“EVERYTHING GONNA BE, OKAY?!”: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES THROUGH THE “PRECARIOUS GIRL” TROPE IN BLACK FEMINIST COMEDY TV

by

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF MY TWO BELOVED UNCLES:

YUSEF O. SHABAZZ

March 6, 1967 - June 21, 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ix

Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION 1

Statement of the Problem 3
Research Questions 7
Purpose of Study 7
Significance of Study 8
Summary of Chapters 9

2 BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT, THEORY AND PRAXIS 11

Introduction 11
Section 1: What Do We Look Like On Screen? 12

Black women's representation in film and media 12
Black feminist comedy 15
"Precarious Girl" Trope 18

Section 2: Black Feminist Ways of Knowing 21

Endarkened feminist epistemologies 22

Section 3: Methodology, Methodology, Methodology 28

Black feminist criticism 28
Black feminist critical media literacy 30

Conclusion 33

3 PRECARITY, HUMOR, AND HONESTY 36

Introduction 36
Case 1: Mirror B*tch, Part 1 45

Mirror B*tch Scene 1 - What I See: 46

Case 2: Mirror B*tch: The Sequel 47

Mirror B*tch Scene 2 - What I See: 48

Case 3: Mirror B*tch: The Finale 50

Mirror B*tch Scene 3 - What I See: 51

The Common Thread(s) 53
Conclusion 54

4 CONCLUSION 56

5 REFERENCES 61

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the portrayal of Black women in contemporary television through the lens of The Precarious Girl trope, a characterization that intersects with issues of vulnerability, authenticity, and societal expectations. Drawing on Black feminist theory and criticism, the study examines how characters like Issa Dee from *Insecure* navigate these complexities, using their portrayals to challenge stereotypical representations. The analysis reveals that while popular media often relegates Black women to limited roles such as the Mammy or the Angry Black Woman, The Precarious Girl trope offers a nuanced depiction that allows for exploration of personal growth, self-discovery, and resilience. Through close examination of key episodes and character interactions, this thesis argues that shows like *Insecure* serve as vital platforms for reshaping narratives around Black female identity, highlighting their multifaceted experiences and confronting systemic biases. By centering The Precarious Girl trope within broader discussions of representation and cultural critique, this research contributes to ongoing dialogues on media diversity and the empowerment of marginalized voices.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I seldom felt fully seen watching characters on TV - whether it was my lack of an ability to connect with a teenage girl who also secretly doubled as an international pop star on Hannah Montana, or to relate to a Black teenage psychic on That's So Raven; even when MTV's original series Awkward. premiered in 2011, I reveled in the fact that I, too, was clumsy and not very popular, but Jenna Hamilton and I had a huge racial barrier between us that only allowed my validation to go but so far. Then I discovered Issa Rae's Awkward Black Girl on YouTube, and it completely blew my 15-year-old mind. I was quickly able to relate to being conventionally "unattractive" (by European standards of beauty, of course), to not knowing what to do or how to act in certain social situations, to wanting to say how I really feel, but being afraid to do so, and to generally not being as well-adjusted and extroverted as most other Black girls around me. I was taller than most of my graduating class, had braces, and recently decided to big chop my permed hair. Not exactly Maxim's Swimsuit Model of the month. J, the main character on Awkward Black Girl truly opened up my mind to what a Black woman character could be, and what her humor could entail. I tuned in weekly to see what shenanigans J and Cece were up to at Gutbusters (J's dead-end job with a white boss who humorously wore Fulani braids, a traditionally African hairstyle, in one episode), and thoroughly enjoyed the pop culture references to movies like Sister Act 2 and to J and Cece dressing up as Salt-N-Pepa for Halloween.

Following Issa Rae's journey closely on YouTube and on social media, I was devastated to learn that Awkward Black Girl was ending, but quickly became excited when I learned about Insecure. I'll be honest though, I didn't quite connect with Insecure when it premiered in 2016, most likely because I was in a very tumultuous place in the beginning of my junior year of college; the 2016 election also happened that Fall, and morale was quite low, to say the least. When I circled back to it in the spring of 2017, I instantly became hooked. It became a phenomenon amongst myself and my peers, often being the topic of conversation both on social media and in real life. I found myself referring back to the show to find potential answers to some of the problems in my own messy twenty-something life and to validate my experiences - something I couldn't quite do with Awkward. or Hannah Montana or That's So Raven. Issa Dee was real, she was raw and authentic, even when she didn't quite know how to lean into it, but it was the eventual acceptance of herself and the choice to continue to show up as her full self that always resonated with me. It was also helpful to see a dark-skinned Black woman with an array of different natural hairstyles that made Insecure such a memorable watching experience and also helped decolonize my own negative internalized perceptions of beauty and desirability. This evolution of Issa Rae's career trajectory, including the unapologetic Blackness throughout both of her series is part of what inspired me to come to this work of centering Blackness and critical Black feminist thought in cultural TV and film productions. Seeing that it was not only possible, but could garner a great deal of success and offer a new perspective, led me to start thinking about how we can continue to tell more stories about Black people that aren't reliant on our trauma, or racial stereotypes, or our oppression.

