ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	"LOVERS ON A MISSION": BLACK INTIMACIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA FANDOM
	Brienne Amaris Adams, Doctor of Philosophy, 2022
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Social media provides a way to study Black people's relationship to the raced and gendered ways that they contend with their intimate lives with friends, family, and their romantic partners through studying their relationship to contemporary cultural productions. Digital Black fandoms constitute Black digital intimacies through affective fandom engagements on social media. Guiding this dissertation are two research questions: How do Black fans grapple with the intimate aspects of their friendships, family, and romantic lives by engaging their fandom objects on social media? How does social media provide a platform to build community through creating new discourse about the romantic and intimate lives of Black people?

Utilizing theories from Black Studies, Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Fan Studies, and Digital Studies, this dissertation analyses web series, television, film, and music. Autoethnography, close reading, and participant observation guide the methods and methodologies for the dissertation. First, the fandom of the queer web series *Between Women*

(2011-2017), which depicts Black lesbians in Atlanta and their romantic, friendship, and family relationships. Next, this dissertation chronicles the journey of the web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011- 2013) to *Insecure* (2016-2021), which features two Black women best friends and their rollercoaster romantic relationships in Los Angeles. Finally, Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* (2016), her husband JAY-Z's album *4:44* (2017), and her sister Solange's album *A Seat at the Table* (2016) as they each explore themes of racial injustice, love, and family. Through this process, "affirmative transformative" fandom demonstrates how digital Black fandom works of Black cultural productions affirm and transform the interior ways Black fans reflect on their interpersonal relationships. "Affirmative transformative" fandom is an amalgamation of traditional definitions of affirmative fandom, where fans affirm that they like a cultural production, and transformative fandom when fans create a new work inspired by their fandom object. The combination of "affirmative transformative" fandom intervenes in how Black fans affirm their fandom objects and themselves while simultaneously creating new fandom works and explaining the ways their interpersonal lives are transformed. The artists' production and fans' relationship to these cultural productions demonstrate that the quotidian aspects of the intimate are necessary to keep in conversation with other forms of resistance to self and world-make for themselves as an act of agential labor for and by Black fans.

“LOVERS ON A MISSION”: BLACK INTIMACIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA FANDOM

by

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Introduction

A Mission for Lovers

Solange Knowles' song "Borderline (An Ode to Self Care)", from Solange's third studio album is about the intimate home space and romantic partner to take a break from the daily onslaught of racism as a Black person in America. The lyrics, "We been lovers on a mission (all the way), so let's take an intermission…" is Knowles' conception of the mission that lovers endure and encapsulates the ways Black people survive, thrive, and fight for justice against discrimination, oppression, and exploitation and protect and prioritize their intimate lives.[1] At the same time, the song describes how one must surrender and take a break from the world to rest to fight another day. The parallel and interconnecting ideas presented in Knowles' song are central questions and claims my dissertation contends with. Knowles croons "baby, it's a war outside these doors," and "baby, I know what you're fighting for…what I'm fighting for."[2] From unemployment to underemployment, gentrification, anti-queer antagonism, violence, bias, and contending with police violence against Black people, the "fight" Knowles discusses is ever at the forefront of her listeners minds. Yet what does it mean to take time "off" from these everyday assaults to seek rest within their intimate partnerships and home spaces? To examine some of these questions, we can turn to how Black people use digital networks to both fight injustice and as a space to discuss their intimate relationships and the joy,

[1] Solange Knowles, "Borderline (An Ode to Self-Care)", *A Seat at the Table* (New York: Columbia Records, 2016) https://genius.com/Solange-borderline-an-ode-to-self-care-lyrics
[2] Knowles, "Borderline"

trauma, pain, and pleasure they experience. Intimacy, as used in this dissertation, is the affectively charged exchange of our innermost thoughts and desires—also named as interiority throughout the dissertation—with each other as explored interpersonally in our relationships and publicly reverberated. Traditionally, Black intimacy has been expressed in Black public spaces such as social clubs, fraternities and sororities, religious gatherings, services such as beauty and barbershops, and Black cultural productions. Technology, and specifically digital social media usage, has expansively allowed for the continued expression of Black intimacy through interiority as another tool to encounter how Black people contend with their intimate lives as a meaning making and knowledge producing labor of love for and by their communities.

I utilize lyrics from "Borderline (An Ode to Self-Care)" as a direct metaphor that encapsulates the main goals and interventions of this dissertation. I center intimacy as first, the dual interpretation of analyzing intimacy in representations of Black interpersonal relationships in popular culture and the mundane intimacy enacted in Black digital fandom practices on social media networks. In this case, I define "Lovers on a Mission" as both the characterization and storylines creators provide and how fans interpret the drama, sex, comedy, heartbreak, trauma, and pain for and by themselves to understand aspects of their own interpersonal lives better. Simply, fans are on a mission to understand their intimate lives better and do so through their fandom practices. Taking an "intermission" from the "war outside these doors" describes how Black creators provide digital ways for fans to interact with their content and how fans use the digital as a break to express their connections to the content to creators and other fans alike. The everyday engagement of social media

networks and fandom engagement by Black people allows for this "mission" and "intermission" of and for love broadly defined and interpolated throughout this dissertation as intimacy to be analyzed. For instance, Solange Knowles, who is featured in chapter three of this dissertation, created Saint Heron as an online community Saint Heron with a record label of the same name as a "digital hub for cultural conversations."[3] Relatedly, as a savvy media and social media user through Saint Heron and an artist who is engaged with her audience, Solange was hyper aware of the news cycle and treatment of Black death at the time of the album's release.[4] In an interview upon the release of the album that "Borderline" is featured on, *A Seat at the Table*, Solange describes the song as a desire to manifest more self-care in her life and prefaces the inspiration of the song as an example of being "in the midst of this last week with the multiple murders of young black men that occurred, I chose this time not to watch."[5] Solange specifically says of the song and her relationship:

> My husband and I share a lot in common in our yearning to see equality in this country. Sometimes throughout that, [self-care] becomes a mission within itself. That song was an ode to how our home becomes a safe space, where we can just love and not deal with some of the intensities that go along with existing in these spaces. That means so much to me."[6]

Therefore, I use the metaphor of this song as directly applied to the mundane usage of social media as Black digital practice to contend with the continued embodied

[3] Naomi Rea, "'I Needed to Find my Community': Solange Knowles on Why She's Beginning a New Chapter as a Cultural Mogul," artnet.com, May 24, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/solange-expanding-saint-heron-1971671
[4] Tavi Gevinson, "Exclusive: Solange Knowles in Conversation with Tavi Gevinson About 'A Seat at the Table'" wmagazine.com, September 30, 2016. https://www.wmagazine.com/story/exclusive-solange-knowles-in-conversation-with-tavi-gevinson-about-a-seat-at-the-table/
[5] Gevinson, "Exclusive: Solange Knowles"
[6] Gevinson, "Exclusive: Solange Knowles"

existence as Black people and the impact of this experience on our intimate lives as an enactment of "home as a safe space, where we can just love."

My dissertation specifically focuses on the digital expressions from fans based on the intimacy and interiority expressed in the cultural productions and how it manifests and is enacted on social media platforms. Social media, with its various affordances and drawbacks as well as the specific ways Black people use it as a space, provides a way to encounter Black people's relationship to the raced, gendered, and classed ways that they contend with their interior and intimate lives with friends, family, and their romantic partners through studying their relationship to contemporary cultural productions. I intervene in studies of Black cultural productions and popular culture through prefacing fandom rather than only interpreting the cultural production itself or the creator's intentions. Relatedly, I use fan rather than audience to connote the affective relationship fans have with their cultural objects that allow them to expressively interact with other fans, utilizing their interiority to create Black digital intimacies. I utilize the terminology "fandom object" throughout this dissertation to describe the cultural production fans have an affective relationship with. [7] I am more interested in what the fandom object says about Black interiority and their relationship to their fandom object. Black fans' intensive emotional investments in media, entertainment, and popular culture are important because these are sites where people go to negotiate power.

[7] In describing a genealogy of fandom, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington state that the attention of studying fans "shifts to the choice of object and its surrounding practices, and what they tell us about the fan him- or herself." in "Introduction: Why Study Fans?" Gray, Jonathan, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. 2007. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York: New York University Press., 5

The research questions that drive this dissertation include: How do Black fans grapple with the intimate aspects of their friendships, family, and romantic lives through engagement of their fandom objects on social media? How does social media provide a platform to build community through creating new discourse about the romantic and intimate lives of Black people? These questions and their answers contribute to conversations in multiple interdisciplinary fields including, but not limited to American Studies, Black Studies, Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Fan Studies, and Digital Studies. Black feminisms provide the foundation by which I describe the affect fans are expressing on digital platforms and I expand feminist theories of embodiment, intimacy, and interiority by focusing on how the digital contributes to Black ontology. I build upon Black Studies discussion of intimacy through expressions of interiority that does not center or is driven by respectability politics in terms of the public expression of affect. I rely on Black fandom and affect from Fan Studies, to intervene and interrupt the discussion of the digital as an extension of U.S. empire, to build upon theories of popular culture consumption, and to provide a counternarrative against the anti-black corporate imagination of the universal social media network user as a cishet white citizen.

Fandom studies is the lens by which Black feminisms and digital studies combine in my research to add to add the affective intimate and interiority to the discussion. Two contrasting definitions of fandom, affirmative and transformative, are central to the field of fan studies.[8] Broadly, a fan has an affective relationship to

[8] Affirmational fandom and transformational fandom were first coined by obsession_inc and taken up by fandom scholars, notably, and the definition I use in this dissertation by Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekenson; obsession_inc. "Affirmational Fandom vs. Transformational Fandom," obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org, June 1, 2009, http://obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html

their fandom object through the investment of affect and labor that is either affirmative or transformative. Affirmative fandom is defined as what fans like, or affirm, the productions they center their fandom on and transformative is defined as taking the affective interest and creating a new work inspired by the fandom. The distinction between the two definitions frames how I am conceptualizing digital participation and fandom engagement and how the cultural productions are informing how fans are analyzing their interpersonal lives. Fan Studies traditionally has focused on fan communities and practices that emphasize the distinction between affirmative fandom and transformative fandom. Fandom scholars, especially fandom scholars of color, have evolved and taken up the question of Black fandom practices in various ways. Prior to the digital, and explained later in this introduction, Black fandom practices of Black cultural productions were affirmative and transformative as well due to questions of representation within media spaces as in who gets to be represented. With the addition of the digital, I argue that we can see an intervention of combining both definitions into an amalgamation that states that Black fans demonstrate "affirmative transformative" fandom in digital spaces. Further, fans shared their insights about the characters and storylines and the overlap with their own lives through witnessing the pain, joy, growth, setbacks, stagnation, and transitions explored in both shows through character arcs and narrative choices.

Another aspect of my dissertation challenges Afro-pessimistic theories through contending that Black life is not always about recovering and responding to the injury of white supremacy, but that the mundane and quotidian aspects of life should be considered in our scholarship as well. I was inspired by a *Cosmopolitan* article Issa

Rae, the creator of the cultural productions examined in chapter two, where she was asked about the intention of centering the mundane. The interviewer states "*Insecure* also proves that it's OK to just show the mundaneness of black lives—not everything needs to be about harrowing black suffering, which can be overwhelming."[9] Rae replies, "It's important to show the mundaneness because it shows us as human, and we don't get to have those moments of celebrating ourselves. We have a very specific struggle even in the mundane, like with microaggressions. But that doesn't mean the world stops. We still keep moving. We're so trained to continue."[10] Through my intervention, Black "*affirmative transformative*" fandom I demonstrate how intimacy and interiority combine in digital spaces to assist scholars to understand Black knowledge production, world, and self-making that goes beyond the "overwhelming" aspects of Black life being always in relationship to the state and social death, but rather what can we "celebrate" and "keep moving" through these small moments of connection on social media networks.

The cultural objects documented in this dissertation constitute strong fandoms and highlight the ways Black fans express interiority and world make through utilizing social media platforms. The cultural productions I engage are web series, television, and music produced by Black creators in the 2010s. The 2010s saw the rise of and expansion of social media through user following and inventing new usages of the platform that pushed their usage as well as cultural productions that heavily focused on digital marketing. For instance, fans livetweeting their interest in a show

[9] Morgan Jerkins, "Issa Rae Talks *Insecure*, Sex Scenes, and Black Female Friendship" cosmopolitan.com, July 24, 2017, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/tv/a10347648/issa-rae-insecure-season-2-interview/

[10] Jerkins, "Issa Rae Talks *Insecure*"

using Twitter's hashtag feature expanded the usage of it as a platform affordance. I focus on the queer web series *Between Women* that depicts Black lesbians in Atlanta and their romantic, friendship, and family relationships. I chronicle the journey of the web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* to *Insecure,* which depicts two Black women best friends and their rollercoaster romantic relationships in Los Angeles. Finally, through the lens of exploring generational trauma, I place Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*, her husband Jay-Z's album *4:44*, and her sister Solange's album *A Seat at the Table* in conversation with each other and explore themes of racial injustice, love, and family. I begin with some of the most marginalized populations through studying the fandom of Black queer communities and end with one of the most popular, with Beyoncé and her family, to demonstrate a range of how Black fandom operates through studying intimacy and interiority through the interpersonal.

Black Digital Fandom: To Affirm and Transform

My research asks what happens when we center the intimate and interior with others to invoke change in our lives. I focus on expressions of intimacy and interiority within Black cultural productions and the way those relationships are affectively encountered by Black fans. Black familial and relationship studies emphasize the ways Black Americans forefront their intimate relationships as a foundational tenet and an affective motivating factor to continue to fight oppressive systems. Scholars of a journal special issue on Black Love state "…what sustained black Americans was

love—communal, familial, and sexual…"[11] Amidst all the turmoil and triumphs, relationships have sustained Black communities. Combined with Black feminisms, my research develops the affective mode to interrogate how Black communities have sustained themselves. Specifically, Black feminism grounds my affective theoretical approach through womanism's assertion of love as a central tenet. In Alice Walker's words, womanism's definition of love is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."[12] The emphasis on community, love, sexuality, and nonsexuality within womanism's description attends to how I am examining Black affect through intimacy and how Black communities have deep roots in love for self, others, and the community that continues in online spaces. It is the pursuit of wholeness as praxis—as sustaining and eventually thriving in Black communities' personal lives. I assert that one way to trace this pursuit is in the active discussions about fandom. Fans have a specific understanding and relationship to their objects; in the case of the fans I study, that understanding centers romantic, communal, and familial storylines. Rather than speculate and theorize about these processes through only examining the cultural productions themselves, we can turn to fan productions and their reflections on the characters and their own lives as evidence of the affective struggles and triumphs in Black interpersonal relationships. Further, Fan Studies is centered in the affectual

[11] Randal Maurice Jelks and Ayesha K. Hardison. "Black Love After E. Franklin Frazier: An Introduction." *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 7, no. 2 (2019), 109 doi:10.5406/womgenfamcol.7.2.0108

[12] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose.* 1st ed. A Harvest Book. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi

relationship that fans have to their fandom object and can lend itself to Black Studies in studying Black fandom and specifically Black fans of Black cultural productions. My research shape that developing conversation.

Intimate partnerships are an extension of where we encounter and negotiate our interior selves and how they are expressed outwardly. Because technology, and specifically Black uses of technology, have become a mode of expression outside of labor, commerce, and communication it serves to distinguish that our digital selves are an extension of these intimate negotiations. They are a site to examine how our hegemonic ideals about our interpersonal relationships are reinscribed, challenged, and co-created with others in a public domain. To that end, Black feminist and queer scholarship that focus on affect with attention to interiority and intimacy support my arguments in two ways, while I also intervene. First, I provide the affective context for a broader understanding of Black fans digital practice and community interactions on social media. Second, I analyze Black expressions of interiority in the cultural productions and how fans affirm and transform their fandoms and thus their own interiority through discussing the cultural productions on social media platforms.

Affect and queer theorist Lauren Berlant's theoretical framing of intimacy as an intersection of interpersonal relationships that reverberate publicly situates my framework on Black relationships, the digital, and fandom. Berlant's definition of intimacy is "an aspiration for a narrative about something shared" and that the "inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness."[13] Berlant's

[13] Lauren Gail Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue", *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998), 281 http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344169.

assertion is that institutions that were supposed to teach us "democratic publicness"— a la Habermas— evolved and were fostered into "collective experience (s)" like cinema and other entertainment forms where there is "the desire for entertainment taken for pleasure."[14] Yet intimacy also operates outside of these institutional realms in everyday mundane practices— such as using social media—that reproduce, challenge, and produce the stories that hegemonic ideals encourage us to follow concerning our intimate lives. Social media teaches us "democratic publicness" as it is guided by the logics of an institution and is a corporation, but through centering intimacy and the entertainment found therein constitutes "collective experiences" that push back against the inquiry that overarchingly centers the institutional and corporate interests of social media usage.[15] Essentially, by studying the collective affective experience of Black fandom we can see how Black people continue in the tradition of being "lovers on a mission" and world and self-making through relating their fandom objects. My dissertation tracks this creation of Black digital intimacies.

Digital intimacy as a subfield borrows from heavily from Berlant and I am examining how Black digital intimacies work through centering fandom.[16] As Berlant asserts, we impact each other in these public ways and thus, I theorize that media also effects our intimate lives directly: both interpersonally and with each other in public in online networks. Berlant built upon theorizing the intimate to define an intimate

[14] Berlant, "Intimacy", 284
[15] To demonstrate this in Chapter 2, I take up Andre Brock's usage of the "libidinal economy" as it relates to Black digital practices that "provides a path toward conceptualizing Black technology use as a space for mundanity, banality, and the celebration of making it through another day." Andre Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Critical Cultural Communication. (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 10
[16] Nathan Rambukkana and Keer Wang. "Digital Intimacies", last modified September 24, 2020, oxfordbibliographies.com, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0250.xml

public. An intimate public's participants are consumers that are "perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging."[17] To support my analysis of Black fandom fully, I draw from Black feminist thought, Black digital studies, and queer analysis of intimacy. Berlant centers marginalized identities that have had to create new ways of being intimate by emphasizing that they have, and we must "rethink intimacy" and to do so is "to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living"[18] Or as Stuart Hall asserts that Black popular culture is where "we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time."[19] Through digital fandom practices we can see how Black fans speculate, reimagine, and world-make about their lives through sharing themselves with the world in intimate digital spaces.

Fan Studies has not attended to race in both recognition of aca-fandom scholars and in paying attention to how Black identity can shift fans relationship to their fandom objects. However, I find that the Fan Studies theorization on the affective relationships that fans have with their objects distinctive and in my dissertation provides another lens to analyze Black fandom practices in digital spaces.

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[17] Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), vii. Kristen Warner also takes up the "intimate public" as it relates to fandom. Kristen Warner, "(Black Female) Fans Strike Back: The emergence of the Iris West Defense Squad" in Click, Melissa A, and Suzanne Scott, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018)
[18] Lauren Gail Berlant, "Intimacy", 286
[19] Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (51-52) (1993), 113

In Fan Studies, scholars often define two distinct modes of fandom production and engagement: the affirmative and transformative. In the introduction of the Fan Studies Reader, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse offer a definition of the difference between affirmative fandom and transformative fandom. They explain, "Affirmative fans tend to collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and critique. Transformative fans, however, take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artworks, or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take."[20] Hellekson and Busse emphasize that many academics focus on the transformative creations of fandom as they are new creations and sites for identity formation. While transformative creations are noteworthy for the affective labor and pleasure garnered from fans, there is another aspect that is opened once race is factored in as Black digital fandoms assist in the creation of a new definition.

I argue that Black fans usage of social media networks demonstrate an amalgamation of both affirmative and transformative fandom as defined by the field to morph and become "affirmative transformative" works of fandom expression. I argue for a simultaneous configuration of both because the ways representation, identity, and function operate for Black fans and their usage of social media; they are dissected, debated, affirmed, and challenged in digital spaces. Additionally, the communal aspects of fandom expressed comprise Black digital intimacies where affective interiority and transformative ideals through world making are enacted. I

[20] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 3

discuss the connection to intimacy later in the dissertation. My conceptualization of "affirmative transformative" Black fandom marries the traditional usage by Fan Studies with the affective meanings of the words themselves. To affirm means "to show or express a strong belief in or dedication to (something, such as an important idea)"; therefore as purported by Fan Studies, affirmative fandom affirms that the fan likes the object through discussion, analyzing, or critiquing.[21] Thus, there is an affective relationship to the object rather than having a passive audience reaction. To push the concept further, I also argue that fans' interior beliefs about their interpersonal relationships "are affirmed", as the definition of the word states, through their fandom and their anti-fandom.

With the same attention to definition, to transform means to "change in composition or structure; the outward form or appearance", or "to change in character or condition."[22] I argue that Black digital fandom expressions directly exemplifies transformative fandom and the affective meaning of the word. While "active fan participation" has been defined by Fan Studies as being heavily transformative and thus of interest, the digital provides another way to see the technological usages of social media to enact fan participation. With fan fiction, cosplay, fan art and other "new creations", transformative fandom has been the premiere way to research fandom as it is accessible and researchable to aca-fan scholars. I argue that Black digital fandom is also transformative in the sense that fans are undergoing various levels of affective contemplation and introspection of their interior lives, and thus are

[21] Merriam Webster, s.v. "affirm" accessed June 9, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affirm
[22] Merriam Webster, s.v. "transform" accessed June 9, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transform

transforming their ideals through world and self-making as they encounter other fans digitally. Specifically with the definition of transformative as a verb to mean "causing or able to cause an important and lasting change in someone or something", fans take up the interiority demonstrated in the cultural productions and express their own through how their fandom causes "an important and lasting change" in their lives.[23] This sense of identity formation is a labor taken on for and by Black fans and the digital fosters the communal fandom expressed for world and self-making.

My intervention adds the affective lens that is specific to Black interiority, intimacy, and relationality to the traditional Fan Studies definitions of affirmative and transformative to bridge the two and meld them together. I observe these intimate and intimate public fandom practices on social media through comments, hashtag usage, and blogs. I utilize theorization on Black interiority and public intimacy to examine "affirmative transformative" fandom practices on social media. To reiterate: first, Black fans affirm the cultural productions because of the representation they demonstrate but also transform their fandom into something else through creative usage of hashtags, podcasts, and other modes of creative expression. Secondly, the Black fandom practices I study are affirmative through casual engagement with fellow fans—or those that dislike the cultural productions or antifans—and content creators while also being transformative through the creativity of Black social media users and their identification and disidentification with fandom objects. There is also an interpersonal element as they are affirmed through the cultural productions and

[23] Merriam Webster, s.v. "transformative," accessed June 9, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transformative

express personal transformation as they encounter what they are seeing and hearing on screen. Specifically, the theme of my research reflects interpersonally in their romantic, familial, and friend relationships to access their interior lives. Thus, their fandom is a quotidian and mundane political "intermission" for their lives.

Intermission and Intervention

Fan Studies

My dissertation intervenes in the study of Black popular culture and digital practices through utilizing affective frameworks from fan studies to analyze Black fans. I consider myself an "aca-fan", a widely debated term in fan studies that describes an academic's relationship to the fan objects they study. One of Fan Studies oft-cited and foundational texts, *Textual Poachers*, defines an "aca-fan" as "an academic (who as access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnography literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community."[24] By that definition, it is clear that many Black Studies texts and scholars of popular culture also bridge the positionality of being an academic and a fan of the object they study even as the terminology is not used. In "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies", Rebecca Wanzo critiqued Fan Studies as field for the ways race has been absent from both analysis and in the canon, while citing and providing a historiography of Black fan practices. First, Wanzo outlines several popular culture Black scholars that can be considered acafans such as: "Gerald Early's essays on

[24] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Taylor and Frances, 2012), 5

sports, Jaqueline Bobo's *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, Robin R. Means Coleman's *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*, Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes: Milestone Comics and Their Fans*, and numerous works in hip-hop studies such as *Tricia Rose's Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America,* and Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*."[25] For instance, Jaqueline Bobo's monograph, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* examines how Black women engage films with Black women as central protagonists. Bobo's analysis examines Black women's reactions to three films: *Waiting to Exhale*, *Daughters of the Dust*, and *The Color Purple.*[26] Bobo argues that Black women's reactions to the films are not taken into consideration, and that there are consequences in dismissing Black women's perspectives. Primarily, Bobo contends that Black women's feedback can affect how the texts are taken up within the broader critique and cultural context surrounding them. Bobo also argues for image reconstruction to combat stereotypical depictions of Black women. While Bobo's interviews aid in the endeavor of combatting stereotypes as a political liberation project, I am not as interested in that goal or aim of this dissertation. The majority of texts I've chosen are not as invested in the politics of respectability. I am more invested in questions that center how Black people are experiencing the breadth of emotions expressed in each text and how they also express those emotions in digital spaces. Yet, Bobo's text remains pivotal as an

[25] Rebecca Wanzo, "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies." *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 20. (2015), 1.2 https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0699.
[26] Jaqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers.* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995)

example of how Black women engage with cultural productions where they are the central storyline. Bobo's argument is pivotal in the way it values Black women's knowledge production from an audience standpoint. My work continues in the tradition set forth by Bobo as a Black aca-fandom text.

Secondly, Wanzo purports that centering Black fandoms in Fan Studies can be utilized as an "identity hermeneutic" to "explore the possibility that a different kind of fan as well as different issues of concern to fans, might be visible if we focus on African Americans."[27] Through an "identity hermeneutic" analytic, Wanzo examines the politically charged ways Black fans demonstrate their fandom. Black fandom practice at times connotes a different relationship to fandom for several reasons. This is in part due to a dearth of representation and/or at times harmful stereotypical depictions of Black people in media. Some examples include the Black press, desiring more nuanced and complex character representation in television and film, and the role that anti-fandom plays in analyzing Black fandom practices.[28] Wanzo argues that fandom and anti-fandom practices are thus defined by attending to a larger political project to demand expansive representation and to have worldviews reflected to them accurately. My research specifically adds to the already established Black acafandom work as aforementioned alongside recent acafandom scholarship that demonstrates how Black fans interact with single characters in multicultural or primarily white casted film and television shows. I am in conversation with scholars who discuss

[27] Wanzo, "African American Acafandom", 1.6

[28] Poe Johnson explores this through examining how fandom is not as utopic as it has been purported to be. Johnson argues that Black bodies have been used for the proliferation of white supremacy; Poe Johnson, "Transformative Racism: The Black Body in Fan Works." in "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color, ed by Abigail De Kosnik and andre carrington, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 29. (2019) https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1669.

