it is not my intention to disable the utility of afro-pessimism. Instead, I would like to point to the heterogeneity of Black aliveness. Kevin Quashie (2021) envisions a "Black world" as a space where Blackness exists in all its complexity—encompassing joy, struggle, exceptionality, and ordinariness. This act of imagination allows Black people to reclaim some control in societies designed to oppress them. Similarly, Kara Keeling (2019) suggests that Black radical imagination creates new possibilities by reshaping reality and challenges the foundations of the current world to envision new ways of being. This signals invocations of Black futures through a lens of both Afrofuturism and surrealism.

Unapologetic Blackness is about being able to exist in the fullness of one's Black experience, with vulnerability, with respect, while fortified within a collective. But how can one be vulnerable amid the proliferation of animalistic, dehumanized versions of Black women from the asexual mammy, the hypersexualized jezebel, the emasculating sapphire? How can one expect respect when the imagery reinforcing Black people's subjugation is continually adapted and amplified?

If media are spaces for Unapologetic Blackness, then one way in which Afrofuturism can be seen today is in the ever-evolving use of alter egos by Black performers. The use of alter egos is an old method of performing representations of Black social life and showing what it could be when not characterized by death. This is a heterogeneous genealogy, and much work has been done dissecting various Black women artists'—Beyoncé's Sasha Fierce, Janelle Monáe's Cindi Mayweather and Jane57821, and Nicki Minaj's six alternating personas, for example—use of alter egos and different

personas to step outside of themselves and outside of their oppressions (Royster, 2013; Irizarry, 2022; Cosimini, 2017; Kooijman, 2019). The alter ego allows the performer to adopt a different persona, one less restricted by the societal notions of respectability or acceptability; “such ‘identities’—which I here adopt as fluid and performative—often lend themselves to a movement that exceeds their characterization as stage personae, suggesting a becoming that transforms the coordinates of subjectivity” (Van Veen, 2013, p.8). Black feminist refusal to conform to gendered stereotypes and roles that limit Black women's freedom and potential and allows them to show up as their full selves, are at the heart of Unapologetic Blackness.

Both Unapologetic Blackness and Afrofuturism seek to reclaim and celebrate the richness and diversity of Black experiences, histories, and traditions, while also challenging stereotypes and misrepresentations. However, Afrofuturism is not the only means of imagining Black futures. Not all visions of Black futures are utopic. Katherine McKittrick (2013) describes “plantation futures” as a framework where Black futures are shaped by ongoing systems of dispossession and post-slavery violence, such as the transition from plantations to prisons. This perspective, rooted in Afro-pessimism, highlights continued oppression without fully reimagining Black liberation. Additionally, Afrofuturism, often dominated by male narratives, frequently excludes Black women from modern representations (Samatar, 2017). Kodwo Eshun (2003) warns that such reimagining risks "futurism fatigue," creating a present overshadowed by melancholia. This exploration of speculative, but perhaps afro-pessimistic, renderings of the future can veer towards inferiority and deficit.

Unapologetic Blackness is slightly different from Afrofuturism, but it similarly adheres to concepts of restorying the past, present, and future. Casting into Black Futurity involves engaging with artistic forms not only to transcend the physical and psychological violence of slavery but also to envision and enact radical change. This approach aligns with Avery Gordon's (2017) concept of "the abolitionist imaginary," a refusal to wait for the future to reshape the present, and Fred Moten's (2013) idea of "double-capacity," the ability to exist in two places and two times simultaneously. It is the centering and amplifying Black voices and perspectives in their experiences and cultural productions, as well as a commitment to resisting the homogenization of Black representations which provide the transformative movement for cultural expressions, social critiques, and collective liberation.

In configuring the radical past and the radical future, we arrive at the radical present. While Afrofuturism is a wonderful means to restory conceptualizations of Blackness, I agree with Emily Lordi's (2020) argument that Afrofuturists overly endow the future or focus on recouping the past with little attention to the present. Yet, we live and exist in the present. And while we owe much to the past and have a responsibility towards the future, it is the here and now in which we can restory. Black women have been and continue to challenge systems of white supremacy by practicing the tenets of Unapologetic Blackness. While Afrofuturism is a great way of restorying and imagining forward, Unapologetic Blackness attends to imagining the present. Black Futures emphasizes living as if a better world already exists, Emily Lordi (2020) posits this concept as Afropresentism, or reinterpreting the past to view the present as an

"unfinished future of a radical past" (p. 154). In essence, Black futurity is the now. Temporality is at the core of Unapologetic Blackness in demanding respect, reclaiming vulnerability, and restorying representations of the intersectional oppressions that Black women face in their daily lives.

### **CODA: Why Can't Black Women Have It All?**

Being Unapologetically Black is a declaration of respect, vulnerability, and kinship. It rejects societal attempts to dictate worth and existence, asserting that Black women have the right to occupy spaces, pursue dreams, and define their narratives on their own terms. This concept is deeply entrenched with Black liberation, especially within media depictions. Allowing unrestricted Black self-expression, innovation, and growth—while recognizing the intersectional struggles and contributions of Black women—creates space for diverse narratives that expand, rather than limit, the possibilities of Blackness. This is how Unapologetic Blackness is embodied in media legacies. Christian and White (2020) argue that historically, authentic representation has been overlooked due to the marginalization of diverse audiences and creators. This neglect has led to limited production, marketing, and intellectual property rights for underrepresented groups. In mainstream Hollywood, this underinvestment amounts to cultural theft, depriving marginalized storytellers of resources and support. This dearth only serves the contention between stereotypical and restoryed versions of representation.