Insecure offered a refreshing and honest portrayal of millennial Black women, navigating their lives with humor, vulnerability, and resilience. This series exemplified how Black feminist storytelling could carve out new lanes in comedy TV, challenging stereotypes and fostering a deeper understanding of Black women's experiences. Inspired by Rae's work, I was compelled to delve deeper into the intersection of Black feminism and media, aiming to contribute to the scholarly discourse and advocate for continued progress in representation. This thesis is not just an academic pursuit; it is a continuation of my personal commitment to ensuring that stories like those in Insecure become a mainstay in our cultural landscape, providing both a mirror and window for future generations.

Statement of the Problem

On television, much like in real life, Black women are usually pigeonholed into stereotypes such as the Jezebel [promiscuous, sexually available and aggressive, (Mgdami, 2009)], the Mammy [the "inept domestic servant," (Mgdami, 2009)], and the Strong Black Woman [a matriarchal figure who caters to the needs of her family and community/is unable to express vulnerability; (Coleman et. al, 2020)]. These stereotypes are all rooted in racism and white supremacy, though they appear in different ways in the media, specifically on television (Williams, 44). This is changing as more Black women are given more opportunities to tell their stories on television and we are seeing an expanded representation of Black women (Williams, 44). For example, shows like *Survival of the Thickest* (Netflix, 2023-present)*, Abbott Elementary* (ABC, 2021-present)*, Chewing Gum* (E4 2015-2017)*, and Insecure* (HBO,

2016-2021) allow us to see Black women of various identities navigating their lives' journeys with dating, career, family, friendships, and more.

Black women are usually depicted as having it all together, being completely confident in themselves and not really having the space to be introspective (Moffit and Henderson, 2020), but as a collective, these shows embrace the otherness of their protagonists and move toward more humanized representations of Black women. Although each of the previously mentioned shows use the "Precarious Girl" trope, this study focuses on *Insecure*. Existing literature on Black women's depictions in the media highlights persistent issues with stereotypical portrayals, often reducing Black women to one-dimensional characters that reinforce harmful racial and gender stereotypes. These depictions frequently fail to capture the complexity and diversity of Black women's experiences, perpetuating narratives that undermine their agency and humanity. With recent depictions of Black women in media illustrating the "Precarious Girl" trope, it is essential to examine how contemporary TV comedies created by Black women are actively challenging prevailing racial and gendered stereotypes. By introducing characters who embody vulnerability, resilience, and authenticity, these shows are redefining Black womanhood on screen and resist the simplistic, damaging portrayals of the past. The "Precarious Girl" trope, exemplified in HBO's *Insecure* (2016-2021) illustrates how Black feminist storytelling in contemporary comedic television, creates sites of resistance and a space to redefine Black womanhood. *Insecure* does this by using humor to embrace vulnerability and precarity in its depiction of Black women. Specifically, "Through humor [Issa Rae] expands on previous images of Black women on television by signifying the possibility of Black women's normalcy and humanity by showcasing

her social ineptitudes in common situations.'" (d'Harcourt, 12). In *Insecure*'s pilot episode, "Insecure as F**K," an introspective Issa Dee, on her 29th birthday, asks herself a very poignant question: "How different would my life be if I actually went after what I wanted?" Throughout the episode, and the rest of the first season, we can see why Issa asks herself that question; she isn't actually living a life that is honest to what she wants, and who she is.