Black fandoms and the intersection of Black digital humanities with scholarship from Kristen Warner, Aymar Jean Christian and Faithe Day, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Sarah Florini, and more scholars in the special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* on "Fans of Color" edited by andré carrington and Abigail De Kosnik.[29]

With attention to a Black Studies genealogy of Black fandom, one may arrive at a specific question: if Black people and Black Studies historically produced varying levels of aca-fandom, antifandom, and decades of media critique, how does Black studies benefit from a Fan Studies intervention? My dissertation in particular answers this question in a few ways. First, Fan Studies provides an affective framework for how fans encounter and produce their fandoms. When applied to Black fans of Black cultural texts, Fan Studies frameworks provides another understanding of Black knowledge production, identity construction, and labor for and by Black people. Secondly, the analysis I bring to Black digital fandom provides another layer of methodological and affective considerations. I center the consumption of popular culture through the cultural productions themselves, how fans interact with their fandom object, and how Black people collectively identify on

[29] Kristen J. Warner, "ABC's *Scandal* and Black Women's Fandom" in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Levine Elana. (University of Illinois Press, 2015); Faithe Day and Aymar Jean Christian "Locating Black Queer TV: Fans, Producers and Networked Publics on YouTube." in "Queer Female Fandom," ed by Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng, special issue, *Transformative Works, and Cultures,* no 24. (2017) http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.867; Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. Postmillennial Pop. (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Sarah Florini, "Enclaving and Cultural Resonance in Black Game of Thrones Fandom." in "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color," eds. andré carrington and Abigail De Kosnik special issue, Transformative Works and Cultures, no. 29. (2019) https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1498; De Kosnik, Abigail, and andré carrington. "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1783.

social media. Particularly, the expressive and collective and community notion of fandom as explored in Fan Studies separates it from general audience reception. Fans have strong feelings of affective identification, support, and approval of the fandom object—or not in the case of anti-fandom. The affective turn, liking the object or not, is a key underlying connector to the fandoms I study. Finally, these quotidian acts of engagement are a site to examine Black knowledge production and world-making . Likewise, because their fandom is practiced digitally, my argument demonstrates how Black users come to interact with each other on social media platforms. Explained in the next section, these social media interactions that center on affective fandoms constitute Black digital intimacies. As Wanzo asks, "if we privilege African Americans in the story we tell about fans in the United States, how might that change our understanding of what a fan is, our understanding of how they are producers as well as consumers, or the role identity can play in the importance of identifying as a fan?"[30] My scholarship expands on the interior ways that Black fans engage in fandom not as an inherently political project for representation, but how they are using the quotidian act of participating in digital fandom for their own labor as identity and world-making practices.

In order to combine the aesthetic notion of contemporary cultural productions with affective interiority, I turn to how fans engage their fandom object digitally with others. First, I posit that fans are using social networks to express their interiority and thereby form and solidify communities through these expressions. I approach these fandom expressions as labor for themselves to world and self-make. Secondly, world

[30] Wanzo, "African American Acafandom," 1.6

and self-making are important narrative devices that allow Black fans to create their worlds and themselves. In a world that continues to try to define Black people as a homogenous group that has been detrimentally pathologized in various ways, for Black people to continue to create their own narratives in cultural productions and digitally connect is a project of self-determination and knowledge production. Finally, I also contend with the ways content creators themselves are aware of this labor and use it in service to their productions for capitalistic gain, but also and what I specifically emphasize the creative motivations for their choices and focusing on the fan digital production.

Black content creators and fans are both contending with the raced, gendered, classed, abled and disabled ways their art represents and is represented. Thus, my attention to aesthetic, affect, and labor are necessary to examine the motivations for creation and consumption. I focus on Black creators as they make art in response to their personal lives; they in turn share it with fans as an expression of their interiority and fans respond in kind on social networks. Furthermore, the digital provides a form of primary source materials to apply new methodologies to examine Black audience and fandom practices. Materials such as interviews, ethnography, and autoethnography are used by Fandom scholars and Black aca-fans to examine fandom expression. I utilize fandom sources on YouTube, Twitter, and blogs to examine how the digital expands Black fandom practices. I argue that this approach exemplifies Black digital intimacies when the affective lenses from fandom and queer studies are applied.

Digital Studies

Two approaches within Digital Studies are key to my research. The first one calls for scholars to demonstrate their research through a project that uses various digital tools; the other vector, and the one I use in this dissertation, studies how people interact with digital media and the power implications situated therein.[31] Digital Studies consider both the content and algorithms used in analyzing identity and culture online. Scholars also consider embodied positionality as the material conditions and usage of the internet impact people's everyday lives. Concerning my research questions, many of the early digital humanists did not study the presence of Black people online based on an assumption about usage. However, the supposed gap –that encompasses one part of the "The Digital Divide"—proved to be not as pervasive by researchers that specifically focus on how Black people utilize the internet in innovative ways. I add to the discussion by continuing to discuss how Black people form community and relate offline and how it has translated in digital spaces to consider new possibilities. In relationship to my dissertation, Digital Studies provides the tools necessary to understand how the cultural productions are circulated and the fan response and engagement on social networks.

My approach to examining digital technology also focuses on how users take up social media platform affordances to explore identity and community formation and how power operates online. Specifically, I argue that social media usage is a quotidian act that provides fans another avenue to engage representations of Black

[31] Bethany Nowviskie, "On the Origin of 'Hack' and 'Yack'" eds. Gold, Matthew K, and Lauren F Klein, eds. *Debates in the Digital Humanities.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

intimacies and interiority, explore their own, and forge fandom communities that disrupt capitalistic understandings of the usage of the digital. For instance, Lisa Nakamura's discusses embodied aspects of utilizing online spaces to empower marginalized subjectivities. Nakamura engages the "digital divide" that examines "post-2000 graphical popular internet, this utopian story of the Internet's beginnings in popular culture can be told with a different spin, one that instead tracks its continuing discourse of color blindness in terms of access, user experience, and content that is reflecting in the scholarship as well as in nineties neoliberalism emphasis on 'moderate redistribution and cultural universalism.'"[32] Due to Digital Studies' buy-in to the idea of a utopian user who is male, cis, heterosexual, and able-bodied, scholars continually recuperate marginalized identities' usage of the internet beyond the initial digital platform design's intention and understanding of how platforms are designed.

As it relates to Black Digital Studies, my dissertation continues in the Black Studies tradition of centering the study of Blackness as it relates to culture, creativity, and how Black people thrive despite and despite it all. To that end, I refer to Kim Gallon's chronicling of the intersection between Africana/African American/Black Studies and Digital Humanities. Gallon interrogates both fields by asserting how recovery has been central to Black Studies as a discipline and should translate to recouping race analysis in Digital Studies as well. Gallon asserts, "Black studies has a unique role to play in dismembering how we think about humanity and the digital

[32] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet.* Electronic Mediations, 23. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10

humanities by extension. A black epistemology will generate questions about the relationship between the racialization of humanity and the digital as power, ultimately fostering new inquiries and deeper understandings about the human condition."[33] Additionally, scholars expand the challenge to foster new questions and deeper understandings like Gallon. For example, in chapter two, I utilize Jessica Marie Johnson's argument on how Black people have taken up technologies to acknowledge and create their own freedom dreams.[34] Specifically, as I situate my research in Black Digital Studies, my work explores identity formation through utilizing technology assists Black people in understanding their black freedom dreams in their intimate relationships through fandom and intimate digital connections. I also utilize Andre Brock's theorization around Black digital practices operating with a "libidinal economy" that bridges the connection of social media usage as a mundane practice where fan's knowledge production is fostered.[35] Chapter two's exploration of Insecure HBO provides a case study to examine how fandom was used as a salve during the 2020 protests and uprisings after the back-to-back murders of several Black citizens. Fans used their fandom object as an intermission from the daily onslaught as Solange expounded upon in the interview about the song lyrics in the title of my dissertation.

Black feminist Digital Scholars are also creating new ways to think about the digital by merging theories from the two fields. As a Black feminist digital scholar, I add to the canon through using Black feminist notions of interiority and intimacy to the

[33] Kim Gallon. "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities" in Gold, Matthew K, and Lauren F Klein, eds. 2016. *Debates in the Digital Humanities.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
[34] Jessica Marie Johnson. "Markup Bodies." *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (2018)
[35] Brock, "Distributed Blackness", 10

field. Kishonna Gray discusses the gap in cyberfeminism's argument that flattens the experience of all women and does not consider race. Gray argues that Black cyberfeminism does a particular work in the digital by "incorporating the tenets of interconnected identities, interconnected social forces, and distinct circumstances."[36] Gray utilizes Black feminist thought as theorized by Patricia Hill Collins which proclaims self-definition to traverse hegemonic ideologies that combines with the idea from cyberfeminism that the internet has the possibility for liberatory practices. By combining cyberfeminism and Black feminist thought, Gray provides a framework to discuss the possibilities how Black cyberfeminism might give "meaningful solutions to combat inequitable power structures."[37] Gray's framework supports my argument on how fandom expression assists fans to self-determine aspects of their interpersonal relationships through the fandom communities as physical and virtual identities cannot be separated. Thus, the framework Gray provides demonstrates how Black women and for my purposes Black fandom communities at large can utilize digital spaces to profess self-making in online and offline spaces. Black cyberfeminism takes into consideration the embodied power dynamics of using the digital, but also the empowerment aspects. Finally, to bridge the ways Black feminisms influence Black Digital Studies, I turn to one of Catherine Knight Steele's definitions of *Digital Black Feminism* as "a mechanism to understand

[36] Kishonna Gray, "Race, Gender, and Virtual Inequality: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Black Cyberfeminist Theory," In *Producing Theory in a Digital World 2.0: The Intersection of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory, Volume 2*, ed Rebecca Ann Lind, New York: Peter Lang, 2015, 177

[37] Gray, "Race, Gender, and Virtual Inequality", 177

how Black feminist thought is altered by and alters technology."[38] Black digital fan creations both altered disciplinary notions and definitions of fandom and found new usage with digital technologies. The technological practices Black fans enact are "meaningful solutions" to their own "freedom dreams." In the next section, I will expand on how Black feminisms have shaped my inquiry and research.

Black and Queer Feminisms

Foundational to my analysis of Fan Studies and Digital Studies are Black and queer feminisms that explore the embodied affective expressions of personhood, analysis of the role of culture, and what we can learn from our interpersonal relationships. Scholars that specifically focus on expressions of pleasure, erotics, gender, and sexuality for Black women are central to how I navigate the inquiry set forth in this dissertation.

First, I want to highlight two foundational texts that bridge my approach to the cultural productions from a gender and sexuality perspective. Hortense Spillers article "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" usage of narrative theory to examine constructions of sexuality, race, and gender. Spillers focuses on how cultural producers can do the work of reinventing stereotypes about Black women as perpetuated in popular culture. In "Interstices", Spillers interrogates Black women's sexuality in the cultural sphere. Specifically discussing the vocalist as an artist and woman, Spillers writes, "…we are interested in the singer's attitude toward her material, her audience, and

[38] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*. Critical Cultural Communication. (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 15

ultimately her own ego status in the world as it is interpreted through form."[39] For Spillers, knowledge production through culture is manifested through the creator's own recognizance about her place in the world. As status and form intersect with power, Spillers writes, "in this instance of being-for-self, it does not matter that the vocalist is 'entertaining' under Amerikkan skies because the woman, in her particular and vivid thereness, is an unalterable and discrete moment of self-knowledge."[40] Spillers also accounts for how audiences contend with the cultural productions Black women produce. This is particularly pertinent for my analysis concerning Fan Studies. "To state the problem metaphorically, the black woman must translate the female vocalist's gestures into an apposite structure of terms that will articulate both her kinship to other women and the particular nuances of her own experience."[41] The cultural productions I am researching, expand upon the notion of kinship between the creator and fan. Through studying fandom production, I argue that fandom expressions are created and maintained beyond the initial experience of the cultural production as it influences their interpersonal lives. As Spillers states, "the particular nuances of her own experience" are central to how I am approaching how fans are exploring their own relationships and intimate lives in relation to the popular culture productions.

My research contends with the ideas of identity formation and self-definition that considers how systemic power operates in the lives of fans but does not center it as an overarching determination. To expound upon how Black fandom works for

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[39] Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality,* ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 87
[40] Spillers, "Interstices", 86
[41] Spillers, "Interstices", 88

Black fans, as Wanzo did by challenging Fan Studies, I turn to Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" that explores the stereotyped origins and possibilities to create new narratives about Black gender and subjectivity. Specifically, Spillers animated and provided the "grammar" to see that narratives of sexuality and gender have been ascribed onto Black people and not for and by themselves. "Mama's Baby" discusses American gender construction as "overdetermined nominative properties."[42] If Black women do not have a gender that can be attained in the traditional patriarchal sense of gender because of the co-construction of race through labor and maternal labor practices under the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, then claiming it will provide space for creation by the female subject for empowerment. As it relates to Fan Studies and practices, Black fans challenge the "overdetermined nominative properties" through constructing themselves using culture and their own interiority and intimate understandings of themselves and each other in social media spaces. Spillers writes, "In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness."[43] In this way, Spillers provides my dissertation with the specific "grammar" to interpret Black digital fandom engagement as well as the radical potential for empowerment. I argue that "inventing" Black digital fandom practices are ways that Black people can speak a "truer word" by turning towards each other to unpack layers of gender and sexuality

[42] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64 (1987), 65
[43] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 65

construction through expressing their interior selves. Also included in this genealogy are scholars that have specifically analyzed Black interpersonal relationships that aren't only pleasure based. For instance, Patricia Hill Collin's "Black Women's Love Relationships" in *Black Feminist Thought* and bell hooks' books *All About Love: New Visions*, *Salvation: Black People and Love*, *Communion: The Female Search for Love,* and *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* provide historical and social context for issues concerning love, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships.[44] Focusing on subjectivity and interpersonal relationships lead me to explore interiority as an exercise in parsing out Black subjectivities and intimacy in cultural productions, fandom, and digital practices. I utilize theoretical approaches to interiority as it encompasses a breadth of expressions that fans may demonstrate.

As noted, Digital and Fan Studies have been challenged by not considering how identity and power operate within their subfields. Black feminist scholars are creating new models for Digital and Fan Studies that center race and gender analysis and my work is part of that field-building trajectory. I am following a genealogy of Black feminist scholars that deal with Black female subjectivity. I look to Hortense Spillers and Patricia Hill Collins as central to my framework on possibilities and love, while Black queer scholars like Evelyn M. Hammonds, Kevin Quashie, Cathy Cohen,

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[44] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009); bell hooks. *Communion: The Female Search for Love*. 1st ed. (New York: W. Morrow, 2002); bell hooks. *All About Love: New Visions*. 1st ed. (New York: William Morrow, 2000); bell hooks. *Salvation: Black People and Love*. 1st ed. (New York: William Morrow, 2001); bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity.* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

and Kara Keeling shape my understanding of sexuality and power.[45] Kalia Adia Story offers a queer Black feminist discussion of autoethnography is central to what I believe fans are accomplishing with their fandom objects as outline in Chapter One's exploration of a Black queer web series. Story bridges narrative, theory, and the personal as embodied through autoethnography in the article and imagines a new possibility for queer black feminists to fight from a vantage point that celebrates their agency. Story writes, "My hope is that in doing my own autoethnographic analysis … I will be able to show that when one's personal experiences are reflected through a wider cultural, political, and social prism, it engenders a new theoretical, methodological and lived possibility for any and all that are seeking racial, sexual, and gendered empowerment."[46] Further, as I attend to interiority and how it is expressed, the call to go beyond intersectionality and to focus on affect as aforementioned is explored by Jennifer Nash in her article "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post Intersectionality" which assists framing how I approach Black feminisms.[47] Nash concludes that self-love as the lasting tenant of

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[45] Kara, Keeling, "Queer OS" *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 152–57.; Kevin Everod Quashie. *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). Cathy J. Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics." *DuBois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 01 (2004); Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality and the Problematic of Silence" in *Futures Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies and Democratic*, ed. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1993);

[46] Kalia Adia Story, "(Re)Presenting Shug Avery and Afrekete: The Search for a Black, Queer, and Feminist Pleasure Praxis." *The Black Scholar* no. 45:4 (2015): 24; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64 (1987); "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies.* 6, 2-3 (1994); Laura Alexandra Harris. "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle." *Feminist Review*, no. 54 (1996); Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009)

[47] Jennifer C. Nash. "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality." Meridians 11, no. 2 (2013): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1.; Other Black feminists are discussing interiority and Black love. Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009); Joan Morgan,

Womanism, but I build upon her understanding of the self and articulate a communal affinity that is romantic in its iterations of friendship, family, desire and the community at large.

Due to the interdisciplinarity of Black feminism, many scholars utilize various methods and approaches to their research questions such as literary and historical criticisms. My scholarship aligns with Black feminisms that used autoethnography, ethnography, the assertion of a political economy, and queer theory. I utilize the theoretical approaches provided from Black feminism to approach Digital and Fandom Studies as the glue that considers an intersectional approach to identity. However, my intervention with Black feminisms is to utilize the ways Jennifer Nash critiques intersectionality and centers a Womanist approach that centers the self and the intimate. Nash centers self-love but her analysis stops there. Whether fans like or hate a cultural object—or any affective expression in between—their interior feelings are expressed on social media platforms. This approach also informs my choice to employ close reading as a method, outlined in the methodology section, to study digital fandom practices. as affective reactions to what fans are watching and listening to in the web series, television, and music examined in this dissertation.

Methodology

I am a self-identified acafan, or an academic who also has insider knowledge of their object of study because they are also a fan.[48] Specifically, to this dissertation,

"Why We Get Off: Moving Toward a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." The Black Scholar, no. 45:4 (2015);

[48] Wanzo, "African American Acafandom," 1.1

I bring an intimate knowledge of my fandoms and the ways they utilize social media platforms to demonstrate their fandom. I am also asserting an intimate methodology as I have an affective relationship to the fandom objects alongside the fandom communities I study. As an acafan, this intimate methodology requires a level of personalization by which the quotidian act of social media fandom expression are observed and actualized, but also acknowledges the affective ways knowledge production is enacted when one has a personal connection and intimate knowledge to the fandom object. It is with this approach that I analyzed the comments, tweets, and blogs that I examine using participant observation, autoethnography, and close reading. For YouTube, I gathered all comments under the first episode for each web series and analyzed comments that directly related to the plot. The tweets I gathered were from real time livetweeting from my personal timeline. Finally, the blog posts I gathered, came from medium.com search about the topics as well as blogs from people I follow on Twitter. My process includes conducting a close reading of the cultural production's aesthetics as a description of what Black fans are responding to, while centering the effects of the platform's affordances on Black connection and innovation for using social media to express Black digital intimacies.

There are two methodological concerns that lay out the ethics of conducting digital fandom scholarship that animate my approach. The first is from Kristina Busse, that considers the slippage of requirements to always request permission to cite and use fan creations in research. This ethical approach was developed as a submission policy for the first fan studies journal, *Transformative Works, and Cultures* (TWC), which Busse cofounded in 2007 with Karen Hellekson. At the time,

they strongly encouraged permission to be obtained from the creator for any fan work. With consideration of changing digital landscapes and other concerns, Busse reconsidered the approach with assistance from (AoIR)'s guidelines for ethical online research. Busse argues that a shift in "focus from universal rules to the particular situations of fan scholars and their interactions and relationships" thus "acknowledges the complexities and expanse that compound contemporary online fan studies research."[49] While laying out the various situations that one might question the policy, Busse examines transformative fan works in the forms of vidding, fan stories, and other various creative fan works. The types of creative works I examine from Black fans of Black created cultural productions are expressed in a different way on social media platforms than vidding etc. and thus compounds Busse's argument point of reconsidering why always asking for permission is a complicated endeavor. I am specifically studying how fans divulge analysis of their intimate lives alongside and conflated with the plot lines of their fandom objects as an intentionally public endeavor on social media. Therefore, my approach to asking for permission must be taken into context alongside my intervention of what Black fans are practicing through "affirmative transformative" fandom and the intention behind their social media interactions.

When analyzing YouTube comments, I utilize pseudonyms for the usernames because the platform's privacy policy requires it. YouTube's Terms of Service states the following: "The following restrictions apply to your use of the Service. You are

[49] Kristina Busse, "The Ethics of Studying Online Fandom" in Click, Melissa A, and Suzanne Scott, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018., 11

not allowed to: 3. collect or harvest any information that might identify a person (for example, usernames or faces), unless permitted by that person or allowed under section (3) above."[50] Thus, to be in alignment with my ethical considerations and YouTube's agreement I utilize specific comments and code for usernames. I also have not asked for permission on the comments I've gathered from YouTube because they tend to fall more on the affirmative and public, or I enjoy this fandom aspect than interspersing more intimate details of a kind that could be damaging to the commenter if taken out of context. YouTube's commenting communities aren't as conversational as other social media since the site is a primarily audio-visual platform rather than being primarily text-based.

In my analysis of Twitter-based fandom, I use high profile Twitter users that I define with 5k or more followers instead of smaller accounts with more casual usage. As I am studying "Black Twitter" and the popularity of these cultural productions, I carefully choose and curate the comments with an intimate small data approach. The users who have public tweets with a higher follower count expect to have a larger audience with their tweets circulating more heavily, especially with the usage of hashtags related to the popular cultural productions I am examining. Users with smaller accounts might understand Twitter's platform affordance of "publicly available" but may not desire to have their tweets to circulate beyond an audience of 200 to 500 or less due to the small nature of their accounts. Further, I do not use pseudonyms for usernames on Twitter as the public nature of the authors I use are identifiable to those who are aware of Black Twitter—both social media users and

[50] YouTube. Terms of Service. https://www.youtube.com/static?template=terms

researchers. I also do not use any tweets that identify confidential information as users are tweeting their responses to the cultural productions.

While YouTube's policy for publishing comments requires anonymity, Twitter does not require the same. Twitter user privacy policy states the following: "By publicly posting content, you are directing us to disclose that information as broadly as possible, including through our APIs, and directing those accessing the information through our APIs to do the same…But these individuals and companies are not affiliated with Twitter, and their offerings may not reflect updates you make on Twitter."[51] This poses no conflict to my use of direct quotes and twitter usernames for the purposes of this research. In terms of confidentiality, I abide by Twitter's rules for researchers that outlines usage of tweets that are public—not under private accounts—and have not been deleted, and I will abide by both rules. Medium.com and the other web sites I have analyzed do not have these protections as they are blogging websites that are intentionally public facing. I treat fan posts on Medium and similar sites in the same way that I would any other published work since the authors are explicitly opening their thoughts to discussion with the world at large.

Alongside my attention to permission and publicity, I utilize the affective engagements that guide Catherine Knight Steele's Black feminist methodological ethics. Steele recognizes potential harm in conducting digital research as an academic and as a member of the in-group. However, Steele offers an approach to reconcile some of these tensions, arguing to "instead situate their public writing and scholarship

[51] Twitter. Privacy Policy. https://twitter.com/en/privacy

alongside my own."[52] As an acafan, I utilize a similar framework through contemplating what an intimate methodology means as an acafan concerning permission, publicness, ethics, and intended usage and circulation by the fans I study. Further, Steele affectively describes research on Black women digital writers as "using the tools we study and being a part of the communities, we investigate are not hindrances or biases to overcome" and uses this relationship "as support rather than obstacles in defining digital Black feminism."[53] For my dissertation, Steele's approach elevates the importance of what fans are describing in their fan production as a commentary on the desires and observations of their own intimate lives. Thus, making them knowledge producers using their fandom as a conduit for expressing interiority. To lean into these complexities as an acafan is a necessary endeavor and one that I also interrogate with my affective relationship to the cultural productions, my fandom, and platform considerations.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one analyses *Between Women*, a web series that premiered in 2011 on YouTube and centers a group of Black lesbian friends and their romantic relationships. Essentially, Black queer representation is not found in mainstream TV productions, thus Black queer web series creators are complicating the notion of representation, visibility, and mainstream television by interacting with and encouraging their fans to interact with their productions. Created by Michelle Daniel,

[52] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*. Critical Cultural Communication. (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 13
[53] Steele, *Digital Black Feminism,* 13

it is one of the more popular web series to depict Black lesbian life. The series covered important topics including conversion therapy, domestic violence, pregnancy, and features a trans character's transition narrative. The characters' friendships are central to both character and plot development as their friendships operate as a site of drama and support in the development of their romantic relationships. The show is comprised of a mix of masculine, feminine, and non-binary gender presenting characters and fans responded in kind to a web series that featured lesbian characters that was produced at a higher quality. Using Aymar Jean Christian and Faithe Day's "quare-shared recognition" analysis on the fandom of Black queer web series, Cathy Cohen's "deviance as resistance", Kevin Quashie's "black aliveness", and Kara Keeling's "Queer OS" I analyze YouTube and Twitter comments from the *Between Women* episodes to explore representation of Black queer romantic life.[54] Day and Christian combine E. Patrick Johnson's understanding of quaring and Patricia Hill Collins' shared recognition to demonstrate the relationship between fans of Black queer web series. Their notion of "quare-shared" recognition will be applied to analysis of my web series as the conception acknowledges the importance of visibility in the public media sphere for Black queer people and my other cultural productions.

[54] Faithe Day and Aymar Jean Christian "Locating Black Queer TV: Fans, Producers and Networked Publics on YouTube." in "Queer Female Fandom," ed by Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng, special issue, *Transformative Works, and Cultures,* no 24. (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.867; Keeling, Kara. "Queer OS." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 152–57.; Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).; Cathy J. Cohen. "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics." *DuBois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 01 (2004): 33

Scholars' analysis on *Between Women* focus on what mainstream representation could do in terms of the political fight for equality in society, and what the representation performance provides for the audiences' perception of masculinity and femininity in Black queer women.[55] I propose to utilize fandom as opportunity to examine representation from a different lens. That is to say, fandom provides a framework to think through the personal affective mode of engaging with their fandom object that can possibly produce different ways of thinking or being in their everyday lives and will use Cohen to support this argument. Through analyzing the fandom of the show, I will demonstrate that fans are invested in viewing quotidian romantic aspects of Black queer life as represented in the web series to assist them in revelatory and affirming aspects of their lives and to view these depictions as a site for expressing joy and pleasure. For instance, the show's opening scene depicts Rhonda, a femme presenting woman, calling her girlfriend, Miller, a masculine presenting woman who is also cheating on her, to pressure her to get married as same-sex marriage was fictionally announced as legal on the local radio station. That wasn't the case in Georgia at the time and it wasn't true for the rest of America until June 2015, four years after the premiere of the series. The creators and fans participate in an imaginary world where an institutionalized barrier to their love lives is erased, giving them an opportunity to re-write their narratives as a mundane act that drives a part of the series drama. Through using the web series as a platform and a way to circumvent the production limitations and discrimination by mainstream

[55] Marlon Rachquel Moore, "Between Women TV: Toward the Mainstreaming of Black Lesbian Masculinity and Black Queer Women in Community." *Black Camera*, no 6:2 (2015): 203

media, fans access to this show exemplifies the importance of seeing oneself to reimagine possibilities. This chapter focuses more on the affirmative aspects of "*affirmative* transformative" fandom and digital practice due to the dearth of representation of Black queer cultural productions.