Yet, my project asks how can we as Black women preserve our inner worlds? Both mediated and in real life. From the middle passage to slavery to the antebellum period to Jim Crow and segregation to the present day, there has been a political and

social death foisted upon Blackness, to which one response may be going insane (Warren, 2016; Bruce, 2021). Unapologetic Blackness would not be possible without an indifference to conforming to external expectations. Embracing unfamiliar, non-stereotypical discourses highlights the unapologetic spirit that Black women have consistently demonstrated throughout the history of Black cultural productions. The crafting of varied expressions of Blackness, is the hallmark of Unapologetic Blackness, and it is not a novel notion.

Things come back around: a proverb that foretells the circular nature of time. However, I consider time a spiral rather than a circle; and while things do come back around, they come back slightly different, slightly changed. Unapologetic Blackness has been a constant expression, and the performance of it has changed over time, as society has changed. But what remains constant is Unapologetic Blackness as an intentional stance where Black peoples, especially Black women, can and do reclaim our time against imposed societal expectations and can fully visualize the entire breadth of their identity without any sense of shame or apology or disrespect. In the same vein of Royster's articulation of Post-Soul Eccentricity as "transformation and alteration become a way of reclaiming bodies that are the sites of racial and sexual conflict and violence by changing them physically and sometimes permanently," Unapologetic Blackness is also a site of transformation and legibility to the full affective range of Black peoples (2013, p.11). Unapologetic Blackness is a powerful and transformative framework that challenges the patriarchal and racist status quo that often disempowers any notions of Blackness that are not indexed to death. I want to challenge the conceptualization that

this concept is rooted in the idea of rejecting the need to conform to white supremacist standards and narratives of Blackness, but rather as acknowledgment that Black people, and especially Black women, have been resisting these societal norms all along.

The implications of this framework allow for a broad reading of cultural productions of Black womanhood. It is my argument that without restorying ideas of Blackness from afro-pessimism, then an in-depth understanding of the Unapologetic cannot occur. Afrofuturism and looking to Black Futurity is one way to combat the overreliance on focusing on oppression. However, I am not attempting to read Afrofuturism as the direct opposite of afro-pessimism, as I believe that both offer insights into what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) would term repetition with a difference. While Afrofuturism imagines a world of opposition and afro-pessimism conceives a world of oppression, both contextualize worlds in which there is a sense of critical optimism that situates an “affective context of nostalgia for the past and pessimistic mourning for the future” (Irizarry, 2022). If Afrofuturism is concerned with the after — after the basic needs of the community are met, after unity, after human--then Unapologetic Blackness centers the current moment and allows for a queering of temporality in the past, present, and future.

The core contribution of this theory is its insistence on the simultaneous analysis of embodied experiences and the surrounding mediated discourses that inform, reflect, co-opt, circumvent, or oppose Black experiences and representations. Yet, as my mother likes to say, “you can have everything you want, just not all at once.” Although I see Unapologetic Blackness as representing a diversity of Black experiences in media, there

can be issues with this; that is, the media artifacts I analyzed throughout this dissertation are not perfect. For example, *Harlem* can at times rely on stereotypical character tropes, fall into heteronormative world-building, and occasionally feature shallow character development and plotlines. Additionally, *Heaux Tales* could be critiqued for potentially perpetuating stereotypes about female sexuality and heteronormative gender dynamics. However, no media depiction is perfect, and my choice in reading these media representations as embodying Unapologetic Blackness lends valuable insights into the complexities and diversity of Black women's experiences in the here and now, and throughout time.

### ***Expansive Potential and Future Research***

Although my project did not explore questions of audience reception and engagement, it is important to note that Black women's engagement with media depicting Unapologetic Blackness should be explored by other researchers. Unapologetic Blackness can and should be expanded outside of a media studies context, and perhaps followed up with other qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups with Black women, to get further clarity and understanding on how Unapologetic Blackness may be understood apart from the case studies I utilized.

### ***Potential for Colonization***

In this project, I am the researcher, the audience, and the analyst. In this work, I share the concern of Boylorn (2017b), in that "I can't protect myself or other Black women from the ways my stories might reinforce misguided mischaracterizations of race,

gender, and class” (p.9). The inclusion or exclusion of narratives may be intentional or circumstantial, but bring to the fore questions of are stories being left out on purpose? Why is this particular story left untold? Will this harm anyone? And are people in the margins being pushed further out to the margins in the privileging of this story?

Consequently, how these personal vignettes may be taken up and used do pose a risk to me, as the researcher. However, in valuing the Black feminist ethic of care and vulnerability, I am willing to illuminate these private stories. In my experiences are echoes of the ancestors. So, I choose to share the personal narratives I have “because [I] believe they do something in the world to create a little knowledge, a little humanity, a little room to live and move in” (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, pp. 109-110). I do not know how this research will be taken up or utilized by others in or outside of the academy, and I can only hope that it will not be misconstrued, misrepresented, or miscontextualized.

I will end with the ardent desire that Black women can have it all, and that representations of Black women can illustrate the full embodiment of their multifaceted affects, their messiness, their authenticity of self, now and forevermore. In Unapologetic Blackness, we reclaim our time.

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