The "Precarious Girl" trope (Wanzo, 2016) is a character who is canonically uncertain about themselves and their lives. On paper, Issa seemingly "has it all"; the college degree, the long-term boyfriend, as well as a stable job/career. As young Black millennial/zillennial women, we are told that these are the things we need to achieve in order to be deemed "successful", often being held as a standard for what success should look like for many of us in our 20s and 30s. However, most of those ideals are rooted in white supremacy, and in many ways, white supremacy's success relies on the compliance, oppression and silencing of Black women (Wood, 2021). Issa Dee, as portrayed in *Insecure*, embodies the complexities and nuances of millennial Black womanhood. Being a millennial shapes Issa's character and her experiences in numerous ways. Sobande (2019) discusses how millennial Black women characters, like Issa, show up and work through post-feminist possibilities, which include both embracing and critiquing contemporary feminist ideals, such as the predominant focus on issues that may not fully encompass the intersectional challenges faced by Black women, including race-based oppression alongside gender biases. These ideals often do not serve Black women because they prioritize individual empowerment and overcoming internal barriers without sufficiently addressing the external barriers like

systemic racism, socio-economic disparities, and institutional biases that disproportionately affect Black women and hinder their advancement.

Millennials, often defined by their “coming of age” in an ever-changing technological and social world, face unique challenges and opportunities - especially their engagement with digital culture and social media (Sobande, 437). Issa's experiences reflect these modern challenges, such as trying to figure out precarious employment, the gig economy, and the complexities of modern dating through her use of dating apps like Tinder. This navigation is prevalent in how the audience sees Issa's professional journey from working at a nonprofit organization to pursuing her entrepreneurial dreams, showcasing the very specific millennial goal of doing meaningful work and personal fulfillment despite systemic barriers that force them into the doctor/lawyer/engineer pipeline that they are often forced into. Lastly, millennials are heavily influenced by pop culture (Hohrn, 5), which shapes their worldview and interactions. It is because of Issa’s references to music, TV shows, and internet culture that she resonates with millennial audiences, making her character more relatable and authentic.

Understanding the complexity of *Insecure* is vital because it mirrors the multifaceted nature of Black experiences. Throughout the show's five seasons, Issa navigates various complexities in her life, encompassing friendships, romantic relationships, career aspirations, familial dynamics, and self-discovery. By the series' conclusion, Issa achieves a sense of contentment and self-assurance in her career, relationships, and personal growth, all while humorously grappling with life's challenges. Situating ourselves within this complexity allows us to engage with the nuances of Black womanhood portrayed in the show, aligning with scholarly

discussions on the importance of recognizing and examining the intricate layers of representation in media.

Research Questions

My research questions are: 1) How have Black women historically used comedy/humor to represent their experiences? and 2) How does *Insecure* make an intervention in Black women's representation on TV through the Precarious Girl trope?

Purpose of Study

Historically, Black women's representation on television has been rife with racist stereotypes and inauthentic portrayals. By continuing the conversation surrounding "carving out new definitions of Black womanhood," (d'Harcourt 11) this thesis explores portrayals of Black women, by Black women. It also critically analyzes the Precarious Girl trope within Rae's comedic storytelling and depictions to challenge stereotypes and hegemonic narratives surrounding Black womanhood through complex characters navigating various aspects of adult life. This particular trope provides opportunity for a more authentic and relatable representation of our experiences through humor and vulnerability. Additionally, the Precarious Girl trope serves as a lens to explore intersecting issues of race, gender, and socio-economic status, shedding light on the unique challenges faced by Black women in contemporary society. By portraying characters grappling with insecurities, setbacks, and triumphs, *Insecure* disrupts monolithic portrayals of Black womanhood, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their lived experiences.

Significance of Study

This thesis explores how Black women auteurs in contemporary/post-network TV comedies use humor to contextualize and cope with real-life experiences, examining thematic elements, comedy genre conventions, and the rejection of racial stereotypes. This study is significant because it joins a growing body of scholarship: the role of humor in deconstructing oppressive structures and fostering authentic portrayals of Black womanhood. This research fills a gap in the scholarship on Black women's representation in media, specifically in comedy television programming. Existing literature often overlooks the nuanced ways Black women use humor as a form of resistance and self-expression in this specific medium and genre. By examining humor as a form of resistance and self-expression, this research provides another lens through which to study Black women's cultural production. This methodological focus on humor adds depth to the understanding of Black women's agency in the media, while also enriching the theoretical framework used to analyze Black women's media representations.

By focusing on *Insecure*, this research highlights the intersectionality of race, gender, and age. With a focus on millennial Black women, this research offers a fresh perspective within Africana Studies, addressing the unique challenges and experiences of this demographic. It also illustrates how Black women in decision-making roles in Hollywood productions can create more accurate and authentic representations of Black women, contributing to de-stigmatization and resisting racial stereotypes. This is crucial in a predominantly white, male-dominated industry where Black women's voices are marginalized. This study addresses the need for more opportunities for Black women to create intentional and relevant works, thus advancing the broader goal of liberating and humanizing Black women both on-screen and in real life. By

emphasizing the necessity of accurate representation and empowerment, this research underscores the transformative potential of Black women's creative agency in the media industry.