Building upon the web series to mainstream television question for media and content, chapter two examines the dating lives of characters from the web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and HBO's *Insecure*. Digital spaces allow fans to encounter and counter one-dimensional representations of Black narratives. In the mid-2000s the romantic lives of Black heterosexual couples were a topic of public discourse. *Insecure'*s (2016-2021) creator, Issa Rae, developed a web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2011-2012*)*, that disrupted the representation of Black women's sexuality and lived experience on television at the time as well as challenged the status quo concerning heterosexual romantic lives. The success from the web series, supported heavily from the fandom community, propelled the series into five full seasons on HBO.

Insecure chronicles 30-year-old Issa, a Black heterosexual woman who at the beginning of the series is dissatisfied with her career and love life. The show explores dating, family, friendship, sex, career issues, and race through Issa and her best friend Molly's characters. Rae as the namesake for her character and the creator of the show *Insecure* and the YouTube hosted web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. *Insecure* is loosely based in *Awkward Black Girl* that premiered in 2011 in the midst of Wanzo's iteration of the "Unmarriageable Professional Black Woman discourse" and offered a refreshing, authentic representation that fans responded well

to and pushed the popularity of the web series into unchartered territory, which eventually led to *Insecure'*s debut on HBO.[56] Aymar Jean Christian argues that web series allow for Black creators, who have been marginalized from the process of producing shows on mainstream television, to produce original content without the "single-story/cookie-cutter" narrative mainstream producers perpetuate.[57]

In this chapter I explore the different representation of the "awkward" and "insecure" narratives these content creators produce as outliers of representation for Black people. Fans engage in pleasure as an interior practice due to the show being a comedy. I utilize Joan Morgan's "black female interiority" and Andre Brock's "libidinal economy" within Black digital practices to formulate my argument.[58] Web series provided the platform to allow creators and fans to interact and not have to engage with legacy media be greenlit. Fans have taken up these contexts of representation in various ways to discuss emotional aspects in the lives such as dead-end relationships, friend issues, family disconnect, infidelity, and unsatisfaction in their careers. Fan created hashtags, podcasts, and groups are important to demonstrate fan labor around world and self-making. Digital creations of fandom communities and content drive this current discourse on Black people's intimate lives. Thus, the fandom of *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* expresses a balance of "*affirmative transformative*" fandom that both affirms them and he shows but also is

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[56] Rebecca Wanzo. "Black Love is Not a Fairytale" *Poroi* 7, 2 (2011)
[57] Aymar Jean Christian. *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*. Postmillennial Pop. (New York: New York University Press., 2018)
[58] Morgan, Joan. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 36–46.; Andre Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Critical Cultural Communication. (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 10

transformative in the ways that fans engage with the material with the ways their interiority is expressed.

Finally, I end the dissertation by discussing mega stars Beyoncé, Solange, and Jay Z and their albums *Lemonade* (2016), *A Seat at the Table* (2016), and *4:44* (2017) respectively. I'll begin this chapter by first delving into what I believe these artists are intentionally doing with the albums and subsequent visual representations for their fans. In their first chapter of their edited collection "Popular Music, Stars, and Stardom: Definitions, Discourses and Interpretations" Loy, Rickwood and Bennett discuss how contemporary artists, especially with the rise of social media must consider "…a fine distinction between popular music stardom and auteur status, the latter signifying the reception of an artist as being genuine creative, and one who explores and extends the dimensions of their art form."[59] I argue say that all three artists have taken these considerations by featuring their family members on their albums and literally when talking to her husband Beyoncé says on "LoveHappy" on the *Everything is Love* album "We keepin' it real with these people, right?".[60] The Knowles and Knowles Carter families demonstrating auteurship and chronicling their lives for consumption.

I chose these albums because of their family kinship and the similar thematic relationship they productions have to each other. Specifically, the speculation around the infamous security footage of the "elevator incident", where a video leaked of

[59] Stephen Loy, Julie Rickwood, and Samantha Bennett, "Popular Music, Stars, and Stardom: Definitions, Discourses, Interpretations" in *Popular Music, Stars and Stardom*. Edited by Stephen Loy, Julie Rickwood, and Samantha Bennett. Acton, ACT, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.22459/PMSS.06.2018.
[60] Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and David Andre Sitek, "LOVEHAPPY" from *Everything is Love.* https://genius.com/The-carters-lovehappy-lyrics

Solange physically accosting JAY-Z at the 2014 Met Gala.[61] The incident's aesthetics prompted speculation about the manufactured privacy and intimacy from the family about their intimate lives. Journalistic and tabloid aesthetics poked fun and ran with outrageous speculations, while fans utilized their intimate knowledge of the family to create their own conclusions. I surmise that the creative and aesthetic choices all three artists made were a response to the rupture between privacy and publicity as each album confronted themes associated with family relationships. Fan's "affirmative *transformative*", with emphasis on the transformative, response once the albums were released allowed for a glimpse into the humanity of their lives as the ultimate expression of interiority and managerial publicity.

All three albums cover love, generational trauma, and the subsequent attempts to heal and love despite the reality of being Black in America. The albums and visuals garnered scholarly reception and fandom response in the form of blogs, syllabi, and social media engagement that lasted well beyond the album drop dates. I examine blogs and other transformative fandom creations about the discourse on these albums and what they reveal about mental health, anger, infidelity, joy, pain, healing, and the everyday reality of being Black in America. This chapter utilizes "black interiority" from Elizabeth Alexander, Kevin Quashie's conception of "quiet" as interiority, and Marisa Parham's "Sample, Signal, and Strobe" to examine digital intimacies.[62] The

[61] Nolan Feeney, Beyoncé, Jay Z, Solange Issue Statement on Met Gala Elevator Incident. Time.com May 15, 2014. https://time.com/101940/beyonce-jayz-solange-statement-elevator-incident/
[62] Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays*. Saint Paul, (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004).; Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Marisa Parham, "Sample | Signal | Strobe: Haunting, Social Media, and Black Digitality," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities Debates in the DH Manifold*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

fandoms in this chapter focus on "affirmative *transformative*" works as fans discuss their interiority in contemplative ways in longer-form digital practices like the blog both constituting affirmation of the fandom object and the transformative potential that they invoke through engaging with their fandom objects and expressing it on social media.

Conclusion

I posit that by examining interpersonal intimacy and interiority in cultural productions and digital fandoms, we see the demonstration of the pursuit of love, wholeness, and intimacy as labor for and by Black communities. Within the quotidian acts of social media usage and the small moments of reflection it provokes, Black fans pursue much needed forms of rest and respite in these public communities and find ways to self-make to imagine a different world within their own relationships and interrogating hegemonic constructions of generational trauma, patterns, and actions. Through fandom expression Black interiority is through deeper desires as connected to their fandom objects. In each chapter of my dissertation, I am representing different modes of interiority based on narrative and aesthetic choices from the cultural productions and how fans interact with it.

Chapter 1: " 'Where All Your Dreams Begin': Fandom and Intimate Possibilities in the Web Series *Between Women*

Introduction

I first encountered the *Between Women* web series in 2011 after a viral video titled "Shit Girls Say…" inspired several parodies and mocking particular demographics and their colloquialisms.[63] The creators of *Between Women* uploaded a video called "Shit Black Lesbians Say…" capitalizing on the viral moment as an advertisement for the web series.[64] I recall sharing the video with my friend, laughing in recognition and making a point to watch the first episode when it premiered. We consistently tried to time when we would watch together as if we were watching a traditional sitcom on television. As one of the more popular web series to depict aspects of Black lesbian life, *Between Women* showcased important topics to Black queer communities including domestic violence, child rearing, violence against lesbian women, pregnancy, and features gender transition as some featured plot lines. The characters' friendships are central to both character and plot development as their friendships operate as a site of drama and support in the development of their romantic relationships. The everyday drama and nature depicted in the web series allowed my friend and I to relate to the plot lines and look forward to seeing how the drama would be resolved. During the show's airing, I often teased her by calling her one by a main character's names and she returned the favor. Years later, at a holiday

[63] "Shit Girls Say - Episode 1," December 12, 2011. Shit Girls Say. YouTube video 1:18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-yLGIH7W9Y.
[64] Unfortunately, this video does not exist anymore as is on YouTube. I will reach out to the creator or subscribe to Between Women TV—the website not the YouTube subscription—to see if I can access the video for analysis.

gathering hosted by my friend and her friends, I updated her on my research on *Between Women*. During the conversation, I playfully called her a main character's name from the series. One of her friends caught the reference and laughed heartily both from the reference and the accuracy of some of the traits my friend and the character had in common. Relatedly, every time I present and mention the web series as a part of my research, fans enthusiastically reminisce about the web series. The show can be considered a "cult classic" since affection for the series still reverberates years later.

I mention *Between Women*'s marketing strategy, how I bonded with my friend through watching the series, and the passionate nostalgia years later as an autoethnographic entry into my account of the digital landscape provides for creators and fans alike. In this chapter, I analyze YouTube comments from the first *Between Women* episode to explore how fans encounter representation of Black queer romantic life.[65] As savvy media consumers, Black queer fans understand that because they are already outside of mainstream acceptance of their sexualities that their opportunity for mainstream media representations of their lives are also lacking. I argue through an analysis of interiority in the first episode that Black queer fandom expression is a call for the experience of seeing oneself fictionalized that demands more than "good" representation. Fans are invested in viewing quotidian aspects of Black queer life as represented in the web series to assist them in affirming aspects in their own lives, using the raw material of their engagement with media to reflect on

[65] Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011, video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM.

identity, connection, and community. Also, the mundane act of commenting on YouTube creates Black digital intimacies among the fans who speak to the creators and the general audience about how they are encountering the characters and themselves.

The series' fandom connotes an interiority that is focused on anticipation, keens, and earnest expression for more representation. In the terms I am developing here, this is "*affirmative* transformative" fandom with an emphasis on affirmation both of media and of marginalized subjectivities. For *Between Women* fans, fandom affirms "I like this fandom object…" and that the series affirms my experience as a Black queer person—an affirmation that can have transformative effects in their interpersonal relationships. Thus, this chapter focuses specifically on how Black fandom transformatively affirms the fan and fandom object through affect. Transformative fandom works in tandem with an emphasis on affirmative in this instance due to the dearth of Black queer and especially Black lesbian representation in television. Essentially, the comments also invoke affective transformative interiority as fans are surveying themselves as not being represented and expressing it in the comments. While transformative fandom usually focuses on reimagining a source text rather than simply commenting on it, I argue that these affirmations perform transformative work. *Between Women*'s fans create a new community of transformation both for Black fandom practices and for Black mundane digital practices through social media usage.

As many YouTube comments were within days of the premiere fans expressed much of what they wanted to see from the series with an anxious

appreciation for the series and with high expectations of what was to come. Fans critiqued or defended the show and provided context for the desires they would have liked to see. In this chapter, I analyze the interiority expressed in the web series and the fandom as what Kevin Quashie describes as "black aliveness" where "every black text rest on a quiet premise of black humanity—that the text and its aesthetics *assume* being."[66] It is this assertion of "being" that is evident in the emphasis on "*affirmative* transformative" fandom. The series is an example of Black queer women going through their day to day lives and fans responded through very succinct comments about what they liked and wanted to see more of. At first, this can be seen as a demand on the creators for a certain representation, but I argue that it is an extension of wanting to be affirmed and thus transformed like fans of other cultural productions.

It is an intimate and vulnerable stance to take and is done so publicly thus connoting an intimate digital exchange with creators and others. Quashie also posits on this type of interiority that is expressed aesthetically writing about quiet—which is an interior aesthetic I employ in chapter three—"aliveness is quiet and interior, yes, but remember that 'despite its name, the interior is not unconnected to the world of things (the public or political or social world)."[67] In this case and for this dissertation, it is not enough to examine how interiority is reflected in the series itself, but I argue that we must also surmise what is happening in fan comments as an expression of interiority as well. While I employ close reading of interiority to analyze the series and its aesthetics, I also apply the analysis to fan expression that "assume being" or

[66] Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 2
[67] Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 20

affirm their worldviews. Therefore, fan comments are a site to observe and analyze Black queer knowledge production through Black digital intimacy. Fans communicate their desires for the series to be seen in a wider cultural context so that they can invite more transformative possibilities through popular culture that has been denied to them due to discrimination in traditional media spaces.

First, I discuss how the mundane activity of commenting on YouTube comment sections about the web series connotes affirming themselves and the series through "*affirmative* transformative" fandom. Next, I outline how the web series aesthetics outline Black queer interiority. Finally, I demonstrate how *Between Women* fans demonstrate Black digital intimacy through their comments to each other and the show's creators.

Black Queer Social Media Optimization

My theorization in this chapter emphasizes the *affirmative* in "affirmative transformative" and is animated by analyzing YouTube's affordances through Kara Keeling's "Queer OS". Queer OS is:

> "a way of thinking and acting with, about, through, among, and at times even despite new media technologies and phenomena of mediation. It insists upon forging and facilitating uncommon, irrational, imaginative, and/or unpredictable relationships between and among what currently are perceptible as living beings and the environment in the interest of creating value(s) that facilitate just relations."[68]

Between Women fan comments are requests to series' creators and affirmative interest in the series to other fans are an example of Black digital intimacies. With *Between*

[68] Kara Keeling, "Queer OS" *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014), 154

Women and how fans thus enact "*affirmative* transformative" fandom expression, I apply Queer OS to read against the logics of both representation for representation's sake for queer fans and the logics of why people are driven to comment on YouTube. In this sense, for Black queer fans, commenting on YouTube is not just an affirmative act of liking the series but it is rather a knowledge producing measure to see their humanity more clearly. Specifically, Queer OS, "is at odds with the logics embedded" in operating systems, and "seeks to undermine the relationships secured through those logics, even as, it acknowledges its own imbrication with and reliance on those logics while still striving to forge new relationships and connections."[69] Watching a web series is a quotidian and mundane activity, but for Black queer audiences they are searching for meaningful entertainment and representation of their lives as is. Because Queer OS expands how scholars think and act with new media technologies, I posit that Black fans are affirming their existence and want their interpersonal experiences affirmed as well. Thus, they turn to another mundane activity, such as commenting on YouTube's platform, to do so not as a cry for a certain representation, but just to see themselves represented in ways that are both authentic to themselves and resonates with their world experiences.

By continuing to read against the logic of comments at simple requests to creators we can push back against how we automatically question fan desires for representation. Further, this interiority is publicly and intimately enacted. As Quashie argues for Black aliveness and being and compares only focusing on interiority as the inner life doesn't do enough work. Quashie posits, "But in making the case through

[69] Keeling, "Queer OS", 154

interiority—in trying to refuse publicness as the totalizing denominator of how blackness is figured and represented—I might have overemphasized the inner life at the expense of thinking through what it means to be alive in the world or, better still, what it means to be of aliveness in a black world."[70] To be alive in a Black world for Black queer people is to be just that, alive and in the world as *Between Women* creators and fans demonstrate through Black digital intimacies. YouTube's comment affordance allows fans to directly communicate with the creator and each other about what they see on their screens and what they wish to see to imagine new worlds.

Black queer fans of web series share communal identity and push creators for a breadth of representation due to the opportunity to comment under the YouTube video The "*affirmative* transformative" fandom expressed comes from a desire of wanting to see themselves represented in a compelling light as Black queer identities had not been represented or expressed on mainstream television in the entirety of their identities.[71] Cathy Cohen's call to action for Queer and Black Studies frames my argument for this chapter as a foundational to understand fan's agency, self-making, and worldbuilding.

For my argument concerning *Between Women*, I take heed to the call from Cohen to study the quotidian decisions of those who are regarded as outside of normative social constructs. I utilize this focus to frame how interiority and Black being through fandom actions constitutes "deviant" constructions of Blackness as an example of Black agential power in their communities. Cohen is challenging Queer

[70] Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 20
[71] Marlon Rachquel Moore, "Between Women TV: Toward the Mainstreaming of Black Lesbian Masculinity and Black Queer Women in Community," *Black Camera* 6, no. 2 (2015), https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.6.2.201

and Black Studies to look towards Black deviant communities—or those that operate outside the politics of respectability—to not overdetermine Black people's actions as *only* political. I utilize this focus to frame how interiority and Black being through fandom actions constitutes "deviant" constructions of Blackness as an example of Black agential power in their communities, but do not necessarily reverberate in political structures because they are not intentionally resistant. Fan commenting is not a political act in and of itself, but it is a quotidian act that has the potential for personal transformation. Explaining the focus on deviance as:

> Instead, I am suggesting that through a focus on 'deviant' practice we are witness to the power of those at the bottom, whose everyday life decisions challenge, or at least counter, the basic normative assumptions of a society intent on protecting structural and social inequalities under the guise of some normal and natural order to life. However, not only do these individuals daily act in opposition to dominant norms, but they also contradict members of Black communities who are committed to mirroring perceived respectable behaviors and hierarchal structures.[72]

Cohen emphasizes that each deviant act/and or being deviant is not necessarily political and that scholars must be careful in assigning those aspects to the subjects they study. For Black queer fandom communities, Black digital intimacies are actually "…attempts to create greater autonomy over one's life, to pursue desire, or to make the best of very limited life options."[73] The continued practice of deviant behavior from the most marginalized subject can eventually have political consequences even if that was not the original intent. Through marginalized groups

[72] Cathy J. Cohen, "Deviance As Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (2004), 38 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X04040044.
[73] Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance," 40

exercising the agency they possess, there is the possibility for there to be a shift in the political sphere.

"*Affirmative* transformative" fandom is a quotidian experience for all the productions analyzed in this dissertation, yet the expression of it for Black queer communities holds another valence of importance due to the lack of representation because of not abiding by respectable and deviant subjectivity. The fields of Black and Queer studies have evolved since Cohen's task to take up questions of subjectivity, namely through focusing on expressions of sex and sexuality. I argue that examining the small pleasurable activities, like fandom, is another way of seeing how Black fans "make the best of very limited life options."[74] By specifically focusing on fan's commentary on how interpersonal relationships appear on *Between Women*, Black Studies and Black Queer Studies can continue to push the bounds to "differentiate deviant practices, defiance, and resistance" and center what Black subjectivity does for Black people first.

Further, Cohen's "deviance as resistance" is useful to explore interiority and Blackness as an "assumption of being" from Quashie in the text and fan actions from through examining its intent first rather than assigning an overtly and overly determined politicalness to their fandom expression. When used as a framework, "deviance as resistance" explains the motivation for creators to first employ YouTube's infrastructure to produce and reach audiences previously overlooked by traditional mainstream television.

[74] Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance," 40

Affirming Dreams Begin: Black Queer Fandom

Queer web series fandom focuses on representation because of a lack productions that center Black queer experiences. Fans take it upon themselves to use the comment section to talk directly to creators, thus queering YouTube's OS. Aymar Jean Christian and Faithe Day theorize about the relationship between Black queer web series fans and the content creators of several Black queer web series. Christian and Day combine E. Patrick Johnson's theorization of "quare" and Patricia Hill Collin's "shared recognition" to demonstrate the relationship between fans of Black queer web series. Quaring "references the ways in which sexual and gendered identities 'always already intersect with racial subjectivity' while also showing how these identities resist and oppression and containment."[75] Black queer web series creators then "quare legacy television production by demonstrating the value of black queer identity. This is accomplished through producing series and pilots that expand the diversity of black queer performances, as well as bringing viewers into the production process by encouraging recognition and interaction with the media text."[76] Christian and Day analyze fan comments and also interviewed creators of two types of Black queer web series: first, "community-driven web producers" that operate outside of Hollywood's logics and present queer content straight to YouTube for the community and second, creators that uploaded "market-driven pilots" that are produced in order to have a pilot greenlit through Hollywood.[77]

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[75] Faithe Day and Aymar Jean Christian, "Locating Black Queer TV: Fans, Producers, and Networked Publics on YouTube," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 24 (2017), 2.3 https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.0867.
[76] Day and Christian, "Locating Black Queer TV," 2.3
[77] Day and Christian, "Locating Black Queer TV," 2.3

With this framing, *Between Women* is a "community driven" produced show as it has full characters and storylines for YouTube rather than using new media to garner interest. Christian and Day argue that due to this production. Their discourse analysis of fandom "unites meanings both inside and outside of pilots, as viewers draw on their own experiences in life, with the show, and with other media texts to formulate responses to the representation of a queer black identity."[78] While their argument focuses on representation as it relates to web series' production and how creators and fans "recognize" each other in the Black intimacies in the comment section based on production aims, I propose that interiority adds an additional lens. Rather than enacting a "radical politic of self" as Story argues, Black queer web series fans are expressing a desire to see the breadth of their experiences for entertainment and simply the future possibility of discovery of self. Fan direct comments to creators are a call for more representation, but as an interior project it demonstrates "*affirmative* transformative" fan expression when the question is centered on production rather than consumption and what fans receive from the series.

To this point, fans expressed that they wanted to see more types of representations that were not situated in the heteronormative binary of gender presentation. Comments such as: "Entertaining but I hope you won't be portraying black masculinity in this negative light throughout the whole season. also wish all the relationships weren't so heteronormative. can we get some femme/femme or stud/stud?" and "Y isn't there a fem x fem relationship or a butch x butch

[78] Day and Christian, "Locating Black Queer TV," 2.4

relationship? Bcuz not all lesbians like the fem x butch pairing. I myself a effeminate lesbian like very feminine girls not those who talk like guys or act like guys."[79] sum up many fans' desires to see different configurations of Black lesbian romantic pairings rather than the masculine/femme pairing each couple presented in the series. To ask for "black masculinity to not be portrayed in a negative light throughout the whole season" is not necessarily asking for a positive portrayal only, but a positive portrayal in addition to what the first episode demonstrates.

Through an "*affirmative* transformative" fandom framework, the fan is simply asking for an additional affirmation while understanding that at times, masculine presenting characters do act in negatively. As they are already acting outside of the realm of respectability, as deviant subjects, their requests are for simply more interior representation rather than what was initially presented. Reading the new media comments through a Queer OS lens and as an opportunity for expression quares YouTube as an operating system further. Another fan commented, "I like it, I'm just not crazy about the fact that all the studs are lying and cheating lol damn we aren't all that bad. On another note I am proud, I had the idea to do something like this and I am just glad that we have that as african americans I will be tuned in."[80] Fans affirm that the show is "entertaining" but also lacks the breadth of experiences they are used to seeing within their communities and wish to be represented. "Damn we aren't all that bad" is both affirming and acknowledging the problematic aspects, but also asking for more representation. While it is a critique of the series lack of

[79] Commenting Fan 1, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Between Women," December 14, 2011, YouTube video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM
[80] Commenting Fan 2, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Between Women," December 14, 2011, YouTube video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM

representation, it is not tied into respectable understandings of how this may look to outsiders but rather what the representation means to them as fans of the show. Further, it is transformative as the comment asks for more representation in the types of gender representation and romantic pairing in the series. The fans are asking for more variety not necessarily for the representation to do the work of portraying them in a "good" light.

But That's Real Life Tho: Aesthetics and Queer Worldmaking

To simplify, Queer OS helps us to read past the initial impetus to understand desire for representation against the ways scholars initially believe audiences, fans, and respectability politics operate as fans use the comment for their own desires. Due to their queer identity, Black queer fans are simply expressing their desire to see themselves represented in entertainment and the opportunity to work out complex ideas as I examine in chapter two and three. In another article that features *Between Women*, Faithe Day also analyzes viewer commentary and the desire for more representation:

> …thinking about the politics of representation, the lack of mediated representations of Black lesbians increases the weight of those representations within the media landscape. Therefore, many viewers feel that the creator of *Between Women* should take on the burden of representing all queer women of color by focusing on positive portrayals of them. While this expectation to take on the burden of representations is common from those within marginalized communities, it can also be argued that the purpose of the media is not to engage in a politics of respectability but to represent whatever aspect of a community or identity it chooses. In addition, there is no cohesive stance on whether the show is doing a good or bad job of representing queer women of

> color (and it would be reductive to assume that a series is simply doing one or the other).[81]

However, as aforementioned Black queer fans already embody "deviant" representation they are not necessarily arguing for politics of respectability in terms of the creator to produce "good or bad" representation, but rather well-rounded representations for balance. Thus, recognizing that they live complex fully actualized lives with drama in different parts of the community. Day observes that fans want to see their actual lived experience in the show, writing "while the show itself is simply a representation of Black lesbians, for many of the viewers there is a belief that the series is or should be representing a reality or lived experience."[82]

I argue, that if we lean into Black queer desire for reality or a lived experience through affective fandom and interiority, we can see this fan practice as a way that fans are affirming and worldbuilding their lives through using the new media platform to comment about their desires. They express an "*affirmative* transformative" work of autoethnography as fans affirm the cultural productions, and express desire for storylines to affirm and transform them as other transformative works have done for mainstream. Quashie states "in a black world, in whatever manifestations of black worldness texts create, *blackness* (not antiblackness) is totality; in such a world, black being is capacious and right—not more-right-than, just right-as-is."[83] As an interior expression of being, or reality, fans queer the operating systems and the line of inquiry that expects them to make creators represent them

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[81] Faithe Day, "Between Butch/Femme: On the Performance of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in a YouTube Web Series," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 22, no. 3 (2018), 13 https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2018.1383800.
[82] Day, "Between Butch/Femme", 13
[83] Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 10

only in a positive light, but that their lives "as is" should be considered in their totality and only in a negative light.