Furthermore, this thesis employs a culturally responsive approach to Black women's representation in television, advocating for more Black feminist and Africana womanist perspectives in Hollywood productions. The research contributes to Africana studies by highlighting the importance of Black women's narratives, contributing to their empowerment and visibility in media. This focus on empowerment is central to the mission of Africana Studies. This approach is crucial for addressing issues that disproportionately affect Black women, such as domestic violence, reproductive health, and mental wellness through informed and intentional storytelling led by Black women creators. By doing so, this research supports the resistance against white supremacy in the entertainment industry and opens doors for new generations of Black women creators, such as Quinta Brunson (*Abbott Elementary*, ABC, 2021 - present), Michaela Coel (*Chewing Gum*, Netflix, 2015 - 2017), Robin Thede (*A Black Lady Sketch Show*, HBO, 2019 - 2023), and Michelle Buteau (*Survival of the Thickest*, Netflix, 2023 - present) to achieve creative freedom and empowerment within the industry.

Summary of Chapters

The forthcoming chapters are organized accordingly, an engagement with the historiography of the topic, analyses of three scenes from *Insecure* that demonstrate the use of humor in depicting themes of vulnerability, honesty, and precarity, and a conclusion providing final thoughts and extending the possibilities of the data for future research. In Chapter Two, a historiography of the study is provided.

Specifically, literature related to Black women's representation in film and media, Black feminist comedy, the Precarious Girl trope, and Black feminist criticism is examined. Chapter Three is an analysis of the tv-series, *Insecure.* In the chapter, three scenes from the series finale are analyzed for how they greatly speak to Black feminist comedy, storytelling and the Precarious Girl trope as they show up in a show like *Insecure*. Chapter Four concludes with a summary of findings, offering final thoughts, and discussing the significance of the work. It highlights how the research contributes to public understandings of Black women's experiences and the field of Africana Studies.

Chapter 2

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT, THEORY AND PRAXIS

Introduction

The representations of Black people as a whole and on television, have evolved vastly. Since the popularization of television itself in the 1940s, which exclusively featured white men and/or stereotypical depictions of Black people, contemporary media tells a different tale. Similarly, historic depictions of Black women, specifically, were especially problematic in this context (Boyd, 2008; Staples & Jones, 1985; Torres, 2005; Tyree et. al, 2022). As contextualized by bell hooks (1997) who also emphasized that critical re-examinations of these representations are necessary, these stereotypes and problematic depictions of Black women in the media are rooted in and reflect the sexism and misogyny that Black women are subjected to in their everyday lives.

This chapter provides a comprehensive literature review connecting Black feminism, comedy, and the portrayal of Black women in media. Through this examination, I demonstrate how HBO's *Insecure* (2016-2021) serves as a prime example of how contemporary comedic television, utilizing the Precarious Girl trope, becomes a platform for Black feminist storytelling, fostering sites of resistance and reshaping perceptions of Black womanhood. This chapter is structured into three sections: 1) "What Do We Look Like On Screen?" delves into the history of Black women's representation in media, Black feminist comedy, and the Precarious Girl trope; 2) "Black Feminist Ways of Knowing" examines Black feminist storytelling and

endarkened feminist epistemologies (EFE); and 3) "Methodology, Methodology, Methodology" provides insight into the methodological approach used to analyze the show.

Section 1: What Do We Look Like On Screen?

Black women's representation in film and media

Black women are not monolithic. We inherently know this about ourselves, and even on television, we have seen different representations of Black women in a variety of different facets of life, from the reliable matriarch of *Good Times* (1974-1979) Florida Evans to the sharp-witted, ballroom icon and house mother Elektra Abundance Evangelista in *Pose* (2018-2021) to Whitley Gilbert of *A Different World* (1987-1993).

Black women's representations in film and media have long been controlled by the dominant population of white producers within the entertainment and media industries (Collins, 2000). The accurate representation of Black women essentially begins behind the screen, and more Black women are starting to obtain more positions in production that allow for a wider range of stories to be told. While welcoming a new generation of Black women creatives to tell stories, credit must be due to the women who made their mark within the entertainment industry in the last few decades. In scholar Janette Dates's article "Movin' on Up: Black Women Decisionmakers in Entertainment Television," she analyzes the influence of Black women's presence behind the scenes in entertainment. Her article includes analyses of the careers of the likes of Debbie Allen, Mara Brock Akil, Suzanne de Passe, and

Yvette Lee Bowser, detailing how they got started as writers for television and impacts they made on networks, audiences, and television in general.