"*Affirmative* transformative" fandom with Queer OS applied as a methodology takes into consideration the subjectivity of those who identify with these cultural subjects rather than only focusing on how the text operates in the public discourses and consciousness. Marlon Rachquel Moore's article examines *Between Women* and its digital network BetweenWomenTV from a media studies disciplinary focus. Moore applies the media term "social mainstreaming" to examine how representation of marginalized groups on prime-time television considers how mainstream society perceives minority populations. The creators of *Between Women* and BetweenWomenTV were in talks with a major network, thus prompting speculation on the effect these characters could have on mainstream audiences. Moore's article is useful as it provides a historical record of Black lesbian characters on TV. However, Moore's focus on representation only relies on one aspect of the series culturally rather than what it could mean for audiences writing, "To paraphrase cultural critic bell hooks, television, cinema, and now web serials may not intend to teach us anything, but something is always learned from them. Whether those behind the camera intend to or not, they teach us which lives to value and which to discard which voices should be heard and which we should ignore."[84] By focusing on the representation and how it may affect social mainstreaming, the argument doesn't acknowledge how fans, and not society writ-large, may comprehend their lives through seeing *Between* Women's queer black subjects as Story stated with

[84] Moore, "Between Women TV," 203

autoethnographic work. Black queer communities value Black queer lives as evidenced by the robust comment section under the *Between Women* web series and others as Day and Christian explore.

While innovative and directly available to consumers from YouTube, *Between Women* is not the first representation of Black lesbians in media. Yet the digital affordance YouTube provides creators to upload their productions is a critical invention and intervention in the media landscape for Black lesbian representation. There were other Black lesbian web series uploaded to YouTube but *Between Women* garnered blogosphere attention, amassed a large fan following and was one of the more popular series at the time. I argue that it is due to the higher production quality of the series in terms of camera work that was not limited to the aesthetics, plot, and character development. Moore chronicles Black lesbian and queer representation in American television as forerunners to *Between Women*. Moore lists *What's Happening!* and it's revival as *What's Happening Now!, Courthouse*, *Girlfriends*, *Dark Angel*, *The Wire*, *The L Word*, *True Blood*, *White Collar*, and ends with *Between Women* as a digital contribution to the list.[85] Citing Cheryl Dunye's film *Watermelon Woman* and film *Stranger Inside* on HBO, as well as Cleo in the F. Gary Grey directed film *Set It Off* as precursors to *Between Women*.[86] Moore argues that Black lesbian "invisibility also exists in theatrically released films, a void that the web serial also seems to fill."[87] Since television representation of Black lesbians up until *Between Women*'s premiere was not necessarily non-existent, the premise of a

[85] Moore, "Between Women TV," 206-209
[86] Moore, "Between Women TV," 205
[87] Moore, "Between Women TV," 204

fictionalized all Black cast in Atlanta produced by Black lesbian creators was a radical move.

Other Black queer representations of Black lesbian women, such as the documentary *The Aggressive*s and the feature film *Pariah*, both take place in New York therefore *Between Women's* plot in the south aesthetically offers a different glimpse of Black lesbian life outside of the major metros of New York and Los Angeles.[88] Also, the characters and representations Moore lists, were not given the breadth of being fully fleshed out characters in all Black contexts as found in *Between Women*. In contrast, *Between Women* subverts these norms as Moore contends, "in addition to situating minority characters within their communities, the other important aspect of stabilized depictions is that storylines involve more realistic portrayals of the personal, social, or political problems lesbians face than are evident in the previous stages of representation."[89] Yet by focusing on representation rather than on subjectivity, the single story framework only focuses on what progress can be made from the show rather than what it means to the audiences it depicts.

Another way to examine why the show doesn't only lend to political means is through the analysis of Cohen's framework is to think about "deviance as resistance" and using the tenets of autoethnography. I use autoethnography as an invitational method to explore my acafandom, and thus it can also be used to explain how fans relate to their fandom objects. Specifically, the emphasis on *affirmative* transformative fandom as found in *Between Women*. For example, Kalia Story

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[88] *Pariah*, directed by Dee Rees. Focus Features. December 28, 2011. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1233334/; *The Aggressives,* directed by Daniel Peddle. Seventh Art Releasing, June 3, 2005. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0462757/

[89] Moore, "Between Women TV", 212

provides an autoethnographic account of how she developed her identity as a queer Black woman through engaging with Alice Walker's character Shug Avery from *The Color Purple* and Audre Lorde's lover Afrekete as detailed in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Story contends, "my hope is that in doing my own autoethnographic analysis of these two figures, I will be able to show that when one's personal experiences are reflected through a wider cultural, political, and social prism, it engenders a new theoretical, methodological and lived possibility for any and all that are seeking racial, sexual, and gendered empowerment."[90] I am especially interested in how Story is interdisciplinary in approaching autoethnography:

> By merging black feminist theory and queer feminist theories of color, this work will illuminate the intersection that exists between popular culture and critical theory, to enact a theoretical, ideological, and lived counternarrative, disidentification, and/or radical politic of the self for individuals who embody marginalized and multiple identities.[91]

Through examining the intent behind fandom as an interior project, or as fans conducting an autoethnography account on themselves, we can see examine exactly what popular culture depictions provide Black fans and it also provides a glimpse into how they experience their interpersonal relationships. Through Shug Avery and Afrekete, Story developed her identity as a queer Black woman where "rather than clinging to the socialized conventions and understandings of what my multiple identities represented to others, I was able through these characters, as well as the incorporation of the praxis of autoethnography in my lived experience and scholarly work to imagine a different possibility of the performance of self."[92] What Story

[90] Kalia Adia Story, "(Re)Presenting Shug Avery and Afrekete: The Search for a Black, Queer, and Feminist Pleasure Praxis," *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (2015), 29 http://www.jstor.org/stable/24803041.
[91] Story, "(Re)Presenting Shug Avery," 24
[92] Story, "(Re)Presenting Shug Avery," 26

accounts is deviance as resistance in praxis and thus the fictional drama, comedy, and soap opera genres of Black queer web series allows for Black queer communities to interface with characters in the same way Story identified with and eventually performed herself. Further, with an emphasis on fandom, the concern then is not about representation for the masses as an intentionally political process, but rather representation for those whose lives have not been represented as complicated fully fleshed out characters. Specifically, as texts centered on the affective pleasure posited in viewing dramatic representation of these lived experiences.

Quotidian Aesthetics in Between Women

To analyze, I completed a close reading on comments from the first episode of *Between Women* due to the robust feedback and subsequent discussion between fans.[93] Fans responded to the first episode that briefly introduced the characters, their connection with each other, and their conflict. The first episode introduces us to the main characters and their romantic, familial, and friendship dynamics. *Between Women*'s first episode was a preliminary introduction to the characters and their storylines in a short 13 minutes and 54 seconds that includes a preview of the next episode.

The episode begins with one of the main characters, Rhonda, femininely styled character on a treadmill listening to a fictionalized radio station. While walking, her exercise is interspersed with b-roll from landmarks around Atlanta from

[93] Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011, video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM.

the point of view of driving around in a car listening to the radio. In this way, Atlanta becomes another character in the series, solidifying the series as a distinctly southern representation of Black lesbian life. This scene is juxtaposed with another character, Miller, shown sitting on a large leather chair in masculine styled business attire with a femme presenting woman on her lap listening to the same radio station.

After introducing these two characters, the radio DJ's voiceover announces Atlanta as the latest city to make same-sex marriage legal, sends a shoutout to the LGBT community, and wonders who will be the first couple to marry with the new law. After announcing the marriage law, the DJ announces that she has two free tickets to see Atlanta rapper Young Jeezy for a lucky listener and plays his song "I Do" with edited emphasis on the lyric, "I see some ladies tonight I might marry…" solidifying the contemporary, southern and urban aesthetic of the show.[94] Rhonda, over the moon about the marriage law going into effect, giddily calls Miller, and the woman sitting on her lap answers the phone announcing the name of Miller's business. The nameless secretary rolls her eyes at Miller as she announces that her girlfriend is on the line. The audience is immediately privy to the fact that Miller and Rhonda are in a relationship, but that Miller is not too keen on commitment as she dodges Rhonda's questions about the marriage announcement. Rhonda frustratingly ends the call with Miller who is not interested in marriage or having the conversation with Rhonda. Of note, that the gym scene is in an apartment complex and not a major corporate gym, while the only aspect that privy's us to Miller's office is that she is in

[94] Young Jeezy (Ft. André 3000 & JAY-Z), "I Do," *TM: 103 Hustlerz Ambition.* https://genius.com/Jeezy-i-do-lyrics.

business attire and both her and her secretary are answering their calls on headsets. The simple and mundane production choices propel us into their world while we as the audience can relate to driving in the car listening to the radio, working out, and even being at work. While these aspects are simple and even simply produced, we must remember that Black lesbian representation in these mundane had not been seen before and that simple fact means a lot to the audience and fans.

My reading of *Between Women* asserts that the Black queer being is centric to the show's development and the fandom expressed, particularly the mundane life depicted for a group of queer Black lesbians in Atlanta. Next, the episode cuts to the opening credits where the artist Look Live, who also plays the character Rae in the series, croons "This is *Between Women*, where all your dreams begin…" While same sex marriage was not legal in Atlanta at the time, the possibility of this mundane act acted out for these black lesbian women could be seen as them speaking a dream into existence. Faithe Day pushes back against the impetus to look at the possibility for same sex marriage as utopic, instead arguing that, "the realm of *Between Women* does not fall into the trap of neoliberalism like glossing over difference in the realities of the queer of color experience in the world. The show itself spends the remainder of this episode, and the entire series, dealing with the hard facts of the embodied experience of black queer women, especially lesbians."[95] We can then read this first scene and the opening credits as not a way to think about the show putting emphasis future goals, but to center the mundane.

[95] Day, "Between Butch/Femme," 9

I argue that the show does not only emphasize the "hard facts" as we may come to know the representation of Black queer life like the film *Pariah* or Queen Latifah's character in *Set it Off*, but that the dream begins with everyday life depictions. Fans responded in kind as analyzed in the next section. Through "*affirmative* transformative" fandom, fans utilize the interiority expressed in the show for Quashie as "aliveness in a black world rather than life in the world as we know it—to write about aliveness in the aesthetic imaginary of black thought, which might help us attend to the poetic aliveness inevitable in each black human being."[96] Black queer imaginings of the mundane and the mundane act of quoting and asking for "being" and "aliveness" reflected back to them extends our understanding of intimacy and interiority as a public endeavor of world making and knowledge production.

In the scene after the opening credits, we are introduced to another couple, Brooke, a masculine presenting woman and her femme girlfriend, Allison, shopping in a local Walmart for groceries. A woman from Allison's apartment complex approaches her and asks her opinion about a brand of chips. Brooke immediately accuses her of cheating, tells Allison that they are going to move, and yells at her that since she is her girlfriend that she can do anything she wants to with her. Allison pushes back against Brooke's tirade and tells her that she will wait for her in the car due to her demanding and outrageous outburst with her talking to her neighbor. Again, producers exemplify the everyday task of grocery shopping and running into a neighbor while out as people in neighborhoods and communities do to escalate the beginning of what becomes the domestic violence theme in the series. At this point

[96] Quashie, *Black Aliveness,* 20

we have two scenes where everyday activities are juxtaposed with the drama of life. While these plot points are not new or groundbreaking even in their aesthetics or production, the fact that they are acted out by all Black lesbian characters remains a point that fans picked up on and responded to.

The series then cuts to Sunny, a quirky light-spirited masculine gender presenting character who is sitting in a park, with two sticky notes to study. Their instructions are to one, “be smooth no laughing”, while number two to simply “lie”. As she continues to “study” her flash cards, she sees an attractive femme presenting woman taking pictures in the park and attempts to hit on her to no avail. She even asks her if she is gay to see if her flirting would have landed. At the same time, Miller calls Sunny while she is trying to talk to the woman in the park. Sunny asks the woman to hold on and explains to Miller that she was in the middle of attempting to hit on a woman using the tips Miller provided. The comedic timing lies in the woman Sunny was hitting on hears Miller’s name, asks if it is Miller Harris, and asks Sunny to speak to her. Miller remembers the woman, Jean, and puts her on hold on Sunny’s phone while she looks on confused and incredulous. Miller’s mother is on the other line and tells her that she made her a peach cobbler for her and her friends. After hanging up with her Mother, the woman in the park tells Miller to call her only further characterizing Miller as a cheater with a suave persona.

Miller even tells Sunny that the woman’s sexual prowess is fantastic to which Sunny becomes even more frustrated. The scene is reminiscent of the film *Pariah* is a coming-of-age story where the character is trying to find her identity and specifically her Black queer identity. She tries to listen to other Black lesbian women for

guidance and even "tries on" their persona to help her figure out Black queer life. Sunny and Miller embody that spirit, but Sunny's quirkiness is used as comic relief in the first episode and throughout the series. It is the over-the-top usage of post-it notes, asking the woman in the park if she was gay, and Miller already knowing the woman that flips the "hard embodied aspects" on its head and instead makes it laughable.

Also, of note in this scene is the fact that we briefly see Miller's mother saying that she is cooking for her and her friends. This choice provides a brief foray into understanding that at least one of the characters are in communication with each other and is aware of her community as she says that she made the dish for her and her friends. Peach cobbler as a choice is also a Black southern dish that has traveled through the great migration to Black people's homes. It is indeed a labor of love for Miller and her friends that her Mom made it for them. This small detail called for another set and intentional dialogue and exemplifies the everyday aspects of their lives that we as an audience are invited to witness.

While Sunny is on the phone, she is pinged in by another mutual friend, Beautiful, who asks for directions to the event Miller is hosting. While Beautiful is on the phone, she also receives another call from her former partner, Rae, who asks her when she needs to pick up their son. This production choice of clicking over while on the phone with friends was popular at the time when *Between Women* premiered as it was a way to show the connection between friends. When Beautiful ends the call with Rae, we pivot to a woman, Jess, who Rae made date plans with and now needs to reconfigure their plans to include her son, Junior. Jess becomes agitated that their plans are interrupted by the fact that Rae must pick up her son. Rae says that she can

tag along because Jess knows that Rae and Beautiful are co-parenting. Jess tells Rae that she can only be a coparent if the child is her child and that she was sick of lesbians always claiming other people's children that are not biological theirs. Rae tells Jess that Junior is her son, that she is coparenting successfully with Beautiful, and that if Jess doesn't understand she can move on and date someone else.

Sunny, Beautiful, and Rae are all outside although in different contexts. Sunny was there to practice her communication skills with women, Beautiful was out chaperoning a group of children her son Junior was playing with, and Rae and Jess were on their way to the next venue after discussing Rae's son. Each scene worked in the sense of showing everyday events but also were produced with the resources the creators had. While the scenes were simplistic in setting, the drama was not and fans responded in turn about the drama unfolding and how they could relate to characters, especially Beautiful and Rae's coparenting issues, and the insensitive comments from Jess.

The last couple in the series, Winney and Mecca round out the group of friends. We cut to Winney, who is in a gym locker room gym when she checks her phone and sees her girlfriend Mecca has text her and told her that she can't make Miller's gathering. Mecca feigns that she can't make it because of work, but the scene shows her in the bed with another woman. The final scene shows Rhonda at home and calling Miller to finish their conversation about marriage, while also implying that she knows Miller is not faithful to her. Miller tells Rhonda that she doesn't want to get married and then tries to click over to finish her conversation with Beautiful and ends up complaining about Rhonda to Rhonda because of a communication

mishap where Beautiful has already ended the call. Rhonda is upset at Miller calling her annoying and the last scene ends on Miller whispering expletives as she realized that Rhonda heard her complaining about her.

Affirming Fandom Expressions

Fans commented on the show with three major types of fandom expression: general affirmation (i.e., "I like this show/this cast member is attractive to me"), comments that specifically compared *Between Women* to other LGBT shows and how they are grateful for Black lesbian representation, and finally discussing the types of relationship dynamics the series showed. I focus on the different categories of fandom comments that are "*affirmative* transformative" fandom expressions that mention references to the character's romantic relationships.

As many of the comments were within days of the premiere fans expressed much of what they wanted to see from the series with an anxious appreciation of the series and with high expectations of what was to come. Fans critiqued or defended the show and provided context for the desires they would have liked to see. In this way they are invoking what Kevin Quashie deems as "black aliveness" where "every black text rests on a quiet premise of black humanity—that the text and its aesthetics *assume* being."[97] *Between Women*'s fan comments are situated in the liminal space for the desire to see more Black queer "being" in various contexts that literally represent their "being" or their mundane everyday lives as Black queer women. In this way, their fandom is "*affirmative* transformative" because they are affirming the

[97] Quashie, *Black Aliveness,* 2

series while also affirming themselves as the opportunity to be "seen" by the creators even if they are not reflected directly in the series. Quashie argues that "the quality of aliveness notable in the worldmaking aesthetics of poems and essays, in how those poems and essays can be read for what they tell us about our being: about how we are and about how we can be."[98] It is also transformative as the digital provides both the opportunity for fans to communicate with content creators in what Faithe Day and Aymar Jean Christian deem "quare-shared recognition."[99] Black fans and creators recognize the production issues queer communities face with having their narratives told in a robust way and thus understand the new media productions as "quaring" how queer stories are told and how fans respond on social media. Their analysis of the fandom practices through "quare shared recognition" constitute Black digital intimacies for fandom communities of Black queer web series.

The comments also invoke transformative interiority as fans are surveying themselves as not being represented and expressing it in the comments. Fans communicate their desires for the series to be seen in a wider cultural context so that they can invite more transformative possibilities through popular culture that has been denied to them due to discrimination in traditional media spaces. I posit that through studying fandom, Kara Keeling's "Queer OS" that reimagines how we interface with and understand the mechanisms of the digital can also be used for how we interface with the logics presented therein. Queer OS, "in its capacity as a social operating system, Queer OS connects existing distributed areas of scholarly inquiry and

[98] Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 2
[99] Day and Christian, "Locating Black Queer TV," 2.3

activism, thereby producing philosophies and cultures within each of those areas that might unsettle the logics that currently secure them."[100] The logics inherent in fan communities on YouTube would at face value analyze the fandom as desiring creators to represent them at face value for political reasons rather than the desire to represent their very "be-"ing as Quashie argues for. Injecting interiority into examining digital practices and queering the ways we approach the question of representation provides a different understand of what audiences are calling for. For the purposes of this chapter, I utilize Queer OS and interiority to examine and intervene in the ways we read production, fandom, and representation through focusing on queer communities' expression of fandom of a popular, now cult classic, web series.

Can't Lesbians Actually Really Ever Love Each Other?: Relationship Critique

YouTube allows fans to directly comment under the show with thoughts of their own and it is in this empowering notion that "*affirmative* transformative" fandom is enacted with emphasis on the affirmative aspects. I gathered all the tweets under the episode and only analyzed tweets that came within two months of the show's premiere as it has been online for several years. I also utilized comments that were "sentences" rather than small expressions of affirmation or dislike. In this dissertation, I then organized the comments that fell under these three themes. First, I explore how fans critiqued the depiction of romantic relationships. Second, I examine how fans explained why and how they surmised the creators made certain creative

[100] Keeling, "Queer OS," 154

choices. Finally, how fans praised the creators for the show for attempting to capture the complexities of Black lesbian life.

Fans commented on the rampant infidelity in the first episode from an introspective lens in terms of the few web series that were in circulation at the time. One fan lamented, "Why do these shows always show people with extremely disfunctional and abusive relationships? Can't lesbians ever actually really love each other????"[101] These rhetorical questions to the creators and the community members recognize that the little representation fans were seeing in web series perpetuated many of the same types of tropes as entertainment. Related to the comment about dysfuction on the show, another fan took the representation personally as a reflection of the types of relationships they have either experienced or witnessed and described wanting a different type of relationship dynamic expressed. They wrote, "this right here why i dnt be wanting to be in no lesbian relationship ain shit but cheaters why a show cant come out where they actually faithful? real talk man"[102] The heaviness expressed in their comment is an expressed interiority of "being" as both how they have experienced their romantic lives and the hopes of seeing it depicted differently in an entertainment space.

These fandom expressions are critiques, but due to the lack of representation they also express an interiority that desires more representation from both the standpoint of affirmation and for a storyline to possibly transform the ways they have experienced their relationships. They do not deny that these aspects exist in the

[101] Commenting Fan 3, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM
[102] Commenting Fan 4, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM

communities, but they wish to push the series to do more as a representational tactic for themselves. It queers notions of representation and what the digital can allow for fans and audiences as fans have access to communicating with creators.[103] "*Affirmative* transformative" fandom works in this sense as fans affirm the series while expressing their frustration as well as recognizing that it happens in their everyday relationships. I argue that this is also transformative in terms of being able to experience it in the first place. YouTube allowed the creator to bypass Hollywood standards of production and still produce a series that was aesthetically pleasing enough to garner the popularity and attention it did.

I Appreciate the Work You Are Doing: Creators and Fans

Because of their investment in the show's success as another representation of fandom, the critiques also invited both the creators and the fans to consider different production aspects as a correction for the critiques. As a push back against the critique of the femme/masculine pairing, a fan commented:

> "Actually, the different gender presentations are quite accurate representations of black lesbian community life. I appreciate the work you are doing. It would be useful to showcase femmes who are controlling or 'womanizing' to reflect more of the realities in our communities. Femmes are also violent and controlling. It would also be nice to show healthy relationships, since there are many healthy relationships in our community. Thanks again."[104]

The fan is expressing "*affirmative* transformative" fandom by first commending the creators on their show, but also pushing them to reflect more on different representations from the Black lesbian communities. The dual notion of the comment

[103] The creators used to post videos talking back to the audience, but they have been removed from the YouTube. This is a memory I have and not one I can prove by referencing it.
[104] Commenting Fan 5, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM

exemplifies how the masc/femme pairings are reflected in the community but also wishing to push the content to present femmes as also being problematic partners, not just masculine partners who cheat, and healthier relationships as other fans stated as well. It is also transformative in the sense that the digital affordance of the platform allows for fans to speak back to the creators using "quare-shared recognition" as they are both from similar communities and understand the effects From this fan, it isn't about the drama or the infidelity but the balance of who is depicted as problematic so that it is not lopsided.

As a Black queer fan, their fandom expression is also building upon the definition of transformative fandom where fans are creating a new way of engaging their fandom through talking directly to the creator rather than only producing fandom for themselves. Likewise, another fan expressed the same sentiment writing, "I wish someone would really write something that shows progressively moving lesbians, not those with all this drama, cheating and suspect relationships. DAG!!!"[105] Fans responded with "quare-shared recognition" this time to each other with YouTube's reply to affordance and not necessarily only to the creator or as a rhetorical question. One fan said, "Progressively moving how? To write about lesbians without drama wouldn't be real and audiences wouldn't respond to anything but that. In fact, to write any shows without drama wouldn't be received too well."[106] This fan recognizes that within the "being" of representation that these aspects occur

[105] Commenting Fan 6, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM
[106] Commenting Fan 7, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM

in real life, and that fans would not respond in kind to a show that didn't have manufactured conflict.

Comparing the show to fictional heterosexual romance, another fan commented, "Well, if they barely show progressive heterosexual couples, you can pretty much guarantee that the portrayal of progressive lesbians is nearly nonexistent."[107] This fan acknowledges the "deviance" of queer relationships, while heterosexual relationships and thus their fictional depictions are normative. If heterosexual relationships are not represented "progressively" to think that the deviant nature of queer relationships would be is an informed expression about the logics of television representation and how and why would the fan expect queer relationships to be depicted differently. Another fan compared it directly to *The L Word*, a show with a predominately all white cast that depicts lesbian life and that it was just as problematic with cheating and dysfunctional relationships as the first episode of *Between Women.*[108] In these comments the fans are affirming the series again and themselves through thinking about what would be entertaining to them and others as fans. As critically engaged consumers, they understand that "drama sells" and the show needs tension to engage audiences while also attempting to portray realities of Black lesbian life in Atlanta. This is evidenced by only one comment pointing out that queer couples could not get married in Atlanta at the time the show premiered in 2011. As a plot device it did the work of inviting audiences into "Where All Your Dreams Begin" as the theme music states and introducing the tension

[107] Commenting Fan 8, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM
[108] *The L Word*, directed by Ilene Chaiken (City: Showtime, January 18, 2004;), television.

between the serial cheater, Miller, and her girlfriend, Rhonda, who desires marriage and more serious commitment from her. Fans can worldbuild through this imagining while also being entertained by the tension the dysfunction provides to see how it plays out in the episode and ultimately the series.

It's the Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth!: Affirming Critique

Finally, fans affirmed the show and the ways the writer and director examined the issues fans discussed. One fan wrote, ":) Nice!! Seems like its going to evolve into something even better. Its not really stereotypical like most people think…. its basically real life drama, real life situations faced everyday in the community."[109] The fan affirmed that they see what happens in the community while also waiting for the show to continue to grow. Many fans affirmed the show on its depictions of the co-parenting relationship between Rae and Beautiful. Stopping mid-episode to comment a fan expressed, "Just came across this. I haven't even finished the first episode, but I had to stop and say I love how she just check 'ol girl about her little boy. DNA does NOT make you a parent. I'm glad she stood up for her relationship with Jr." Another fan noticed their relationship and stated the same, "Watch your mouth Jess.. Watch your mouth man... I love it! Lower your tone, 7:59-8:25 it's the whole truth and nothing but the truth! It's no different straight/lesbian world.. a bond with a child is a bond indeed. If more men did their job or kept their bond with their boys like this it would be a better world. I love it.. 'I'm trying to keep my hands off of you..' lol.."[110]

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[109] Commenting Fan 9, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM

[110] Commenting Fan 10, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM

Through quare-shared recognition, fans acknowledge and affirm the realities of the community especially, with the tension between Rae and her date Jess, and her critique of her relationship with her child, Jr. Jess states that she doesn't understand why lesbians are in and out of short-term relationships and claim bonds with children after the relationship is over. Noting that she and Beautiful were together for longer than two weeks, Rae simply puts that she will not continue in the relationship with Jess if she doesn't respect her relationship and fans championed it in the comment section.