Beginning with Hattie McDaniels as "Mammy" in *Gone With the Wind* (1939) - which earned her an Academy Award for her performance, making her the first Black woman to do so - scholars have noticed a trend in stereotypes that consistently seem to repeat themselves throughout history. Chatman (2016) names some of the stereotypes that the vast majority of scholars have referenced in their analysis of the representation of Black women in film and media, including "the faithful and obedient mammy," "the jezebel [or whore]," and "Sapphire" or the Angry Black Woman (ABW)." Depictions of compliant Black women in Hollywood productions such as the Mammy stereotype, portray Black women as slightly dim-witted and meek, but also obedient to the orders of the superior white character (Collins, 72). These characters do not get to ask themselves introspective questions - certainly not about going after the life they really want and doing what makes *them* happy, as individuals - because of their positionality in those settings as objects, and not subjects. Chatman notes that these "controlled images are ideologically designed to maintain their subordination," ("their" in this case is Black women) which reinforces that as those images are intentionally created and put forth in order to oppress us, so should our desire to intentionally critique - and create - images of Black women that resist the oppression and dehumanization of Black women in mainstream media.

Historically, the "mammy" or "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (Collins 72) is an archetype used to justify and rationalize the exploitation of house slaves and restriction of Black women to domestic labor. "By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and "family" better than her own, the mammy

symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power." (72) For example, in modern productions, the Mammy trope can look like Black women being relegated to roles in the workplace that force facilitate the exploitation of this notion of care and nurturing, as Horhn (60) states: "Black women have long held the responsibility of taking care of others and putting themselves last." Historical images of jezebels and modern portrayals of "hoochies" represent a warped perception of Black female sexuality. (Collins, 81) The jezebel stereotype functions to categorize all Black women as sexually aggressive, a label used to justify rampant sexual assault of enslaved Black women by white men. (81) Furthermore, this hypersexualization of Black women created an expectation that they should be more fertile (81), thereby perpetuating the cyclical exploitation and violence against Black people through increased reproduction and labor in service of the chattel slavery system.

The "Sapphire" or the "Angry Black Woman" trope depicts Black women as "evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful," (hooks 119) qualities that contrast the nurturing and obedient mammy trope. This stereotype comes from a long-standing association of femininity with an inherent "evil" or "sinfulness" (119-120) which has roots in Christianity, with stories such as Eve biting the apple in the Garden of Eden. Racist and sexist beliefs paint Black women as the embodiment of female evil and sin. Under this assumption that Black women are evil, white male hegemony justifies the dehumanization and exploitation of Black women.

All of these stereotypes are harmful to Black women because they: 1) are rooted in racism, which is both offensive and traumatizing, and 2) reinforce the negative perceptions that people who are not Black women, have about Black women.

The goal in creating accurate representations of Black women on screen is not and should not be to educate white audiences or to change their minds. It is to allow Black women to see themselves in a positive light, rather than dominant negative depictions that are perpetuated in the media. Black feminist comedy is one avenue with which Black women begin to resist these negative images and stereotypes on television.

Black feminist comedy

Katelyn Hale-Wood coined the term "Black feminist comedy," a framework that "combines and navigates the seemingly opposite terrains of trauma and humor." (323) Wood's studies over the years primarily focused on blending of these elements as a tool for storytelling in standup comedy. This research draws from Wood's ideals and applies them to the analysis and discussion of comedy television. Wood argues, "Under varying social, temporal, and cultural contexts, Black feminist comedy resists and exposes structures of marginalization and oppression that attempt to silence Black women and Black queer people."(2021). Through Black feminist comedy, Black women and Black queer people are empowered to embrace and employ "a politic of joy while telling necessary truths about race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship," (Wood, 2018, 2021) within the context of the United States. This framework allows for a closer examination of the empowerment aspect of Black feminist comedy - it inherently provides an intersectional approach to humor and comedy as it pertains to Black women within the genre and as agents of their own deployment of humor - to take back and reframe what humor means by basing it in the truth. Wood further addresses some of the intersectionality of Black feminist comedy in the ways that Black feminist comics "critique how white superiority and heteropatriarchy function as the defining sources of power in the United States *and* revel in Black women's joy

as a form of resistance." (19). With this assertion that joy is a politic and a form of resistance, I assert that humor in Black feminist comedy in the 21st century/in contemporary TV shows are redefining Black womanhood through the resistance of oppressive structures within their humor.