Likewise, fans also condemned Brooke and Allison's relationship. One fan wrote, "AINT NO WAY IN THE HELL I COULD BE WITH SOMEONE THAT TREATS ME THE WAY BROOKE TREATS HER GIRL. ALL CONTROLLING AND POSESSIVE" and "But brooke and alis relationship is horrible, like who makes a huge scene in Walmart about some chips. But that's real life tho"[111] Through their own interiority, fans affirm that the show depicts reality and that they couldn't see themselves in Allison's shoes as the abuse hadn't escalated to physical at that time and Allison was still sticking up for herself against Brooke's attempts at being possessive and controlling. To this point another fan stated, "This is ignorant. Where's the f4f couple?and that crazy ass abusive stud makes me sick lol I'm way too into this show I'm so mad but I can't stop watching."[112] While the show "makes them sick", the fan is enjoying the show while also critiquing the lack of gender presentation diversity in the romantic pairings as stated earlier. I don't constitute this as hate

[111] Commenting Fan 11, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM
[112] Commenting Fan 12, Michelle ShowRunHer, "Season 1 Episode 1 Premiere," YouTube, December 14, 2011 video, 15:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjYoT2a1ieM

watching but rather *affirmative* transformative fandom with an emphasis on how Black queer communities affirmed *Between Women* while also enjoying the anxiety and tension it created affectively as they watched.

As Black queer fans already embody "deviant" representation they are not necessarily arguing for politics of respectability in terms of the creator to produce "good or bad" representation, but rather well-rounded representations for balance. Thus, recognizing that they live complex fully actualized lives with drama in different parts of the community. Day observes that fans want to see their actual lived experience in the show, writing "while the show itself is simply a representation of Black lesbians, for many of the viewers there is a belief that the series is or should be representing a reality or lived experience."[113] If we lean into their desire for reality or a lived experience through affective fandom and interiority, we can see this fan practice as a way that fans are affirming and worldbuilding their lives through using the new media platform to comment about their desires. This an "*affirmative* transformative" work of autoethnography as fans affirm the cultural productions, and express desire for storylines to affirm and transform them as other transformative works have done for mainstream.

Conclusion

Fandom of queer web series represent populations that have been historically left out of the mainstream tv network line-ups. Thus, primetime television is not the only source for where people can find their identities represented and begin to re-

[113] Day, "Between Butch/Femme", 13

imagine their lives outside of their constituted stereotypical sexualities. Quashie writes, "What I want is the freeness of a black world where blackness can be of being, where there is no argument to be made, where there is no speaking to or against an audience because we are all the audience there is… and, as such, the texts' work can manifest an invitation to study and to becoming for the black one."[114] "*Affirmative* transformative" fandom expressions for queer Black web series fans are expressions of wanting to see themselves as they are in the breadth of their existence. This fandom reads a different analysis into the question of representation. With Black digital intimacies, the enactment of queer worldmaking as is in fan expression is a demonstration for the interiority that is not bound in the logics of representation.

[114] Quashie, *Black Aliveness,* 10

Chapter 2: Growing Intimacies: Fandom of the Web Series to Television Journey for *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure*

Introduction

In June 2010, I possessed a general anxiousness about my life prospects because of the ongoing recession and recovery from 2008. To thwart some of my ongoing unease, I turned to my social media networks for relief and a broader community. In early 2011, I recall seeing a post about the first episode of *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* on Facebook claiming that it was hilarious. Curious, I began watching and identified with several aspects of the short first episode, especially her issues with underemployment. *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* premiered in 2011 on YouTube. The protagonist "J" chronicles her career, friendships, and romantic life under the comedic guise of being Black and awkward. "J" narrates the beginning of the episode as: "I'm awkward… and Black. I heard that those were the two worse things anyone could be."[115] I did not understand myself as Black and awkward but I laughed heartily and could identify with many parts of the first episode: the rolling "California stop" after spending time in Los Angeles during my MA, cutting my hair and going back to my natural hair after breaking-up with an ex, and disliking aspects of my job just like "J". Also, at the time there were not many alternatives in newly produced shows of fictional depictions of Black women's lives. I immediately shared the first episode on Facebook and looked

[115] AWKWARD Black Girl | "The Stop Sign" (S. 1, Ep.1), February 3, 2011 YouTube, video, 3:40. "Issa Rae Presents" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIVa9lxkbus

forward to the next one. I became invested in the show's plot line and ultimately, it's success because of the joy and conversation amongst friends it brought to many of my experiences as an early-twenties professional, struggling for more gainful employment, and other relationship woes in the early 2010s.

Insecure, created by Issa Rae for HBO in 2016, is a comedy/comedy-drama that chronicles a thirty-year-old, Black heterosexual woman who at beginning of the series is dissatisfied with her career and love life. The show explores dating, family, friendship, sex, career issues, and race through "Issa Dee" as a character, which borrowed Rae's first name as the protagonists' name, and her best friend Molly's relationship. *Insecure* is loosely based on one of Rae's earliest YouTube produced web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*—also referenced in this dissertation as *Awkward Black Girl* or *ABG*—features Issa acting as the character "J" with a similar premise. The protagonist "J" chronicles her career, friendships, and romantic life under the comedic guise of being awkward. Her awkwardness propels the comedy's conflict and character development much like Issa's insecurities does for *Insecure'*s plot.

Through "*affirmative transformative*" fandom I examine the fandoms of the productions to examine how affirmative transformative fandom and digital community propels web series to success and affirms and transforms how fans discuss their lives in digitally intimate communities. Rae's rise from web series producer to television and media mogul is an interesting one driven by fan engagement through sharing interiority from an awkward behavioral characterization to an insecure one with awkward elements for comedic relief. I argue that in

continuance from web series to television that we see a balance between the "*affirmative transformative*" fandom that emphasize both the *affirmative* aspects of Black digital fandom and the *transformative* aspects equally. Aesthetic choices and characterization, the period in which it was produced, a show that centers heterosexual characters, and social media usage at the time produced Black fandom and digital practices that balanced the affirmative and transformative fandom expressed on Twitter once the show's iteration moved from YouTube.

As *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* center a Black female protagonist, I utilize Joan Morgan's "politics of pleasure" that is invested in "*black female interiority"* as it is exemplified in the storylines and their fandoms. Morgan frames pleasure in analyzing cultural texts through different interventions such as the advent of social media and digital discourse for the possibilities of expressing interiority. Morgan's definition of interiority is "to excavate the broad range of feelings, desires, hearing, (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the 'politics of silence.'"[116] Morgan grounds her argument in Black feminist Evelynn Hammonds' "politics of articulation" rather than the respectable "politics of silence" thus, black female interiority provides a framework to examine Black women's sexualities.[117] *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* do not shy away from this articulation of pleasure and sexuality as the characters routinely question and speculate about their desires and intimate partnerships whether they are familial, friendship, or romantic. Therefore, the usage of interiority in public digital spaces are

[116] Joan Morgan, "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (2015), 37 https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915.
[117] Morgan, "Why We Get Off," 37

interlocked when discussing the plots of the cultural productions, fans engagement with them digitally, and how they utilize them to explore their own interpersonal relationships.

First, I situate *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* in the media landscape they premiered in. Next, I outline how the web series and television show aesthetics outline Black interiority that is focused on pleasure. Finally, I demonstrate how fans of each production demonstrate Black digital intimacies through their comments to each other and the show's creators that articulate a balance of Black fans expressing "*affirmative transformative*" fandom.

Articulating Pleasure

This chapter examines the online fandom of *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* to explore the affective relationships Black people have to their fandom objects, their own intimate lives, the creator's intention, and the digital fandom expressed on social media. Following in the footsteps of televisions shows from the 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Living Single* and *Girlfriends*, *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* continued the comedic expression of Black intimacy and interiority by focusing on friendships, romantic partnerships, and family relationships. Rae's foray into producing the web series on her own on YouTube and her usage of fan engagement to continue producing and prop up its popularity eventually turned into the iteration of *Insecure* on HBO. The trajectory is a fascinating case study on digital creation, social media, and fandom that supports and propels shows into mainstream media.

Rae represented a different take on Black women's singleness at the time by also not being a "wife" as depicted in many of the popular reality TV shows that were

in their infancy at the time *ABG* premiered. While *ABG* and *Insecure* center heterosexual relationships, they still provided a different representation of Black womanhood. I argue that like *Between Women*, fans responded to Rae's construction of different type of representation not out of a dearth of just seeing themselves as Black queer audiences, but as another aspect of Black interior life and characterization.

Shows such as the *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Basketball Wives*, and the *Love and Hip-Hop* franchises were popular at the time, and ABG and eventually Insecure were constructed in direct contrast to these representations. Rebecca Wanzo provides another layer of analysis with the "Unmarriageable Professional Black Woman discourse" that came into public discourse circa 2009 after a study circulated in the news cycles about the lack of Black women's marriages. Wanzo argues that it was directly correlated to the prominence of the Obama's love story and marriage that was a factor in Obama's election in 2008.[118] Wanzo chronicles the national ideology and attention that pathologized Black heterosexual women's marriageability and desire for marriage rather than how the media and discourse did not critique the material, systemic, and other ideological reasons why Black women's marriage prospects were not "twice as likely as white women to never have been married by age 45"[119] Wanzo writes about the discourse on Disney's first Black princess, in *The Princess and the Frog*, the self-help proclamations by Black men on how Black women were the sole purveyors in why they were single, and finally the pressure of

[118] Rebecca Wanzo, "Black Love Is Not a Fairytale." *Poroi* 7, no. 2 (2011). https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1096.
[119] Wanzo, "Black Love", 1

using the Obamas as a relationship to aspire to that would not realistically work for many Black couples. The discourse ultimately focuses on the "individual choices, regardless of structure", the "American Dream", and "liberal individualism" thus placing the proverbial blame on Black women for their failure to secure marriage and partnership.[120] Rae created the web series at the height of this discourse, offering another representation that fans responded to. Much like Sinclair's awkward and introverted character in *Living Single* or Lynn's freeloading hippie character in *Girlfriends*, Rae continues in the tradition of awkward Black girl characterization but emboldens her character through the comedic timing and provided a different representation of Black women that was not in circulation at that time.

While Rae may have provided a different take on Black women's representation in media at the time, I argue that Rae still capitalized on the aspects of their representation that was not respectable and at times directly played into the "Unmarriageable Professional Black Woman Discourse". Kristen J. Warner chronicles how shows like *Basketball Wives*, *Love and Hip Hop* and its various city franchises, and *Real Housewives of Atlanta* all center ratchetness in various iterations. While there has been much said about ratchetness and especially Issa Rae's usage of ratchet in *ABG* and her series *Ratchetpiece Theatre*, produced on YouTube in the years between *ABG* and *Insecure*'s premiere, I want to focus on the path for creation and Hollywood legitimacy and production that the ratchetness expressed in the reality television shows provided for *ABG* and *Insecure* to build upon.[121] Warner situates

[120] Wanzo, "Black Love", 14

[121] These two authors mention Issa Rae in their definitions of ratchetness. L.H. Stallings. "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination", *Palimpset: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* Volume 2, Issue 2, 2013 pp. 135-139 and Kristen J. Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless:

Issa's definition of ratchet and the reality television representations within the larger media landscape around respectability and "negative imagery" for Black women. Warner speculates, "Their ratchet performances provide an opportunity for visibility, which is no small thing, yet this visibility is rarely discussed in the popular press except in terms of negative imagery. Also rarely discussed are the diverse ways these performances are received by black female viewers."[122] This is where an "*affirmative transformative*" framework can come into play by studying the *ABG* and *Insecure*'s digital fandom with emphasis on both affirmation and transformation.

To this point Warner posits, "little has been written on the potential pleasures that black female audiences experience from viewing characters who look like them—even if they do not act like them—week after week."[123] I argue that *ABG* and *Insecure* bridge the gap between the highly stylized, materialistic constructions of Black womanhood of the reality television shows and exemplifies an everyday mundane Black woman who draws pleasure from ratchet representations, sees herself in these aspects, but also does not have access to the types of excess the women she may look to for entertainment. Rae filled the gap in this type of representation, while also capitalizing on the road these shows provided for audience members.

Issa Rae capitalized on YouTube as a platform to showcase *Awkward Black Girl*. While YouTube was important for queer black creators and fans in chapter two, it remained true for Issa Rae and the awkward representation and comedy she developed in the series. Jessica Marie Johnson provides an anecdote for my questions

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Ratchetness, Reality Television, and Black Womanhood." *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 30, no. 88 [1] (2015): 129–53. doi:10.1215/02705346-2885475.

[122] Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," 134

[123] Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," 136

by asserting that Black people use the digital in ways that are liberatory and revelatory. Johnson posits:

> "… that black digital practice is the interface by which black freedom struggles challenge reproduction of black death and commodification, countering the presumed neutrality of the digital. Black digital practice is the revelation that black subjects have commodified themselves and digitized and mediated their own black freedom ideas, to hack their way into systems thus living where they were 'never meant to survive.'"[124]

I argue that Rae used YouTube in an intentional way to hack herself into Hollywood—a path that many Black creators have struggled with due to rampant racism and in the case of Black female creators, there is racism and sexism to contend with. The path Rae took to get *Awkward Black Girl* to *Insecure* was filled with a continual pursuit of digital content to help others that both boosted her popularity and solidified the digital as a way for Black content creators to be taken seriously by Hollywood executives.[125] Then as a fandom practice, social media provided a larger platform outside of the smaller intimacies of websites to debate, deliberate, and amplify fandom communities. Johnson states, "the founding of Twitter in 2006, Tumblr in 2007, and Instagram in 2010 brought black diasporic cultural, political, and social life in an intimate and seemingly sudden public spotlight."[126] The publicness is intimate through the expression of interiority and "affirmative transformative" fandom as an example of what the digital provides for Black fans to mediate their black freedom ideas and self and world make.

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[124] Jessica Marie Johnson, "Markup Bodies." *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (2018), 59. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7145658.
[125] Rae's path has also animated other web series to TV recognition as I believe that the web series *Brown Girls* on OpenTV directly benefited from Rae's success with *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure.*
[126] Johnson, "Markup Bodies", 69

Black fans are exemplary to the digital practice Johnson describes and that Andre Brock outlines as "political-economic analyses foreclose the sensual, the erotic, or the deviant by arguing that they have no value in a rational worldview, but the denial of their "exchange value" does not negate their existence. How does one value love or anger?"[127] Instead, Brock argues for the "libidinal economy" that focuses on Black lived experience online. Especially, because "another benefit is the acknowledgement and theorization of Black communal identity as a meaning-making strategy."[128] Black digital fandom is a meaning making strategy because it is also libidinal as it "offers a release from considerations of Black digital practice as labor or commodity."[129] Black fandoms are labor, but a labor of love for Black communities in terms of navigating their interpersonal relationships. Black digital fandom practices relationally produce hacking their way into their own systems and presenting their whole selves to the world in intimate ways through the analysis and expression of interiority. I expand upon Brock's argument that the libidinal economy "provides a path toward conceptualizing Black technology use as a space for mundanity, banality, and the celebration of making it through another day."[130] Interiority and intimacy are both avenues to explore how Black social media fandom is a celebration of making it through another day by examining Black interiority that exemplifies pleasure.

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[127] André L. Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Critical Cultural Communication. (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 32
[128] Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 37
[129] Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 31
[130] Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 10

Awkward Black Girl and Insecure Fandom

I begin by emphasizing the behavior and character construction Rae develops in both the web series and television show as an example of interiority she heralds as an essential part to the popularity and thus success of the show that began on YouTube and propelled the producer/actor/writer to mainstream media and HBO. Specifically, Black digital fan expression of affirming and identifying with this iteration of "awkwardness" and then "insecure" interiority connote affirmative transformative fandoms through Black digital intimacies on social media platforms. Some examples of the interiority expressed in the shows include the main character "J" narrating parts of the show, or Issa—the character on *Insecure*— talking to herself in the mirror and her mirrored self, talking back to her. *Insecure* also includes many daydream flashbacks as aesthetic and to aid plot development for the 30-minute comedy. Fans responded to this expression of interiority with their own thus creating intimate digital spaces through affirmative transformative fandom expression.

There Are Other Black Girls

While interiority and intimacy can connote many different types of emotion and affect, I want to focus on pleasure as aforementioned by Morgan due to *Awkward Black Girl*'s and *Insecure* comedic aesthetic, genre, and expression of a different representation of Black women that was lacking in the entertainment landscape at the time. Ariane Cruz analyses *ABG* before *Insecure'*s 2016 premiere. Cruz argues that Rae was successful in exploring Black female sexuality through her usage of "awkward" in relation to the character's identity and specifically J's sexuality. Cruz contends, "…the epithet of awkward mediates performances of Black female racial

and sexual authenticity on the show, unveiling the ways that black female sexuality becomes authenticated in and through its ontological failure and nonbelonging, however comic."[131] Cruz places *Awkward Black Girl* in relation to other dominant representations of heterosexual Black women in the media at the time.

As aforementioned, Rae represented a different take on Black women's singleness and sexuality at the time by being awkward and not being a "wife" a la *Basketball Wives*, *Love & Hip Hop* (all on Vh1), and *The Realhousewives of Atlanta* [Bravo] as depicted in many of the popular reality TV shows that were in their infancy at the time.[132] Cruz's analysis of Rae's exploration of sexuality focuses on the plot's themes and construction of the web series as other scholars such as Carmel Ohman and Yael Levy analysis on *Insecure* concerning the same interior subject.[133] I argue that understanding the behavior mediation of awkward and insecurity that *ABG* and eventually *Insecure* underscores alongside the fandom provides another analysis of the work these shows are doing for Black fans. Studying the series plot and aesthetic choices paired with fandom engagement demonstrates how a breadth of expressed emotions are received by fans—we can learn what fans learn from and ultimately do with their fandoms. I argue that an expansion Cruz's emphasis on of awkwardness in relationship to her sexuality to include her friendships, workplace

[131] Ariane Cruz, "Mis (Playing) Blackness: Rendering Black Female Sexuality in *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*" in Black Female Sexualities eds. Trimiko Melancon and Joanne M Braxton, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 73
[132] Cruz, "Mis (Playing) Blackness," 78
[133] Yael Levy, "A Sexual Subject: Black Women's Sexuality in Insecure." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 1-13, 2020: 1–13., doi:10.1080/14680777.2020.1722723.; Carmel Ohman, "Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae's Insecure." *Black Scholar*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2020: 5–15

woes, and relationship prospects provides a different representation that mediates her entire life and fans responded affirmatively.

Additionally, Rae took advantage of YouTube's new media promise through their slogan at the time, "Broadcast Yourself", through passing some of the constraints and challenges that come from pursuing a greenlight from traditional media may have posed. Aymar Jean Christian's examines the ways in which web series become sites where producers and content creators can connect directly due to the digital nature of the comment section.[134] Christian's argument is that web series allow for Black creators, who have been marginalized from the process of producing shows on mainstream television, to produce original content without the "single-story/cookie-cutter" narrative mainstream producers perpetuate. By examining the digital ways fans interact and reflect on their fandom object, specifically focusing on the interiority expressed, I trace how digital community intimacy is built and how fans reflect interact with their fandom objects.

YouTube prefaces audio-visual consumption due to its platform affordances and the commentary and interaction happens after an episode unless it is a live streaming event as opposed to Twitter where one can tweet simultaneously. Therefore, comment sections often reflect affirmative fandom which is the fandom that discusses and analyzes. Analyzing representation alongside platform affordances, Christian continues, "She (Issa) created an original representation and then experimented with distribution in ways that deviated from and continued a tradition

[134] Aymar Jean Christian, *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*. Postmillennial Pop. (New York: New York University Press., 2018)

beginning with BET. *Awkward Black Girl* proposes to represent its community of fans—primarily but not exclusively black women—in a way unseen on legacy television, and does so convincingly."[135] The web series allowed for Rae to "push the boundaries of normative Black female representation."[136] I argue that mainstream television has seen awkward Black girls in mainstream television before 2011. Characters such as Sinclair from *Living Single*, Lynn from *Girlfriends*, Kim Parker from *Moesha* and *The Parkers* can arguably be seen as source references for J's character. However, to build upon Christian's point, new media allowed Rae the opportunity to circumvent censorship of legacy media by expressing explicit sexuality, as Cruz analyses. To reiterate, the awkward mediation adds another layer of interiority and thus identification with fans while YouTube provides a platform for fans to comment.

In the comment portion of *ABG*'s first episode, "The Stop Sign" which was uploaded to YouTube on February 3, 2011, fans readily affirm the show and relate to Issa's short pilot episode—only 3 minutes and 40 seconds—where she introduces us to her awkward relationships with her coworkers, ex-boyfriend, and ultimately herself. The episode introduces us to J's world where she states that she is Black and awkward which are "the two worst things anyone can be."[137] To sum the episode: J pretends to be in a music video when she's by herself in the car, tries to avoid her co-worker at stop-signs as they both drive in their respective cars to work, shows a montage of her boyfriend breaking up with her, J's subsequent sleeping with the co-

[135] Christian, *Open TV*, 117
[136] Christian, *Open TV,* 117
[137] AWKWARD Black Girl | "The Stop Sign" (S. 1, Ep.1), YouTube video, 3:40. "Issa Rae Presents" February 3, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIVa9lxkbus

worker she's trying to avoid because of her heartbreak, and making up rap lyrics disparaging the ex-boyfriend as coping mechanisms. J begins the episode rapping along to an explicit original song penned for the episode called "Booty Shawts" where she is rapping along with the rapper about her sexual exploits and how men pay attention to her because of it. Juxtaposed with her nerdy co-worker at the numerous California stop-signs sets up the awkward mediation with how to avoid interaction with the coworker she slept with, A because of her breakup with her ex-boyfriend, D. It is an everyday experience for those familiar with California. The three scenes take place in her car, bathroom, bedroom, living room, and a quick foray into the company party where she admits she awkwardly and drunkenly slept with. J narrates the episode with rhetorical questions to set up her awkward misadventures. J's awkwardness and Rae's scripting drew the audience in and resulted in fans affirming the series through their comments.

As representation for a new audience in the landscape of Black media in the early 2010s, women identified with a representation that reflects their interiority and could express it to the creator and others on YouTube. I gathered all the comments from the series and analyzed longer comments that both affirmed and exemplified how the show transformed their worldview about themselves and lives. With expressing their interiority, fans responded expressing their pleasure with the first episode. Under the first episode, a commenting fan wrote,

> BAHAHAHAHAA my first time watching this [yes, I live under a rock] and I am soooo happy to find another "awkward black girl" like myself :,D don't feel so alone in this world happy dance I also shaved my head to change my life's scenery, loved a guy named "D" [big mistake __], and rap/sing while

> alone while trying SO hard not to have a nicki vibe XD lolz, #sigh what i'm trying to say is: you're cool, and ima insta-fan :].[138]

The fan affirms every aspect of J's character in the episode relating to being another awkward Black girl. The fan also includes reference to Nicki Minaj, a rapper known for her sexually explicit lyrics and branding representation as J's character raps an original song for the show about a rapper's sexual exploits and compares her own composition to Nicki. The fan also shaved her head to "change" her "life's scenery," and made a "mistake" loving a guy named "D" like "J" did in the episode. These other interior expressions of the fans' life are both affirmative of the show, while being transformative to her life personally due to her relationship with the show and being "happy to find another 'awkward black girl' like myself". By commenting her pleasure with the show, she is invoking an "*affirmative transformative*" work and Black digital intimacy through naming herself a fan for Rae and others to see. It is affirmative by praising the show but also transformative that she can relate to and laugh about her interior and interpersonal relationships in the process.

Generally, fans also expressed desire for the show to remain small to insulate it from changes that can happen on a larger production stage. One commenting fans discusses this aspect specifically:

> I've watched the whole season, and I know this is selfish to say, but I don't want this show to be on TV, I want it to be my little secret, and plus if it was TV, it wouldn't be the same, they would have to censor everything, but at the same time I would want this show to make a lot of money, they deserve it, good script[139]

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[138] Commenting Fan #1, AWKWARD Black Girl | "The Stop Sign" (S. 1, Ep.1), February 3, 2011 YouTube, video, 3:40. "Issa Rae Presents" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIVa9lxkbus
[139] Commenting Fan #2, AWKWARD Black Girl | "The Stop Sign" (S. 1, Ep.1), February 3, 2011 YouTube, video, 3:40. "Issa Rae Presents" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIVa9lxkbus

The fan affirms the series, recognizes the platform affordances, but also as a transformative enterprise understands its impact on the industry, and to a certain extent, other fans through sharing. I also recognize this comment to express affective ownership of the show as they identified so closely and enjoyed the web series, while also wanting it to do well without losing authenticity.

Black fans have had a contentious relationship to media forms regarding representation. Alfred L. Martin's describes the political ways Black fans engage with their fandom objects. The four interlocking discourses Martin introduces are: must-see blackness, economic consumption, pedagogical properties, and understanding the machinations of the culture industries.[140] The comment about the show not being censored but desiring it to make a lot of money collapses three of Martin's assertions: the move to television and the potential economic boost underscores fan understanding the precarity of Black media such that it becomes must-see by knowing that money talks to produce more representations of Black media. The comment also prescribes Martin's fourth way that Black fans engage through pedagogical properties which are the ways Black fans examine "how fit fan objects are for learning and role modeling" or "what can be learned from a particular fan object" about how to move throughout the world as a Black person[141] Related to Martin's exploration of Black fans, I assert that the pedagogical properties for Black fans where pleasure and interiority allow them to learn more about their own interpersonal lives through

[140] Alfred L. Martin, "Fandom While Black: Misty Copeland, Black Panther, Tyler Perry and the Contours of Us Black Fandoms." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2019: 741, doi:10.1177/1367877919854155.
[141] Martin, "Fandom While Black," 741

transformative affective fandoms. Simply, what can fans learn about themselves with each other and from these cultural productions to world-build their own romantic, familial, and friend relationships?

Another fan that commented on the show supports this the pedagogical effects of learning about oneself after watching a trailer for *Insecure* on HBO in 2016 before its premiere. She claims,

> Just saw the trailer for her new HBO show and had to come back and reminisce. In high school, there was no show on television I could relate to. Then a friend told me about this show and I was hooked instantly. I'm overjoyed Issa made the bold choice to share with the world her incredible talents. And, in doing that, she gave so many of us a show we could actually relate to and helped us realize we weren't the only awkward black girl out there. So proud of Issa. I can't wait for Insecure to air![142]

She has learned that she is "essentially" not alone in her understanding of herself as she was represented in media. Notably, the comments I've analyzed and their specific refrain of relating to the "awkward" is important as it created bonds both digitally and in their personal lives to the television show. They are learning from their interior lives that they are not alone in how they feel as "awkward back girls" even with their "awkward" sexualities that aren't mired in the types of sexualities that were circulating widely in the media at the time. The digital intimacy Rae fostered for her fans to explore and world-build through continued with *Insecure*. The popularity of the series garnered a built-in audience for *Insecure* to build upon and shifted to other social media platforms, namely, Twitter and Black Twitter specifically.

[142] Commenting Fan #3, AWKWARD Black Girl | "The Stop Sign" (S. 1, Ep.1), February 3, 2011 YouTube, video, 3:40. "Issa Rae Presents" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIVa9lxkbus

Love = accountability/fin

Once *Insecure* premiered on HBO, Rae could push the boundaries of sexual expression to become more explicit and kept the affective interior plot device of being centered on one behavior from awkward to insecure. Cruz later acknowledges in the *ABG* article concerns about the creative authenticity in the show as it transitioned in form and platform from YouTube to HBO. Rae curated *ABG* alongside Tracy Oliver as independent creators with full creative control as they didn't have to answer to television executives about the direction of the series.

While Cruz's concerns were valid as the platform changed, they were expanded in an innovative way through the insecure mediation and pushing the boundaries of storytelling due to HBO's established credibility in television. Specifically, with the move to HBO, Rae certainly pushed the sexual, language, aesthetics, and content boundaries even further, which may be an affordance of HBO as a platform that regularly pursues characters with blatant and expressed sexuality. As an innovative story arc, Rae flipped the romantic aspects of the show by depicting the woman cheating on her boyfriend, which is typically represented as a man cheating on a woman when heterosexual storylines are depicted. The audience is also privy to how issues in her relationship affected how she also interacted in her career and friendships. *Insecure*'s characters are educated 30-somethings that run in a tight circle with each other due to romantic, professional, and friendship connections in present day Los Angeles. As viewers, we can explore the main character's motivations through the long arc of many of the ancillary characters and how they

navigate their many insecurities with themselves, their relationships, and their careers.

Insecure chronicles 30-year-old, Issa, a Black millennial woman who at beginning of the series is dissatisfied with her life. The show explores dating, family, friendship, sex, career issues, and race through Issa and her best friend Molly's characters. Molly is a successful lawyer, who is career driven and ready to do what it takes to make partner at her primarily white and male law firm. Much like *Between Women*, Los Angeles also becomes another character as the show frequently shows b-roll and they frequent many Black Los Angeles businesses and neighborhoods. The examples in this section are pulled from the third episode of season two titled, "Hella Open."

After cheating on her boyfriend and the demise of their relationship in season one, Issa returns in season two ready to embark on a self-proclaimed "ho phase" to get over her relationship and to re-establish herself as a single woman. In the episode, "Hella Open", Issa and Molly are sitting in her high-rise Los Angeles apartment putting together a bookshelf and are halfway through drinking a gallon bottle of Carlo Rossi wine.[143] Earlier in the episode, Issa is trying to hook up with a man and starts giggling uncontrollably due to his touch. The scene shows Issa attempting to move on from Lawrence, although they had sex again after their breakup. Issa's hook-up with the stranger at the beginning of the episode was awkward and thus prompts the discussion to turn to sex back in Molly's living room. Issa shares that it is "hard

[143] Dayna Lynne North, "Hella Open", *Insecure,* directed by Marta Cunningham, aired August 6, 2017 (Los Angeles: HBO Entertainment, 2017) Television Show.

trying to fuck" and all the ways she gets in her head thinking about if her potential sex partner is not good at sex or if she isn't good at it before they even begin. She also did not have to think about these sexual connection aspects as she had been with Lawrence for several years. Molly is more sexually free than Issa and decides to go on a break from having sex and dating but suggests that they should get back together by saying "I mean, we were supposed to do this ho shit together." Issa says that she always wanted to have a ho phase but fell in love with Lawrence instead. To this point, Issa decides to say fuck love, and feelings and decides that she just wants to have sex and suggests they should go out.

Issa turns to Molly and asks her "Can you teach me how to ho?" To which Molly replies, "Bitch that's rude… and...yes."[144] What does it mean for a Black woman to proclaim that she wants to be taught how to "ho" on a mainstream media platform? The "ho" label has a very specific sexual connotation that has historical resonance in the hypersexualization narrative of Black women. Yet this cultural moment has a specific background that makes a show like *Insecure* not only possible but successful. The show exemplifies deviant choices for working class and middle-class black people on various levels.

Politics of respectability has demanded that Black women are the carriers of propriety and uplifting the race through their sexual piety. It has been widely heralded as a political progress narrative that would help to achieve racial equality. While respectability's historical connotations have shifted through history, it remains and

[144] Dayna Lynne North, "Hella Open", *Insecure,* directed by Marta Cunningham, aired August 6, 2017 (Los Angeles: HBO Entertainment, 2017) Television Show.

has evolved to match the political climate. Lisa B. Thompson discusses how middle-class Black women, often seen as the carriers of Black sexual piety, have begun to create a new narrative concerning sexuality. Thompson credits the new Black aesthetic as the stage for new cultural creations to emerge that aren't as invested in politics of respectability. [145] *Insecure* discusses racist issues that face Black women in their personal and professional lives. It is a decidedly Black cultural production that is not interested in purporting a colorblind storyline. Thus, *Insecure* is an example of how "…contemporary black female writers reject the assumption that racial loyalty prohibits them from writing about sexual desire."[146] Teaching Issa "how to ho" is an expression of desire about her sexual life to where she is not concerned with how it comes across in the public political sphere. Thompson continues:

> These texts do not attempt to revise beliefs about black hypersexualization by erasing sexual matters; instead, they challenge concepts of acceptable sexual behavior for middle-class black women. Refashioning the black female subject in post-civil rights narratives and performance culture is an attempt by cultural producers to consciously expand the possibilities of middle-class black performance and identity. Under this new rubric, writers extend the representation of the middle-class black woman beyond the image of the black lady.[147]

Thompson focuses on the middle class, and it is useful by acknowledging that there are new ways in which Black middle-class women have begun to represent their sex lives. *Insecure*'s characters are educated 30 somethings in a world where a deep

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[145] Lisa B. Thompson. *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class*. The New Black Studies Series. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 5 "Writers seem more willing to craft representation of middle-class black sexuality that are neither pathological nor perfect. This refusal to either demonize or valorize the black middle class allows for a much more fluid view of blackness. If middle-class characters no longer have to act as cultural police in order to uphold narrow, essentialist ideals of blackness, then there is room for diverse representations of middle-class black women."

[146] Thompson*, Beyond the Black Lady*, 5

[147] Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady*, 6

recession hit the country, hip-hop has infiltrated mainstream media, and the world saw the first Black president of the United States. Issa is college educated, but she doesn't make enough to keep up with the rising costs of her apartment which is in the beginning stages of gentrification. This puts her in the working-class sector. Yet her friend, Molly, is certainly a middle-class as a lawyer and has no qualms about expressing her sexuality and having sex with whomever she would like. She is a capable teacher for Issa's request.

An example of the type of pleasurable interiority expanded by Black women is a tweet that garnered well over 400 "likes" and almost 250 retweets on Twitter concerning the scene with Molly and Issa from the same episode "Hella Open." The fan stated, "Hoe phase? It's supposed to end?"[148] with a gif of a man blinking in a confused nature attached to the tweet. The "likes" in this case demonstrate that other fans agree with the fan in that the "hoe phase" is not supposed to end and continue in terms of continued pleasure for Black women. This very simple tweet is the definition of "*affirmative transformative*" as it affirms the show and their worldview, but also is transformative as it pushes the envelope for a Black pleasure politic where the promiscuous "hoe phase" does not end and is applauded as a great endeavor to embark upon. Fans agreement with it is transformative as a public display of an intimate knowledge and intimate fandom practice as the user did not use the official hashtag for the show in the tweet, but fans still understood the context and reference

[148] @TheMeccanism, Twitter, August 6, 2017, https://twitter.com/TheMeccanism/status/894400003678064640?s=20&t=MEPwqAPqNw6IvdKExidNUQ

she was making due to Twitter's affordances for the platform and intimate knowledge.

Black digital fandom practices allows us a glimpse into the ways Black women center their pleasure both sexually and the ways the show continues to reflect their worldviews in new and innovative ways. Black female interiority as theorized by Morgan is ushered in by contemporary Black feminist scholars that examine pleasure and the erotic. Morgan criticizes Black feminist thought for not pushing the boundaries of pleasure in their analysis through only referencing and pedestaling Black feminists texts without re-interrogating them. Morgan writes,

> Bequeathing them the sanctity of dogma and rendering them impervious to the changes of time, we've often failed to re-interrogate these venerated interventions with the temporal, cultural specificity reflected in contemporary US black women's ethnic heterogeneity, queerness and the advent of digital technologies and social media. By ignoring these changes, we've rendered BFT incapable of addressing the variegated landscape of black female sexuality or reading contemporary black women's cultural production for pleasure. Until we do, we will continue to inextricably link trauma and violence to black women's lived and historical experiences and negate pleasure as frivolous, irrelevant, or "unfeminist".[149]

I argue that "*affirmative transformative*" fandom allows an analysis of interiority that takes the venerated scholars of Black feminist thought and bridges them with understanding of not only how contemporary scholars are studying pleasure, but how they are enacted by the populations we study. Digital technologies, and in this case social media, are fertile grounds for Black women's discussion of their pleasure. Fandom reflects the interiority of the cultural production back to themselves to explore and examine their relationship to their own pleasure.

[149] Morgan, "Why We Get Off," 38

While the scene with Issa and Molly was a comedic and interesting moment, another scene in the episode garnered a lot of attention and fandom response. . The first season chronicled how Issa and her boyfriend—eventually ex-boyfriend—Lawrence's relationship devolved from what appeared to be Lawrence's retreat into himself after losing his job and subsequently the loss of intimacy in their relationship. Instead of ending it, Issa cheated, and Lawrence enters a rebounding "friends with benefits" relationship with Tasha who he met at his bank. A few weeks into them getting to know each other, she asks him to help with her family cookout. He arrives to the cookout and he gets overwhelmed assisting her family with set up tasks. Earlier in the episode, his coworkers mention a networking happy hour event they suggest he come to. After feeling overwhelmed at the cookout, Lawrence tells Tasha he has a work event to attend and leaves her at the cookout. He receives a text from her asking about his whereabouts, and he tells her he got caught up working, but shortly after buys a round of shots for his coworkers. As night falls, Tasha calls him and asks him why he didn't return to the cookout, and if he didn't want to come why he didn't communicate it clearly. Lawrence takes the opportunity to tell her that he didn't want anything serious, while she reminds him that he didn't stand by his word to be there at the cookout. Tasha tells him that she didn't expect for their situation to be serious, but Lawrence was acting like it was when his actions proved otherwise.

Tasha calls out the ways his intentions, both in words and actions, don't align and is evident when he attempts to apologize for his actions by citing that he wasn't ready for a serious relationship. She calls out his lack of accountability by stating that he is "a fuck nigga…" … "who is worse than fuck nigga. You a fuck nigga who

thinks he's a good dude."[150] Lawrence's "good guy" credibility is questioned. I found myself engaging with the dialogue on my timeline as I follow many fans of the show and realized at this point that I wanted to study *Insecure* rather than remaining only a fan of the web series and at the time the new the show on HBO. The sympathy fans garnered from Lawrence being cheated on were placed under scrutiny because of his behavior with Tasha.

Through my own social media timeline, I happened to follow a fan that tweeted a long introspective thread after that episode. In it, @peoplesoracle writes about her views on relationships that was spurred by Lawrence's behavior. She did not use the #InsecureHBO hashtag to make her comments visible to the fans and Twitter users that might click on the hashtag. This could be due to not wanting to engage in the dialogue about the show that centers hegemonic representations of relationships as she instead pushes the boundaries of these constructions with her comments or wanting the thread to stay within the confines of her followers. Black digital intimacy and knowledge of the timeline topics assisted me in knowing that she was indeed discussing *Insecure* at the beginning of the thread without mentioning characters.

The fan states that she wishes to "preach a sermon"—which is a nod to Black oration and church culture—and discusses her views about the scene. In a thread with over 30 tweets, she discusses accountability and relationships needing core values as well as for a relationship to change you with the desire to change for the better.[151] She

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[150] "Hella Open" *Insecure.* Season 2. Episode 3.
[151] @peoplesoracle, Twitter, August 6, 2017, https://twitter.com/PeoplesOracle/status/894396846503800833?s=20&t=TwWy8HgHAMGDajWGM5tONw

expounds upon relationship requiring skills and that Lawrence's lack of self-reflection meant that he did not possess those skills by stating: "If being a 'good guy' or 'not one of those chicks' means that you can get to stay exactly who you are, then you can stay exactly by yourself."[152] At the end of the thread, she mentions how she wants " the love I experience in a relationship to aid me in becoming more in alignment with my core values." Bringing her thoughts back to Lawrence and reading a "real life" situation into Lawrence's actions she states, "So many say they want that. But like Lawrence, they act shocked and appalled when it's time to stand & be accountable. He wasn't sorry. tuh."[153] She then drops the proverbial mic by tweeting "Love = accountability/fin."[154] This thread is an example of the balance and emphasis between "*affirmative transformative*" fandom as she expresses her thoughts about the show, her thoughts about relationships, and refers to her own experience. Her tweets garnered a modest amount of engagement and several people responded with various affirmative memes to her comments about the show and relationships. Her interior life as expressed on Twitter exemplifies Black digital intimacies as others joined in by affirming her comments. It is also transformative as other fans possibly learned something new about themselves building upon Martin's argument about the pedagogical aspects of Black fandom. They could reflect about their own

[152] @peoplesoracle, Twitter, August 6, 2017, https://twitter.com/PeoplesOracle/status/894407808589934595?s=20&t=TwWy8HgHAMGDajWGM5tONw
[153] @peoplesoracle, Twitter, August 6, 2017, https://twitter.com/PeoplesOracle/status/894408411533725696?s=20&t=TwWy8HgHAMGDajWGM5tONw
[154] @peoplesoracle, Twitter, August 6, 2017, https://twitter.com/PeoplesOracle/status/894408512104796161?s=20&t=MEPwqAPqNw6IvdKExidNUQ

relationships thus constitute world-building, rethinking, and reimagining their own intimate lives. The original fan also stated that she was considering putting the thread on her blog, which is another iteration of Black digital intimacies where she can engage another audience.

A Real Ass Conversation

Towards the end of the fourth season, in the episode "Lowkey Happy" Lawrence and Issa encounter each other enough through mutual friends and situations that keep them in each other's orbits.[155] They decided to meet up at Lawrence's insistence and the entire episode focuses on their encounter. The entire episode is the one fans were waiting on after three seasons of Lawrence and Issa being in each other's friend and professional circles and constantly running into each other. They fall into an easy banter with each other and have tough conversations about where their relationship went wrong, Issa apologizes for cheating, and they generally clear the air. It is an episode with endearing awkwardness, and comedic aspects serve as a reminder to the audience of their longevity and the ease with which they know each other. It is shot beautifully and immersive through the lighting and dialogue. The cinematography showed them across from each other the entire time as they hashed out their relationship issues. The pace was slower than the episodes as they reconnected and shared many of their innermost thoughts and thoughts and plans. They end up having sex with a song discussing how much the singer wants to show someone they are cherished. The scene is without all the awkwardness and comedy

[155] Natasha Rothwell, "Lowkey Happy," *Insecure*, directed by Ava Berkofsky, aired May 31, 2020 (Los Angeles: HBO Entertainment, 2020) Television Show.

that Issa's previous hookups demonstrated, and without the intensity of Lawrence's sexual encounters. Earlier, Issa states that she is trying to figure out what makes her happy and that it is essentially a decision to be. Before they are reunited sexually, Lawrence says, "tonight made me happy," to which Issa replies "you make me happy" and Lawrence responds "Yeah, me too." the episode ends with Issa walking home along the streets of Los Angeles and ends on a shot of Issa with a slight contented smile on her face.

As a part of Issa's marking strategy, she tapped into the popular digital podcast format to recap episodes. "*Insecuri*tea" is an HBO sponsored podcast about *Insecure* by Crissle West (social media name @crissles), and Francheska Medina (social media name @heyfranhey), two prominent podcast hosts with their own amassed followings due to their podcasts *The Read* and *The Friend Zone*, respectively.[156] The recaps of the show are another place of intimacy where fans can immerse themselves further as fan expression to produce self-making. By naming it "*Insecuri*tea", Rae signals that the podcast is a Black fan space to further explore the real world and fictional implications of the show. "Spilling tea" is a Black American queer lexicon of providing the latest information and/or gossip about a person but has expanded to indicate a hot topic or other salacious information. Issa is directly marketing to her targeted audience, those who know Black idioms thus indicating that this show is for Black audiences.

[156] HBO. "Insecure - Insecuritea Podcast." accessed January, 17 2022. https://www.hbo.com/insecure/insecuritea-podcast.

As an example, the episode "Lowkey Happy" aired on the Sunday after heightened protests due to news circulating around George Floyd's death which defined the Summer of 2020 worldwide amidst Covid-19 pandemic.[157] One of the hosts, @crissles, of the HBO sponsored recap podcast for the show aptly titled *Insecuri*tea primed the audience for the show's distractive nature from the constant news cycle when she tweeted: "if you need a break from reality you should *definitely* tune in to Insecure tonight, trust me. #InsecureHBO #Insecuritea"[158] At the time of writing this dissertation, the engagement on the tweet connoted 299 retweets and over 1,300 likes as her followers anticipated her livetweeted thoughts about the show. A few minutes later during the episode, @crissles later commented about the dialogue on the show "a real ass conversation only happens when both people are ready to put down their ego and be vulnerable. #InsecureHBO #Insecuritea"[159] This tweet garnered over 3,200 retweets and over 8,200 likes as it centered the more mature characterization the fans were seeing in the development of the characters.

While much of the conflict and drama in the series consisted of the characters acting out of their insecurity, fans anticipated this episode as they saw the reconciliation of the main characters through relationship closure and them ending the show by engaging in sex after their conversation. While retweets and likes do not

[157] "Lowkey Happy" Insecure. Season 4. Episode 8.
[158] @crissles, Twitter, May 31, 2020, https://twitter.com/crissles/status/1267274216052789252?s=20&t=TwWy8HgHAMGDajWGM5tONw
[159] @crissles, Twitter, May 31, 2020, https://twitter.com/crissles/status/1267278957826768896?s=20&t=TwWy8HgHAMGDajWGM5tONw

necessarily signpost agreement, they do demonstrate popularity and engagement with the sentiment and discourse surrounding the show. As a popular podcaster and the official show's podcaster @crissles is also asserting and advertising her insider positionality to promote the show, the podcast, and continue to create community around both by using the hashtags. The first tweet about the nature of the show connotes both "affirmative transformative" fandom and Black digital intimacy. @crissles knew her followers would probably be watching the show and she placed it in conversation with the news cycle and affective feelings about the protests and murders. Temporally, the show acted as a reprieve from the news cycle for Black Twitter users who "come together as a family"—an oft repeated phrase—for livetweeting Black cultural productions. It is thus transformational as it encouraged people to affectively shift from their overwhelmed and angry mindsets about the weekend to the affective interpersonal bonds depicted in the show's episode.

Rae is aware of the effects of fandom and social media's affordances and how it fosters fan engagement and growth from fans, thus fans can continue to engage with the content beyond the episodes. The podcast is corporately sponsored by HBO; however, the emphasis is on what the episode can do transformatively for audiences in the crisis of the protests and recognizing continuing police brutality. To that end @crissles realizes the cultural necessity of the moment and the digital intimacy that formed by Black Twitter users and fans of the show. The second tweet about the "real ass conversation" is "*affirmative transformative*" fandom in the same way @peoplesoracle's thread is in that it is expressing commentary on a general observation about relationships. Add in the specific analysis on the stagnation or

growth of the characters interior lives while indicating hashtags to inform followers about the context of the tweets. It is affirmative in the sense that it supports the shows development and transformative in the way that one can reflect upon and think about their own egos and vulnerability when it comes to their interpersonal relationships. The interiority reflected upon is done publicly with other fans and we can learn a lot about the status of interpersonal relationships from these fandom exchanges as fans engage with each other.

Fandom as Marketing and Fandom as Community Practice

Finally, I want to highlight some of the ways Issa utilized digital fandom as a lesson from the power of Black digital fandom that made ABG successful and how she captured it for *Insecure*. Rae purposefully used fan engagement to market *Insecure*, and people have created threads, hashtags, blogs, and podcasts in as a fan endeavor to produce meaning and self-making. As aforementioned Rae created the podcast "*Insecuri*tea" as a way for fans to engage the show. Rae also utilized Luvvie Ajayi's skills as a popular recap writer for the ABC's *Scandal* on her personal blog by inviting Luvvie to write for *Insecure*, but had it sponsored on an HBO website.[160] Black fans also utilized the official hashtag #InsecureHBO, while creating teams for the shows' main romantic relationship. Fans created #TeamIssa and #TeamLawrence to explore each side of their relationship and how it might play in the real world while

[160] Luvvie Ajayi was hired to write the official recaps from her success recapping Scandal on her personal blog. HBO set up a website MyBathroomMirror.com, but it redirects to episodes of Insecure on HBO's website at the time of writing this dissertation. Luvvie also had all the episodes recapped on her own website. Luvvie wrote about it on her website here: Awesomely Luvvie, "Issa Rae's Insecure Is Here, I'm Geeked and I'm Recapping It!" *Awesomely Luvvie* (blog), October 10, 2016. https://awesomelyluvvie.com/2016/10/issa-rae-insecure-recap.html.

also predicting what direction their relationship may go during each episode. The media site cassius.com also created "Mensecure" hosted by Cory Townes and Mouse Jones, which provided a counternarrative of the "man's perspective" as the show's focus was the friendship between Rae's character and her best friend Molly.[161] They discussed the #LawrenceHive, which plays off the Bey Hive, a fan created name for fans of the singer Beyoncé. Claiming a side also does the work of world-making as fans identify with the characters that most reflect their current world view and offer a way to reimagine their lives through the character's story arc. These fandom creations are "*affirmative transformative*" as it reflects their worldviews by affirming their lives and the fandom through the "sides" they choose and transforming the ways they see their relationships through fandom discussion using the hashtag.

Conclusion

Studying digital fandom, epistemologies of interiority as expressed in cultural productions and fueled by Black digital intimacies opens a world of understanding about the human condition. As evidenced by @crissles stating that watching the show would be a break from the world in 2020. "*Affirmative transformative*" usage of the digital and understanding of fandom practices centers how we continue and open ourselves up to the world to foster new connections online and in our personal lives. Rae provided her characters with a complicated story arc that fans are enthralled by. Through watching the show, they are invested in their sexual agency and express it

[161] Mensecure only had a few episodes, but they came back and sponsored a Twitter "Space" after the show aired to discuss the show. cassius | born unapologetic | News, Style, Culture. "MENSECURE Archives." Accessed June 13, 2022. https://cassiuslife.com/tag/mensecure/.

publicly on digital platforms such as Twitter. Black women relate to Issa and Molly's different approaches to sex and relationships and respond in kind to how they feel about the romantic relationships the show depicts. Black women's sexuality and gender has been under inspection, ridicule, and attempted to be ruled for various political and economic purposes. Exemplifying Black women's subjectivity can begin to reconstitute these crafted norms outside of gender and sexuality construction that power structures impose.

Chapter 3: "True Love Breathes Salvation Back into Me": Fandom Connection on Trauma, Pleasure, Pain, and Healing in *Lemonade*, *A Seat at the Table*, and *4:44*

Introduction

Over a year and a half span, the Knowles and Knowles-Carter families released albums that sparked and fostered interrogation of my life and thus my fandom of theirs due to the way they interspersed deeply personal aspects of their lives. The album and accompanying visual album *Lemonade* (April 2016) by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, the album *A Seat at the Table* by Beyoncé's sister (September 2016) Solange Knowles, and the album *4:44* (June 2017) by Beyoncé's husband Shawn "JAY-Z" Carter also thematically piqued my interest as a researcher. I found myself interrogating how I felt about myself, my family, my friends, and various romantic partners, while simultaneously situating myself in the project of graduate school which is knowledge production. These albums helped me to think about my approach to my life and work. Like other examples, these feelings played out for me in social media spaces through sharing my thoughts as well as engaging with the fandom from others as well. Beyoncé, Solange, and JAY-Z's interpersonal confessions and weaving of these tales occurs against a backdrop of Black mundane and quotidian life and presented with abstract aesthetics and allowed for layers of attuned meaning to be tapped into. Due to the nature of their intimate confessions, the emotional charge from each album garnered levels of engagement that were deeper because the families are not fictional personas or characters but real people.

This chapter brings to the fore questions of celebrity that were not central to the previous chapters due to their fictional narratives. The albums in this chapter all hold autobiographical aspects that the creators confirmed in interviews and through videos that accompanied the songs. Thus, the question this chapter poses: what are Black fans producing that are an extension of the albums and their creators through expressing their own interiority in digitally intimate ways? Specifically, when it comes to Black popular culture and celebrities, how are fans responding to the people behind the narrative, their own lives, or some combination of both? Through questioning author and auteurship, we can discover another aspect to affirmative transformative fandom in digital spaces. Fans responded to vulnerability expressed in the albums and visual output in various digital ways and expressed the central question to this entire endeavor on a blog post in response to the title track from the album *4:44*, where DL Chandler wrote "Isn't art supposed to be transformative?"[162] Fan expression of these albums connotes another expression of "affirmative *transformative*" works and Black digital intimacies due to their mega-celebrity status. Fans found affective affirmation of themselves and an affirmation of their fandom objects as well as personal transformation and created new, with the emphasis on transformative fandom expressions from engaging with the videos and lyrics that transform their fandom into something new and creative while also being personally transformative.

[162] D. L. Chandler, "Jay-Z, 4:44, and The Unyielding Weight Of Judgement," *Medium* (blog), July 8, 2017, https://medium.com/@dlchandler123/jay-z-4-44-and-the-unyielding-weight-of-judgement-2099e56accf7.

In this chapter, I return to Kevin Quashie and utilize the monograph, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture. Quashie* examines questions of affective and interior modes that examine culture beyond resistance and into why and how Black people experience life. He writes, "Quiet, instead, is a metaphor for the full range of one's inner life—one's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty. It Is hard to see, even harder to describe, but too less potent in its ineffability."[163] The aesthetic choices that Beyoncé, Solange, and JAY-Z affectively choose in their albums and visuals all encompass elements that present or connote quiet or slowness to affectively inject the gravity and seriousness of their interior expressions. As Quashie writes, "An aesthetic of quiet is not incompatible with black culture, but to notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way."[164] Alternatively, I am using Quashie's theorization around quiet to examine how the productions inspire how fans encounter the interior quiet expressed and digitally created "affirmative *transformative*" fandom with an emphasis on the transformative aspects.

Lemonade chronicles the healing journey of a woman who speculates and discovers that her lover has stepped out of the bounds and promises of their

[163] Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2012)., 6
[164] Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet,* 6

relationship through infidelity and the consequential denial and mistrust. Through an arc of discovering and uncovering aspects about his infidelity, she comes to know more about generations before her and draws on these stories to heal. Beyoncé chronicled her relationship through these songs, which I first thought was fictionalized and less personal until I saw *Lemonade* after the first night it aired. By using African spirituality and New Orleans antebellum iconography through a reimagining of Black women as governing plantations, Beyoncé leads Black women through various vignettes in the visual album that premiered on HBO on April 23, 2016. The album witnesses Beyoncé go on a healing journey of denial, anger, pain, healing, and forgiveness. Solange Knowles' *A Seat at the Table* intersperses aspects of Black love, life, and intimacy through a personal discovery of worth and growth. The albums do this by expressing the expansiveness of emotions: joy, weariness, anger, hope, a lover's sanctuary, and indignation to name a few. As aforementioned, the title of this dissertation is from her song "Borderline (An Ode to Self-Care)" where she sings about the self-care of tending to your relationship after fighting for your rights or just living as a Black person in the United States. *4:44* from Jay-Z delves into different themes that raise questions about Black community wealth building, personal topics such as apologizing to Beyoncé for his indiscretions and other ways he failed their relationship as well as his mother telling her coming out story on the album. All three albums use visuals and words from various Black cultural producers, couples, individuals, and family members as a collage that are woven in with their own words. The kaleidoscope of perspectives and visuals results in a narrative arc that conveys a love of self, love of friends, family, and romantic

partners under the complicated conditions of Black life in the United States. As contemporary albums, they were also released during the heightened attention to police brutality and murder of Black people in the immediate years prior and concurrent to the albums' release due to social media. Through their family's popularity and fan response and creation, we can draw on the context of the very public views in their lives when they had typically been more cryptic about aspects of their lives and how fans were able to tap into a larger network of digital community and share their vulnerabilities.

Reading Auteurship

Fan Studies attends to the ways that fans engage with their texts that center pleasure and affective meaning making as seen in earlier chapters. As aforementioned, once we take account of how Black creators and fans engage with their media objects fandom can be viewed from as doing a different work than what has been readily established in the field. To push the discipline further, Cornel Sandvoss challenges Fan Studies scholars to consider the viability or usage of authorship through viewing fan objects as texts, as one would connote in literary studies, and fans as readers. To do so, Sandvoss states that scholars must return to the wider cultural meaning fans produce rather than only acknowledging them within their subcultural contexts. Sandvoss argues that by conceptualizing fandom as a form of "pleasurable subversion, as the rallying point of communities, as focus of audiences' own textual activities or performances" that Fan Studies "neglected the act of reading as the interface between micro (reader) and macro (the text and its systems

of production)."[165] However, as Sandvoss does not center race, I intervene through demonstrating that this is exactly what Black creators and their subsequent fandoms accomplish and express in digital spaces. Fandom Studies' overarching neglect of Black identities with cultural productions that feature Black casts and storylines do this. Sandvoss explains that in an increasingly mediated world, there are various ways to interact with a fandom object—articles, videos, newspapers, books, music, film etc.—and that fans create a "*field of gravity*" around their fandom objects with the various ways one can interact with the text. Essentially, fans may engage with an article, radio/podcast, television show etc. about their fandom object thus constituting a gravitational pull of multimedia to centrally engage with their fandom object.[166] Thus, "text is constituted through a multiplicity of textual elements; it is by definition intertextual and formed between and across texts as defined at the point of production."[167] Inquiry and analysis about production are consistent with all of the productions I engage, but when mega celebrity is thrown in relief by sharing their interior lives requires a deeper investigation. The Knowles and Knowles-Carter family have created an aesthetic of inter- and hypertextual media within their productions that collapse several ways we engage the field of gravity for fandom objects and thus expand the ways fans engage their productions or as Sandvoss connotes, their text. With the productions in this chapter, the creators have included

[165] Cornel Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader?: Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture," in *Fandom : Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 72
[166] Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader," 65, 67
[167] Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader," 67

various imageries, iconographies, and layers of meaning that tell their stories and thus fans are reading their texts with layers of attuned meaning making.

Returning to Wanzo's "identity hermeneutics" in this chapter states that Black fans read the texts in the ways that Sandvoss calls for separation from the author.[168] With the hyper textuality of popular media, Sandvoss questions the role of the author and if fan studies scholars should remove thinking of popular media as authored texts as it is understood in literary studies. Sandvoss argues, "we do not describe popular icons such as musicians, actors, or athletes, or other fan objects such as sport teams, as deliberately authored texts."[169] Perhaps sports teams, athletes, and actors are not read as authors because they have been constructed by their physical talent or the role they play, but this standpoint does not take into consideration interiority express in the ways they narrate and construct the aspects that lie outside of their talent. Sandvoss continues:

> Whether a given fan object is found in a novel, a television program, or a popular icon, fan objects are read as texts on the level of the fan/reader. They all constitute a set of signs and symbols that fans encounter in their frames of representation and mediation, and from which they create meaning in the process of reading. Consequently, what is needed is a broad definition of texts that is not based on authorship, but on texts as frames of realizable meanings that span across single or multiple communicative acts, including visual, sound-based, and written communication.[170]

As seen in previous chapters, "representation and mediation" are central to how we analyze the affective interiority and intimacy expressed by creators and fandom in digital spaces. My question for this chapter poses, what if we thought about texts of

[168] Rebecca Wanzo. "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (2015). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0699.
[169] Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader," 64
[170] Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader," 64

popular icons, in this case the Knowles and Knowles-Carter families, as specifically authored and thus then blurs the lines of what we think of authored texts and how they are read? Due to the representation and mediation questions that race and gender garner in popular media and digital spaces, we can arrive at a different consensus of how fans, especially Black fans, encounter their fandom objects for meaning making. The "realizable meanings" that fans create in the process of reading as Sandvoss argues are centrally related to how fans are responding to the interiority expressed by authored texts. As the Knowles and Knowles-Carter families collapse multiple communicative acts that are visual, sound-based, and written their fans are responded through "affirmative transformative" fandom that expresses interiority on a different level as they are also expressing their real-life experiences.

Expanding on the role their celebrity plays, the Knowles and Knowles Carter families garner a lot of speculation about their private lives due to their mega celebrity status. They have thwarted much of the curiosity through interviewing with select media outlets and by addressing private aspects of their lives through songwriting. Yet, fans always crave more. Citing the popularity of celebrity biographies, Sandvoss acknowledges that "even where those in the center of the public gaze aim to maintain a public and hence staged persona, fans' interests often focus on what lies behind the public facade."[171] The ways we understand writers as authors of fiction can also be applied to the celebrity lives of the Knowles and Knowles-Carter families through the mediation of their hypertextual musical and visual output that is also deeply personal.

[171] Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader," 64

Auteur theory or auteurship has been utilized in literary and film studies to describe "meaning in a cultural text to the intentions of an individual creative source" and when applied to popular music auteurs can be seen as "producers of 'art', extending the cultural form and, the process, challenging their listeners."[172] Notably, auteurs "are working within an industrial system, individual performer(s) are, at least primarily, responsible for their recorded product."[173] Loy, Rickwood, and Bennett examine the role of the auteur when analyzing music artists in the introduction to an anthology on popular music stars and stardom. They write that "many contemporary stars are now frequently considered auteurs, carefully maintaining control over their public profile" and that there is "a fine distinction between popular music stardom and auteur status; the latter signifying the reception of an artist as being genuine creative, and one who explores and extends the dimensions of their art form."[174] Playing with the similarity of terms in author and auteurship through also centering the artists as opposed to only using the text to read fandom output, there is a decidedly more vivid picture of the role of stars as "a mythic constructs, playing a key role in their fans ability to construct meaning out of everyday life."[175] Race and gender compounds the ability for fans to construct meaning out of everyday life due to representation combined with the hypertextuality of the Knowles and Knowles-Carter sonic and vision aesthetics. Through examining interiority and intimacy, we

[172] Roy Shuker, *Popular Music Culture: The Key Concepts*. 3rd ed. Routledge Key Guides. New York: Routledge, 2012, 86
[173] Shuker, *Popular Music Culture,* 86
[174] Stephen Loy, Julie Rickwood, and Samantha Bennett. "Popular Music, Stars and Stardom: Definitions, Discourses, Interpretations," in *Popular Music, Stars and Stardom*, ed. Stephen Loy, Julie Rickwood, and Samantha Bennett, (ANU Press, 2018.), 8 http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv301dk8.5.
[175] Loy, Rickwood, Bennett, "Popular Music, Stars, and Stardom," 8

can see how auteurship operates in expressing details about their intimate lives and thus how fans read and respond with "affirmative *transformative*" fandom.

The cultural productions chosen for this chapter weave together a tale of hope and resistance for Black lives and how this intersects with intimacies that constitute friendships, self-relations, romantic pairings, and within families. For this chapter, I turn to two scholars that have taken up interiority in a different way than Morgan in chapter two regarding pleasure and *black female interiority* and how I am conceptualizing Cohen with "deviance as resistance" as an expression of interiority in chapter one.[176] Elizabeth Alexander defines interiority as:

> The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of. … Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty.[177]

Black digital practices are emblematic of the black imaginary that is expressed in public but is also beyond the public to express wild imaginations. Thinking alongside locative aspects, the conversations are happening in the space of the home as a site where our intimate lives unfold in vulnerable ways; this is true both intimate lives of where we live and use social media and the relationships explored in fandom. Explained differently, it is both locative to the home but also interior as a place to reimagine how we relate to one another. Alexander theorizes, "in the spaces we designate and create, the self is made visible in the spaces we occupy, literal "black interiors," the inside of homes, that black people live in. Are the living rooms of those

[176] Cohen, "Deviance As Resistance", https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X04040044.
[177] Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays*. Saint Paul, (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2004), 2

homes, the spaces most consciously arranged and presented, representative of not only living space but of one's self, one's aesthetic self?"[178] The aesthetic self as created in Black home spaces are indicative of "*affirmative transformative*" fandoms through reading fandom objects as texts and interrogating the Black imaginary around what could be and the possibilities of Black intimacies. In this chapter, I examine the hypertextuality of these albums and visuals through examining interiority through quiet as Quashie describes.

Digitally, due to their celebrity status, the fandom of their albums also took on more transformative fandom, as in fans created inspired pieces for their fandoms. Marisa Parham offers insight into how I am reading "affirmative *transformative*" fandom in relation to Black social media fandom. Parham writes, "*signals*—how communities use compressed texts to come into being across time and space, *samples*—cultural performances that both crystalize and iterate signals, and *strobes*—oscillations that break the signal, event-times that capture the truth of the signals displaced origin."[179] For my purposes, signals are social media affordances that allow transformative works to be produced, samples are the albums and their grand scale in distribution and fandom discourse, and strobes are the "affirmative *transformative*" fandom produced. Fans created fandom works that captured the affective registers felt from these albums and the ways that people encountered them on social media. While Parham focuses on trauma as haunting as affect captured by signal, samples, and strobes, I am utilizing the affective mode of quiet and intimate spaces to construct my

[178] Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays*., 9
[179] Marisa Parham, "Sample | Signal | Strobe: Haunting, Social Media, and Black Digitality," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities Debates in the DH Manifold*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

argument. Parham specifies that "moving across these terms provides an opportunity for thinking intentionally but broadly about the affective life of social media utterances, with an eye to how social media works through and against us, with us and without us."[180] Fans created and described their fandoms with strong affective language in support of and against these albums, while also interpreting them to understand aspects of their lives in fuller relief. Specifically, with Black digital practice, Parham argues, "Digital social media platforms are important to this inquiry not only because they have been so heavily used by African Americans but also because social media experience can be productively understood as technically parallel to historical complex matters of cultural ownership, transmission, and participation in African American culture."[181] Black digital fandom is exactly that—a practice that is "technically parallel" as it relates to participation in African American culture. The Knowles and Knowles-Carter's family celebrity status and consequent reach to massive audiences produced a different level of engagement that captures the affective ways Black fans use the digital to affirm themselves and transform the ways they encounter their personal lives.

Lemons into Lemonade

On April 23, 2016, there was a synergy of fandom expressed online as people livetweeted their reactions to Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* which premiered on HBO. "Formation" was the first single from the album released in the same surprise

[180] Parham, "Sample | Signal | Strobe"
[181] Parham, "Sample | Signal | Strobe"

manner in February 2016.[182] Beyoncé and her backup dancers performed the song in black and gold military regalia at the SuperBowl half-time show. After the performance, *Lemonade* the album and visual event, was publicized prior to its release; most of the content was unknown besides the focus on racial justice visuals, capitalistic braggadocios, and sexual desire and expression in "Formation". On Twitter, the conversation during and after the visual album aired turned personal due to the content about Beyoncé's relationship and family shared through the album. I watched the release the day after it debuted, and closely followed how fans, specifically Black women, shared their experiences of how they experienced many of the themes Beyoncé expressed in the album. Before seeing the visual album, I did not believe *Lemonade* centered the real-life painful aspects of JAY-Z and Beyoncé's relationship. Especially due to how Beyoncé was notoriously quiet about their relationship. The visual album made it clear as JAY-Z makes an appearance on the visual for "Sandcastles". Besides fans affirming the content, the days following the debut also resulted in fans discussing their own personal lives in relation to the album content and produced "affirmative *transformative*" fandom due to their relation to the content.

Aesthetically, the visuals for *Lemonade* are multilayered; it is a visual masterpiece that weaves together poetry between songs that were written by British-Somali poet Warsan Shire.[183] As a fan of Warsan, I immediately recognized her poetry, which added to the hypertextuality of the visual album. Interspersed between

[182] *Beyoncé*: *Lemonade*, directed by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (2016; HBO).
[183] Beyoncé. *Lemonade,* directed by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. Good Company, Parkwood Entertainment, 2016, HBO.

each song are titles for each section of the album: Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness Resurrection, Hope, and Redemption. Each title weaves together the discovery of infidelity and the feelings that ultimately lead to reconciliation by the end of the album. Drawing from antebellum style clothing and location, the album is distinctly situated in the south with stylings particularly reminiscent of Louisiana and New Orleans, Louisiana specifically which prominently feature the Superdome—a New Orleans entertainment stadium landmark, which was also a site of despair during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 for many of the city's Black residents. There are also nods to African spirituality throughout the visual album with water and fire playing prominent roles.[184] With the multilayered messages and meanings, Black fans could layer their own meaning onto the visual album through the experience of being descendants of enslaved people experiencing disruptions to their intimate lives. There is a brief scene in the album features mothers of slain Black men by the police that was taken up in the visual accompaniments for the songs "Formation" and "Freedom". What does it mean for fans to digitally experience and respond to Black layers of attuned meaning with an intimate knowledge attached to both the storyline and visual nods? Affirmative transformative—with the emphasis on the transformative aspects—fandom explains their meaning making processes as an exercise in Black knowledge production, meaning and worldmaking.

[184] Scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley chronicles many of the African diasporic based religions in a book about Lemonade. She also intersperses much of her own life alongside Beyoncé to discuss her fandom. This book is certainly a work of Black acafandom. See Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism.* Austin: University of Texas, 2018.

The "affirmative *transformative*" fandom I would like to highlight for *Lemonade* is the *Lemonade* Syllabus as gathered by Candice Benbow and contributed to by several Black women cultural critics, activists, theologians, artists, and academics.[185] I would constitute the syllabus as a work that is "affirmative *transformative*" with the emphasis on transformative as it is a translation of their fandom and understanding of *Lemonade* into a new creation. We are taught and trained to think of a syllabus in the academic setting in that it is a pedological tool used with teaching. I argue that it is also transformative as an intimate tool in the context of fandom for learning and expansion of learning more about oneself. The intent of the syllabus is for confession and healing in the embodied experiences of the persons who compiled the syllabus. It is also a site and possible transformation as a tool for teaching, but like the fandom from Rae's *Insecure*, it is to teach fans more about themselves. Political themes about Black womanhood in *Lemonade* are situated within a story of betrayal and redemption from an intimate partner. *Lemonade* also reveals itself as a commentary on generational trauma and the ways that these patterns are perpetuated. Beyoncé wrote in an article months after *Lemonade's* release that she wanted to examine generational failures of love within her family through the album.[186]

Due to my academic and Black feminist interests, I tend to follow scholars, activists, and people who share and center those interests in their professional and personal lives. The collaborative effort for this syllabus is made possible through the

[185] Candice Benbow, "Lemonade Syllabus," (syllabus, Issuu, https://issuu.com/candicebenbow/docs/lemonade_syllabus_2016, May 7, 2016).
[186] Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, "Beyoncé in Her Own Words: Her Life, Her Body, Her Heritage," Vogue, August 6, 2018, https://www.vogue.com/article/beyonce-september-issue-2018.

affordances of Twitter's platform, namely, the usage of the hashtag. The syllabus was uploaded to issu.com, a place to upload digital content in the form of zines or magazines.[187] It is downloadable and thus can be printed as well. Prior to the #LemonadeSyllabus, the #FergusonSyllabus, #BlkWomen Syllabus and several others since *Lemonade*'s debut went viral and circulated widely. The #FergusonSyllabus and the #BlkWomen syllabi were produced as a response to police violence against Black people.[188] While these important interventions also connote the same types of Black digital intimacies I experienced with the #LemonadeSyllabus' curation; they were produced under a different affective lens. The signal, sample, and strobe from for these syllabi were produced to understand a traumatic event, the histories that led up to it, and the possible solutions. In contrast, the #LemonadeSyllabus was not made in response to the traumas of police brutality, but rather the relationship issues Beyoncé explores in the album. Further, the #FergusonSyllabus does not share the same aesthetic design choices of the #Lemonade Syllabus and Benbow's effort is transformative in the sense that it takes the form of the syllabus beyond the stark black and white design and as a reflection of the multimedia found in the visual album that inspired it. The *Lemonade Syllabus*, is a selection of cultural productions and scholarship that began through listing inspiration for the aesthetic and thematic choices Beyoncé made in the visual album. Those who

[187] "Digital Publishing Platform & Content Publishing Solutions," Issuu, accessed March 29, 2022, https://issuu.com/.
[188] Daina Ramey Berry. "#BlkWomenSyllabus: Here Are 25 Must Reads for the Empowered Black Woman," (syllabus, *For Harriet* Blog, http://theculture.forharriet.com/2015/08/blkwomensyllabus-here-are-25-must-reads.html, 2015). See also, Sherri Williams. "The Black Digital Syllabus Movement: The Fusion of Academia, Activism and Arts." *Howard Journal of Communications* 31, no. 5 (October 2020): 493–508. https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2020.1743393.

contributed also took to Twitter to combine their headshots with their contributions on a template that features cut lemons. The syllabus as an educational tool provides a useful frame of reference for the ways we expect the information to be used. Syllabi are supposed to help us understand a concept or topic further and are often created by one person.

The syllabus is an "affirmative *transformative*" work because it is affirmative and transformative in the traditional fandom sense: fans enjoyed *Lemonade* and it is transformative as the syllabus is a creative endeavor where the curators made it their own; it is "affirmative *transformative*" it both affirmed fans experience of the album as Black women and it is transformative as it documents texts that reflect what was seen in Lemonade as a way to understand the themes situated therein and as texts that meant something to the development and transformation of Black women. It is also a "labor of love" for Black women and by Black women who were inspired by Beyoncé's interiority. Benbow writes in the introduction, "I also hope this inspires other sisters to tap into their own magic and give us the work that will heal and transform us." Playing with the genre and form of the syllabus and the emphasis on the transformative aspect of creating the syllabus, Benbow encourages, "Let us continue to take the lemons at our feet and make lemonade" which references a line in the visual abut from JAY-Z's grandmother's birthday where she explains that while at times while life was difficult, she took the hard parts and made lemons into lemonade. Benbow also thanks Beyoncé for expressing her interiority, "B- thank you for your vulnerability and your willingness to tell our story in such a creative and powerful way. We needed this. Thank you for knowing that we needed it."

Acknowledging that Beyoncé was vulnerable allowed the creators to be vulnerable as well and construct the syllabus. The syllabus does the double work of affirming the creators as they all saw the aesthetic and transformative references Beyoncé employs in Lemonade as well as taking their fandom a step further and utilizing the syllabus to understand the themes, and thus themselves further by including theoretical texts about the themes the visual album presents.

For instance, under the Fiction and Literature section, contributors list *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash which Beyoncé draws inspiration from for the physical setting and clothing style although the film takes place in a different part of the Southern United States.[189] As far as literature that features fraught heterosexual relationships, the contributors saw inspiration from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Brothers and Sisters* by Bebe Moore Campbell, and *Waiting to Exhale* by Terri McMillan.[190] These texts center extensively on metaphorical "Love Droughts" while trying not to lose oneself to the pursuit and maintenance of relationships that are categorically altered by race and gender construction of Black heterosexual relationships. To that end, under Black Feminism the syllabus also lists *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill Collins and texts from bell hooks that center love and relationships.[191] As these are causes that are important to how Black women have

[189] *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash (1999; New York, NY: Plume).
[190] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York, First Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006); Bebe Moore Campbell, *Brothers and Sisters*, (New York: Putnam, 1994); Terry McMillan, *Waiting to Exhale* (New York: Viking, 1996).
[191] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* [2nd ed.] (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009); bell hooks. *All About Love: New Visions*. (New York: William Morrow, 2000).

theorized about the romantic, familial, and friendship and general affective lives, it is fitting that contributors cited them as both inspiring to Beyoncé and would be beneficial to reading them to understand *Lemonade*'s contribution further.

Thus, the syllabus affirms the texts listed on it themselves as transformative, *Lemonade* as a text that continues continuing in the genealogies of that tradition and affirms their own speculations about their love lives. Syllabi are also periods of study, often quiet—as the syllabus is mainly comprised of film and books— that can be completed collaboratively or alone. In that way, this is also an affectively quiet and introspective affirmative transformative work that reflects and is read through the hypertextuality found in the visuals and lyrics in the film. I argue that the collaboration and digital circulation that spurred on the syllabus as a viable format, is an example of Black digital intimacies as the hashtag circulated within a specific group of collaborators that both intimately knew each other and were vulnerable enough to reach out as well. The digital practice of the syllabus as started by the #FergusonSyllabus but perpetuated with a different affective mode by the *Lemonade* Syllabus and others, is a site where Black people are the actors and purveyors of their own interiority as it relates to their interpersonal lives. It is produced to help to stop the proverbial "Love Drought" of self and relationships with others.

"I tried to ____ it away…"

Solange Knowles first single from her third studio album, *A Seat at the Table*, was released on September 30, 2016. Solange's album is about the constant ways Black people are discriminated against and those interior feelings that accompany the scenarios and situations Black people are confronted with every day. Songs like

"Weary" and "Mad" have specific affective underpinnings to racial justice that are not overtly stated as opposed to the more political "Don't Touch my Hair" extolling the virtues and resistance of Black hair, or "F.U.B.U." which is an acronym "For Us, By Us" which was also a popular clothing brand of the same name in the early 2000s. For instance, her explanation of "Borderline (An Ode to Self-Care)", as referenced in the introduction of my dissertation is specifically for Black people to take a break from the onslaught of daily life as Black people with each other, in their intimate home spaces, or as this dissertation theorizes about what happens when that theorization occurs in online spaces? Solange's album was produced and released separately from the Beyoncé and JAY-Z's album. However, the affective registers her mother and father share on the interludes of the album certainly influenced Beyoncé and what also happened with JAY-Z as they are all family. Also what has been hailed as "the elevator incident" at the Met Gala captured the attention of fans of the family's music and those that aren't as it captured an intimate moment of a family that has controlled their media output.[192] The family confession of anger due to integration from Solange and Beyoncé's father and pride in Black identity from their mother on *A Seat at the Table* provide a basis of understanding interiority and generational aspects that are exemplified in their musical output.

On October 2, 2016, videos for two singles, "Cranes in the Sky" and "Don't Touch My Hair" were released on YouTube. This section will focus on "Cranes in the Sky" as it focuses on coping with various relationships.[193] The video is a series of

[192] Nolan Feeney. Jay Z, Solange, and Beyoncé: 'We Have Moved Forward'. Time.com May 15, 2014. https://time.com/101940/beyonce-jayz-solange-statement-elevator-incident/
[193] Solange – Cranes in the Sky (Video) October 2, 2016. YouTube video solangeknowlesmusic, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0qrinhNnOM

stills that chronicle flowy modern dance choreography from Solange by herself to being in a group of Black women. The lyrics and the video both connote a quiet interiority as it relates to personal and interpersonal conflict and healing. Solange exemplifies how trying to outrun your issues do not necessarily solve issues although these acts may give one the illusion of temporary relief. Solange, and her ex-husband directed the video that features sparse settings and movements accompany the lyrics. The lyrics chronicle how Solange utilized various economic, physical, and romantic choices to avoid the inner work that felt like "metal clouds." To indicate this visually, one vignette features Solange in a dress made of purple yarn while off camera it is slowly unraveling the dress from her forearm and in another scene, she is holding a translucent bag over her shoulder that has white boxes in it. The literal and figurative unraveling and heavy bag carrying against constructed sets is metaphorically interspersed with abstract choreography set in nature is both hypertextualized and simplistic in nature to allow for various entry points for fans into the imagery and lyrics. Solange's interiority expressed lyrically in the song is both supported by the sparseness and specificity of placing other Black women—demonstrated by them holding, touching, or even a literal dress with long connecting panels of fabric connecting the women—in the video as it allows for interpretation of intimate connectedness. Specifically, with how Black people, and specifically Black women in the case of the video, may cope with the "metal clouds". Fans read the lyrics and video and interpreted how her lyrics related to their lives alongside Solange.

Medium.com, established in 2012, is a popular blogging host site that claims itself as "a new model for digital publishing" through fostering "nuance, complexity,

and vital storytelling without giving into the incentives of advertising."[194] The website defines itself as conduit and space for ideas from anyone including "thought-leaders, journalists, experts, and individuals with unique perspectives." Writers are incentivized to publish on medium.com through monetized engagement with individual posts, thus bringing a different economic layer and platform affordance to traditional concepts of blogging and digital magazine publishing. The platform is accessible with a membership and due to the income incentive and competition on the platform writers often construct their content as self-help or information providing service.

One such blog connotes "affirmative *transformative*" fandom as the author used their personal interior feelings to discuss and then demonstrate ways to confront the "metal clouds", while it was also transformative as she made a new fandom creation while also encouraging transformation in her readers. Chantia Singleton's blog, "The Realness Behind Solange's, "Cranes in the Sky" and what we can learn from it" was published only a few days after the album and video debuted on October 7, 2016.[195] Through rhetorical invitations and questions such as "Come have ***A Seat at the Table*** and lets revisit some of her lyrics and hopefully grow from the overall message."… and "Can you relate to this at all?" after listing many of the ways she has avoided confronting her own "metal clouds".[196] Singleton situates the blog by

[194] David Streitfeld, "'The Internet Is Broken': @ev Is Trying to Salvage It." *The New York Times*, May 20, 2017, sec. Technology. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/technology/evan-williams-medium-twitter-internet.html.
[195] Chantia Singleton, "The Realness Behind Solange's, 'Cranes in the Sky' and What We Can Learn from It.," *Medium* (blog), October 8, 2016, https://medium.com/@chantiasingleton/the-realness-behind-solanges-cranes-in-the-sky-and-what-we-can-learn-from-it-672d31caab6c.
[196] Singleton, "The Realness Behind Solange"

recounting and relating to the ways people avoid their lives. She states, "**We try to stuff our voids with the temporary dopamine release that we extra from sex, relationships, money, possession, drugs,** etc."[197] She states that while she wasn't addicted to substances as it runs in her family, she was addicted to being in relationships dubbing it **"The Relationship Package"** that she ordered. In sum, she relates that she used and relationship highs to cover the pain from parental abandonment and not feeling loved as a child. Further she states that she ran away from her problems and comedically quips that you would have thought she was Usain Bolt II, in the same way that Solange sings, "I traveled 70 states, I thought moving around make me feel better."[198] While sharing her interior life on the text-based platform, she also states the steps she took to heal and continue to engage in, rather than continuing to fill the void with activities or distractions. Singleton lists admitting one's issues, seeking counseling/and or a higher power, analyzing what you subconsciously consume through taking break from media and choosing to read an inspirational book instead, taking time for yourself alone, and knowing that maintaining growth is a process that assumes constant evolution."[199] Singleton ends the blog by stating "I hope this helps someone fly."[200] Singleton took the song and used to reflect on the growth and healing she took on and affirmatively transformed her fandom into a blog to help others.

While Singleton's avatar on the site demonstrates she is a Black woman she did not relate the song to her identity as a Black woman like another medium.com

[197] Singleton, "The Realness Behind Solange"
[198] Singleton, "The Realness Behind Solange"
[199] Singleton, "The Realness Behind Solange"
[200] Singleton, "The Realness Behind Solange"

author, Jessica W., did in her blog "Is This What Solange Was Talking About?" several years after the albums debut in 2020. Singleton complicates the song beyond the romantic implications and provides another affirmative transformative interpretation of the song. She first recalls hearing the song and not understanding the song or the visuals to the song as she assumed it was about the loss of a romantic relationship but knew it about "a number of tasks she attempted to complete in an effort to make *something* go away."[201] She also recognizes the abstract nature of the video, writing, "And then there was the video. Another distraction from what she was saying. So many visuals of Black humanity in soft, dreamy color schemes. Something about the juxtaposition of black skin tones against pastels and earth tones is so visually soothing, yet I still wasn't quite connecting the dots."[202] She enjoyed the song and the visual in a non-specific way, which is another pertinent understanding of fandom. To answer the question in the title of the blog, she writes, "It wasn't until last week that it occurred to me that maybe the thing she wanted to go away was the weight of oppression that we carry every damn day as Black people."[203] She interprets the song as Solange not just running from interior anguish, but also the stressors Black people carry as well.

The blog was published, on June 7, 2020, after an intense period of racial injustice as outlined in chapter two with *Insecure*'s episode acting as a balm or temporary respite from the protests. The writer lists a series of violent events in the spring of 2020 including the publicized murders of Black people by police, a brutal

[201] Jessica W, "Is This What Solange Was Talking About?," *Medium* (blog), June 7, 2020, https://medium.com/@notcbradshaw/is-this-what-solange-was-talking-about-99a055b27dda.
[202] Jessica W, "Is This What Solange"
[203] Jessica W, "Is This What Solange"

attack against a Black trans woman at the height of the protests, women from her alma mater outting their sexual assault attackers on Twitter to be met with disbelief, and the increasing demographic coverage of the pandemic's overindexing impact of death in Black communities. She writes, "Whether we want to admit it or not, there's really nothing we can do to save ourselves when the world has weaponized our appearance. There's no real safe way to navigate the world as a Black person and even more so if you're a Black trans person. I felt my heart break for all the injustice in the world towards people who want nothing more than to be left alone to exist peacefully and prosperously."[204] Relating it back to the song, she accounts how she attempted to journal, run, pray, meditate, connect with friends, shop, busy herself with work, all to no avail. Instead, she chose to sit with her feelings and to allow them to exist without chasing them away as Solange and Singleton both concluded does not work in the meantime. To conclude the blog, she writes, "So I allowed myself to be angry, and afraid, and sad, and hopeless. And now, as I am looking for the role I can play in this revolution as companies and individuals are waking up to what we've been screaming at them since 1619, I'm just waiting for the strings to come in to soften the vibe."[205] "Cranes in the Sky" chronicle's Solange's interiority and her fans responded in kind to two different scenarios where both ponder questions of how one may encounter life's challenges. They both are published on a website with the intention of reaching audiences that are looking for blogs that are "nuanced and complex" according to what medium.com hopes the writers and audience are looking

[204] Jessica W, "Is This What Solange"
[205] Jessica W, "Is This What Solange"

for. Both blogs did not garner a lot of engagement, but they did the important work of "affirmative *transformative*" fandom for the authors themselves and those who may have read the blog but not engaged by leaving a comment or "clapping" which is medium's version of Facebook's "like" or Twitter's "favorite". Black digital intimacies are fostered as fans confess their intimate lives through their fandom and share on social media sites.

"Isn't art supposed to be transformative?"

JAY-Z released *4:44* on June 30, 2017 and continued the affective interiority storytelling as evidenced in his wife's and sister-in-law projects. JAY-Z thematically addresses hip hop culture, his relationships—notably those with his wife, child, and mother—and political aspects of Black life in America. For the purposes of this section, I will focus on the title track, "4:44", as it garnered a lot of discussion on social media platforms due to the way he directly addressed his marriage from his perspective. Specifically concerning confession of infidelity ultimately alluded to in *Lemonade* and confirmed in an interview he gave to the *New York Times*.[206] There is an arc inherent in the affirmative transformative fandom expressed with JAY-Z's confession on the track *4:44* that reveals a lot about what the combination of celebrity, fandom, and how heteronormative relationships are perceived and enacted.

The following blogs that discuss the lyrics do not reference the visual as it was released on August 1, 2017, a month after the album's release. The track is exactly

[206] Dean Baquet. "Jay-Z Discusses Rap, Marriage and Being a Black Man in Trump's America." *The New York Times,* November 29, 2017, sec. T Magazine. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/29/t-magazine/jay-z-dean-baquet-interview.html

four minutes and forty-four seconds long while the video, that proclaims itself as a short film on the first still, is eight minutes and eleven seconds long. The video is a hypertextualized series of dance vignettes and social media posts interspersed with JAY-Z's rapping the lyrics to the song on top of many of the dance scenes. Like "Love Drought", JAY-Z does not rap along with the lyrics. For fans reading the visual with the lyrics, it allows for entrance into the song with various points that seem both contradictory and complimentary to theme of the song. I posit that the chaotic choices the visual interjects propels his apology to Beyoncé in sharper relief with comparison to Black life in America much in the same way *Lemonade* did for Black women in the arc of the entire album and visual. That these issues JAY-Z confesses to on the song are placed within the larger thematics of Black life in America and that the visuals accompany a song that is about romantic life is an important note to register. Without a visual, fans only had his lyrics to interpret, and the reading of the lyrics and fans responded with strong opinions about the song and interspersed their own interior feelings and experiences into their reactions.

In "4:44" lyrics, JAY-Z apologizes for the big and small ways he mistreated Beyoncé beyond his confession of infidelity over the course of their dating and married life.[207] He states that his daughter's birth opened his eyes to how he not only treated his wife but also other women and the impending shame of his children knowing the intricacies of his behavior. He begins the song with a series of apologies in the first verse for his romantic missteps and their impact on Beyoncé's life and

[207] JAY-Z, "4:44". *4:44*, June 30, 2017, https://genius.com/Jay-z-4-44-lyrics.

body—alluding to miscarriages the singer suffered as alluded to in previous songs. While fans had mixed messages that critiqued and praised JAY-Z's lyrics, I argue that in this articulation of an inner quiet life JAY-Z is enacting oneness as a part of Black subjectivity as Quashie posits. Writing about vulnerability, Quashie states,

> Oneness, then is important to understanding black cultural identity beyond the limits of public expressiveness or a discourse of resistance. Within the concept of oneness, vulnerability is a human condition, not merely a particular form of black violation; vulnerability is ordinary, necessary, not exceptional. Every human being has to encounter humility, has to be able to feel and countenance far—an inner life depends on having an awareness of what it is to feel small and wreckable and desperate (as well as what it is to feel brave, strong, and capable).[208]

While levels of vulnerability have been explored by Hip Hop and JAY-Z is certainly not the first to do so, his status as an auteur and superstardom propelled his apology to his wife in new stratosphere. While Quashie shies away from thinking about public expressiveness, as seen in the first chapter, it is in public, in an intimate public where our innermost life is stretched and transformed. Fandom, again, is the conduit for transformation and knowledge production. In the case of this family of artists, the emphasis remains on the "affirmative *transformative*" aspects.

These next blogs I analyze center scholars of Black studies with emphasis on how the affective hurt and pain expressed in the song plays out for both JAY-Z, Beyoncé, and the larger understanding of Black cishet relationships. Professor, cultural critic, and writer Josie Pickens contributed a blog to The Black Youth Project's website. The title, "But Black women are not cocoons: I'm tired of being expected to mother Black men and applaud when they finally grow up". In the blog,

[208] Kevin Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet*, 122

she extols the "peace and reckoning" that JAY-Z demonstrated in the aforementioned interview in the New York Times about "4:44", but also "couldn't help but roll my eyes as I watched his interview." She states that she relates to Beyoncé as her "experience with betrayal and infidelity mirror my own and those of almost every single woman I know" but is also tired of offering grace and understanding to "Black men, who way-too-often are not able to reciprocate the same nurturing and care." She chronicles where there is a comparable narrative where Black women are offered the same space to "fuck up time and time again" and if the narratives were permitted or circulated they would perpetuate respectable "unladylike" behavior.[209] She gets to the crux of her argument and ultimate critique of the blog by stating there is always space for Black men to behave like JAY-Z and they "need the offer of love and care as they behave badly, because the world is often so cruel to them."[210] However, she speculates on what would have to change in order for Black women to not be the cocoons anymore by stating that she wishes for Black men to not use Black women's steadfastness to be irresponsible with their hearts, minds, and bodies, where Black men own the toxic masculinity that not only damages the people they love but also themselves, and where therapy and counseling doesn't come as a compromise that is part of a mediation to keep their families intact.

Relating it to Black families she states that she wishes for "a world where people work to become whole and healthy in relationships with other people, so that

[209] Josie Pickens. "But Black Women Are Not Cocoons: I'm Tired of Being Expected to Mother Black Men and Applaud When They Finally Grow Up" December 19, 2017, *Black Youth Project.* https://blackyouthproject.com/but-black-women-are-not-cocoons-im-tired-of-being-expected-to-mother-black-men-and-applaud-when-they-finally-grow-up/
[210] Pickens, "But Black Women Are Not Cocoons"

cycles of pain and violence can be ushered out of Black love relationships, and thus Black communities."[211] Pickens expresses "affirmative *transformative*" fandom in the way that the blog and song first affirms her experiences and other Black women she is in community within ways that are familiar and painful. This is not a work of affirmative as in, "I like it", but with her savvy media critique she is using it to further affirm her worldview about the state of Black heterosexual relationships. Secondly, there is an understanding of transformation inherent in both the acknowledgement of the pain she's felt but also the speculative nature of what she wishes were different. Especially her hope and understanding that "I believe such a world is possible. And we can begin to build such a world by not expecting Black women to bound themselves to trauma and pain, so that Black men can become more free."[212] The blog uses *Lemonade* and *4:44* to birds-eye-view the state of Black heterosexual relationships from her perspective and analysis while also calling for a different way of being. The post garnered a lot of engagement as did the conversation on other social media platforms. The longer form engagement allowed Pickens to express her thoughts fully and not be taken out of complete context as is easier with tweets and threads.

Likewise, writer and scholar, Jenn M. Jackson specifically takes up the question of the utility of the public apology when to Jackson it "erases Beyoncé's pain" as "patriarchy, race, and class intermingle to lower the bar of expectations for

[211] Pickens, "But Black Women Are Not Cocoons"
[212] Pickens, "But Black Women Are Not Cocoons"

successful Black men."[213] Jackson interrogates the direction of the discourse by asking "At what point do we draw parallels between the ongoing infidelity Jay describes and larger narratives that say Black women are not worth love, that we are not marriageable, and that we should be grateful for whatever man chooses us?"[214] Jackson's overall argument is that the apology should come alongside an investigation around the hurt that Black men cause Black women in terms of an "investigation of the how's, why's, or what's."[215] Rather than perpetuating an apology that doesn't look at the larger picture of why and how Black heterosexual relationships carry these effects. Jackson's "affirmative *transformative*" fandom relegates the transformative aspect as an opportunity to identify how the systems and larger discourse that perpetuate what happened in the song continue. To examine the interior pain and affective understanding of how so many Black women, not just Beyoncé, relate to the song and what produces men like JAY-Z and their lack of accountability.

Continuing in the same affective mode, Candice Benbow, the same Black woman who compiled and curated the widely circulated *Lemonade* Syllabus wrote about "4:44" in the now-viral personal essay "4:43" on her blog. In an interview to the media outlet cassius.com, Benbow discusses "As much as I love the album, I had to confront why 4:44 was making me uncomfortable. Then it hit me—I don't know what it's like to experience this level of growth from the man I love. So, I wrote,

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[213] Jenn M. Jackson, "On '4:44', Maleness, and the Performance of the Public Apology," *The Black Youth Project* (blog), July 14, 2017, https://blackyouthproject.com/444-maleness-performance-public-apology/.
[214] Jackson, "On '4:44"
[215] Jackson, "On '4:44"

'4:43' to address my own feelings and find a way to heal."[216] The blog is written as a contemplative first-person essay where Benbow anguishes over a lover that left her broken in the ways Pickens and Jackson discuss. She named the essay "4:43" and stylized the numbers the same as the album cover laid over the same orangesicle color, because of the ways she has occupied the space before a Black man expressed the growth and maturity and apology JAY-Z expressed to Beyoncé. In the same vein as "Love Drought" where Beyoncé asked several rhetorical questions about their love, Benbow contemplates "Do we not love to be loved? Or have women like me mastered the art of being starter relation/situationships? Do we provide men like you with everything necessary to become the men you want to be—without us? Is that how this works? Who made these rules?"[217] These rules are the structural aspects that have socialized Black romantic relations as Jackson iterated. Candice echoes Jackson and Pickens by stating that the growth men like JAY-Z happens at their expense.[218] The transformative aspect of the blog for Benbow is in expressing the affective response the song and commentary produced and allowed for reflection on. It is especially poignant at the end of the blog where Benbow provides remedies for Black heterosexual men and women to process to avoid repeating the mistakes of "4:44" and to avoid another "4:43" experience. Benbow encourages men to:

> I hope you will tell them that it's not enough to have progressive race and gender analysis if they are going to wreak havoc in the intimate lives of the Black women who love them. I hope when the women in your life come to

[216] Candace Benbow, "4:43," *Candice Marie Benbow* (blog), accessed March 30, 2022, https://candicebenbow.com/blog/443.
[217] Benbow, "4:43"
[218] Benbow, "4:443"; "I'm glad you've grown and are finding you way. But how am I supposed to celebrate growth that happened at my expense?"

> you with a story like mine, you will remember me and remind them that it isn't their fault.[219]

Benbow also encourages Black women to:

> And I will encourage every sister to be unafraid of asking questions for fear that they may say the wrong thing to early. I will tell them to run from men who cannot show proof that they are actually doing the work to be well. I will challenge the men I know and love to just… do…better. To not exploit and exhaust the love of women and then discard them as if they are trash. And I will be proof to everyone—including you—that there is life after insufficient loved and though rare, peach tulips actually do bloom in summertime.[220]

Benbow's call to Black men and women to interact differently is indicative of an "affirmative *transformative*" fandom where, unfortunately, the song affirms her experience with men like JAY-Z as she also curated the *Lemonade* Syllabus and affirms the truth of the song although not in an affectively positive or praising manner. Benbow then transforms it into a personal essay and provides solutions to what she believes would cure the interior anguish experienced through reliving parts of the song after listening and the fandom responses online. To reiterate, the essay is centered on her romantic life, which due to the essay's popularity also occurs in her reader's lives thus their desire to share and commiserate with each other on Twitter about the blog.[221]

Men's perspective on the song on medium varied. Much of the fandom generated answered part of the debate about JAY-Z never being vulnerable or confessional on prior albums as 4:44 is his thirteenth studio album. They affirmed their fandom through going through his discography and dissecting his lyrics for the ways he struggled with vulnerability and his relationships. Others wrote scathing

[219] Benbow, "4:43"
[220] Benbow, "4:43"
[221] Benbow, "4:43"

reviews of the song and the subsequent discussion and fandom expressed about the song. Saki Benibo wrote a long form blog about JAY-Z titled the "4:44 Effect". The blog chronicles the red flags of the discourse around 4:44, the "Footnotes" JAY-Z produced and released after the album's debut with other prominent Black men in entertainment where they discuss systemic racism and in another dissect honesty and vulnerability in relationships in the same vein as 4:44. Benibo argues that the "supposed vulnerability was performative; a collective exercise in gaslighting. And it set a dangerous precedent for cishet black men who live in our homes and communities."[222] Benibo observes that Footnotes also does not include any queer men in entertainment to talk through these issues.

Generally, Benibo argues in the same way that Pickens, Jackson, and Benbow discuss in that their discovery happened at the expense of and without extending the same grace to Black women, writing, "many of these video feel like watching children discover things, and excitedly tell them to you. But these men are not children, and their arrested development should not be rewarded."[223] Benibo grapples with the ways white supremacist tactics are enacted through cishet Black men against Black cishet women and Black queer people and concludes that "we expend so much energy to hid ether truth: cishet black men are entirely superfluous to the black community."[224] The "affirmative *transformative*" work here is also painful in the sense that Benibo discusses the way his emotional labor has been used and the affective "emphatic overload" built up and inspired him to write this piece. Benibo

[222] Saki Benibo, "The 4:44 Effect," *Medium* (blog), July 15, 2017, https://mrbenibo.medium.com/the-4-44-effect-ea81fd5b6cff.
[223] Benibo, "The 4:44 Effect"
[224] Benibo, "The 4:44 Effect"

states that they wrote the piece to "help process my pain."[225] In the same way that Benbow wrote "4:43"and went viral in a different way than the collective *Lemonade* syllabus. Writing in these social media spaces connote intimacy as people are writing from places that are not inspired by fiction but rather by real events from real people with a large platform to circulate the discourse around them. Benibo's blog garnered 22 comments and over 2,300 claps, or likes, on medium's platform exemplifying that the audience responded in kind.

The quote in the introduction of this chapter is from a blog on medium that attempts to put the discourse and the song in a larger context. D.L. Chandler's medium piece titled "Jay-Z, 4:44, and the Unyielding Weight of Judgement" was published on July 8, 2017, a week after 4:44's release.[226] He sums up many of the narratives circulating about the track. Many of which were stated in the previous blogs cited concerning Black men and women's relationships and how Black men are late in understanding how the ways that they show up in their relationships are at times detrimental and toxic. Yet his goal for the blog is not in "defending or even explaining Jay-Z's motives"[227] but rather that he apologized, took accountability, and changed. This display can potentially inspire people to do differently. He states, "I didn't anticipate as much vivitrol as I witnessed over *4:44* but given the swelling cacophony of the 'Men are Trash' stance and the fact many of us cement that fact in our actions, it definitely hit many deep in their souls."[228] Agreeing with Pickens,

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[225] Benibo, "The 4:44 Effect"
[226] D. L. Chandler, "Jay-Z, 4:44, and The Unyielding Weight Of Judgement," *Medium* (blog), July 8, 2017, https://medium.com/@dlchandler123/jay-z-4-44-and-the-unyielding-weight-of-judgement-2099e56accf7.
[227] Chandler, "Jay-Z, 4:44, and The Unyielding Weight Of Judgement,"
[228] Chandler, "Jay-Z, 4:44, and The Unyielding Weight Of Judgement,"

Jackson, Benbow, and Benibo, Chandler writes, "there is nothing that Jay-Z should be overly applauded for, although it's strange that people are shaming others for using his moment as an inspiration. Are we supposed to pretend that a favorite megastar voicing a personal stance can't move us to change ourselves?"[229] Again, Chandler asks a poignant question that is the underpinning of this entire dissertation: "Isn't art supposed to be transformative?"[230] Chandler doesn't deny Beyoncé or other Black women's experience at the hand of Black men, but he does examine that JAY-Z's fans could potentially use the megastar's apology as a starting point for relational transformation.

Through blogging, Chandler enacts "affirmative *transformative*" fandom to both affirm the harm perpetuated by Black men towards Black women and the transformational aspects the song can inspire. Chandler holds space for both aspects of the coin to be true and allows for a different interpretation as creators of the 4:44 Syllabus hoped to do with creating it in the same manner as the Lemonade Syllabus. Brittney Cooper also discussed how JAY-Z's apology provides a way for Black men to see it as a necessary part of masculinity in the hip hop genre where that type of posturing isn't as popular, and that JAY-Z's popularity provides a larger avenue to discuss it.[231]

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[229] Chandler, "Jay-Z, 4:44, and The Unyielding Weight Of Judgement,"
[230] Chandler, "Jay-Z, 4:44, and The Unyielding Weight Of Judgement,"
[231] Brittney Cooper, "Jay-Z's Apology to Beyoncé Isn't Just Celebrity Gossip — It's a Political Act," in *Queen Bey: A Celebration of the Power and Creativity of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter*, ed. Veronica Chambers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019).

Conclusion

I surmise that the auteurship level of mega-celebrity that Beyoncé, JAY-Z, and Solange have reached as a family play a role in the messiness and slippage people are experiencing with their fandom expressions. The fact that the Knowles and Knowles-Carter families are real people adds another level of mediation and analysis that their fans must engage with. Adding Black digital intimacies around the topics of their albums and the various levels of interiority and affect emphasized the transformative aspect in "affirmative *transformative*". Bloggers took time to contemplate their reactions and write their thoughts in a longer form than what Twitter could relegate their thoughts to. Their engagements circulated widely due to the topic and strong feelings fans had. Black fans, in their quotidian and everyday digital practices are stripping down the meanings assigned to Blackness to world make through expressing their interiority.

Conclusion

The aims of this dissertation are to focus not only on the cultural productions that discuss interpersonal relationships, but their affective reception through fandom as well. Often reception is lost in translation of scholarly analysis and what these affective relationships to popular culture can mean for Black fans. I purport that studying fandom, opens analysis to understanding digital practices and how Black people are navigating their interpersonal relationships. Through the three different iterations of "affirmative transformative" fandom, I demonstrate that Black fans do the labor of creating intimate digital spaces for themselves first to invoke pleasure but also to understand aspects of their lives deeper. By expressing their desires through interiority there are layers of meaning making and worldbuilding expressed. Each chapter demonstrates a case study that continues to push back against narratives that overly determine Black experience in America as homogenous and always resisting.

My dissertation builds upon the genealogies and critical assertions of Black Studies, Digital Studies, Fan Studies, and Black Feminism. At the same time, my work will challenge the assumptions made around intimacy, love, and romance by exemplifying texts where the creators are invested in telling their truths in ways that combine identity aspects concerning race, class, gender, and sexuality. I want to focus on the production aspects of each artifact, the creator commentary about their work, and the fan reaction with attention to how three interact with each other to delve into the ways culture can assist in identity development beyond hegemonic representations and preface the quotidian. I study Black love, romance, and interpersonal relationships because I believe that affect and how communities relate to each other

and attempt to express joy, healing, forgiveness, and pleasure that the Black lives are enriched as a result. My hope is that my research focuses not only on survival but how Black people can thrive by not continuously centering narratives that have narrowly defined their existence.

My contribution to each field will assist scholars to utilize Black intimacies and to recognize how important pivoting toward affect and intimacy can be to their research questions. Another aspect of my research, and other Black digital humanists, contend that Black life is not always about recovering and responding to the injury of white supremacy, but that the mundane and quotidian aspects of life, like social media usage, should be considered as well. To reiterate Gallon from the introduction: "Black studies has a unique role to play in dismembering how we think about humanity and the digital humanities by extension. A black epistemology will generate questions about the relationship between the racialization of humanity and the digital as power, ultimately fostering new inquiries and deeper understandings about the human condition."[232] My research is distinctly American Studies and Black Studies because of its adherence to interdisciplinary study of the meaning that's found in American life and Black epistemology through studying Black digital fandom. It is my hope that my research reverberates into the world as public scholarship on the state of intimate relationships and Black communities, to challenge limiting analysis, and act as a resource for Black communities to find deeper understanding of the culture and relationships that they participate in. My research bridges gaps in the

[232] Kim Gallon, "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities" in Gold, Matthew K, and Lauren F Klein, eds. *Debates in the Digital Humanities.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

literature and provide much-needed research on digital practice, Black communities, and fandom and cultural studies. The small ways Black people experience joy and heal their intimate relationships drives my interest in this subject. I center Black intimacies and interiority because I believe by fore fronting affect and how communities relate to each other and attempt to express joy, healing, forgiveness, and pleasure that the propensity for activism against oppression is strengthened. We go on.

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