Early examples of resistance in comedy include Black women in minstrel performances and how they used elements of comedy - specifically parody - as forms of social protest (11). Wood names performers like Ida Forsyne, Josephine Baker, and Aida Overton Walker, who engaged in male impersonation to show the "malleability of race and gender," thus highlighting their intersectional experience through comedy (11). Wood also notes a specific form of comedic protest performed by Walker, who would parody white supremacy through dance and gesture in "cakewalks" - a dance originally performed by enslaved African Americans, often involved exaggerated movements and served as a form of subtle resistance and satire of white slaveholders' manners and customs (National Museum of American History, 2016). These are a few examples of many that showcase how Black people used comedy as a form of social protest and as sites of resistance. I argue that Black women in contemporary comedies are also creating sites of resistance through their use of more modernized forms of comedy. Black humor has roots in West African griot traditions that eventually grew into diasporic traditions - like "playing the dozens" - Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes "playing the dozens" as a form of verbal dueling, a back and forth comedic exchange where people riff witty, often insulting remarks and jokes off of each other. According to Gates, the dozens are a crucial aspect of the oral tradition, combining elements of humor, satire, and performance. This practice can be seen as a way to cope with and

resist societal pressures and marginalization, using language as a tool for empowerment and community bonding. (1988)

In this same sentiment, Wood also names “the satiric styling of slave humor” as another form of comedic tradition that predates the minstrelsy era – Although there are countless examples of “slave humor,” the analysis in this research will include the ways that this form of humor plays out in the show centered in this thesis - *Insecure*. One way that *Insecure* parodies enslavement and media productions that depict enslavement is through its show-within-a-show, “Due North.” In it, a character named Ninny, played by Regina Hall (who, might I add, is arguably a Black female comedy icon) fights for her right to read, while also satirically existing to please her master, played by Scott Foley. By employing a melodramatic approach to the acting in Due North, the humor lies in the sheer ridiculousness of Hollywood productions that are about enslavement - one character exclaims, “I hate slavery!” (Insecure, HBO, 2017). "Due North" employs "slave humor" through the use of irony and absurdity to highlight the irrationality of the institution of slavery itself. The show-within-a-show presents exaggerated and comedic scenarios that challenge viewers' expectations, while provoking reflection on the legacy of slavery in America. By employing humor, "Due North" invites audiences to engage with difficult topics in a more accessible and approachable manner. In another episode of the first season, one of Issa’s co-workers asks her why more of the students aren’t swimming at a beach clean-up that their nonprofit organization, We Got Y’all, organized; “Slavery,” Issa responded dryly. This is also an example of comedy that involves “necessary sociocultural truths” that are specific to Black people - a joke about racism being flipped on its axis and also flipped onto the oppressor in this case, where the joke is on him.

As mentioned in the previous section by Wood (2021), comedy involves truth. The inherent quality and prioritization of truth telling and vulnerability in Black feminist comedy offers a mechanism for confronting the uncomfortable realities of navigating white cisheteronormative patriarchy with these identities. To tell your story does mean facing your truth, and sometimes it's ugly; *Insecure*'s showcase of the ugly parts of the truth are part of the humor that makes the show all the more humanizing for Black women specifically. For the purpose of the study, this framework will be applied to a comedy television series to explore the role of humor in storytelling which lends itself to deconstructing and undermining hegemonic narratives.

"Precarious Girl" Trope

Although this thesis focuses on *Insecure*, the literature will include discussion of Issa Rae's body of work, starting from her web series "Awkward Black Girl" on YouTube to *Insecure*. The discussion of Awkward Black Girl is important to note here because it is an early example of the Precarious Girl trope that is then fleshed out in *Insecure*. Rebecca Wanzo (2016) begins talking about Issa Rae's "The Misadventures of An Awkward Black Girl" Web Series (2011-2013) by stating that "comedy has long trafficked in shame and abjection to produce laughter" (27). Wanzo defines abjection as "otherness found in abjection as a desired end and an expression of authentic self" (29). This definition encapsulates the idea that abjection, often associated with experiences of marginalization and exclusion, can be embraced and transformed into a source of empowerment and self-expression: "since black subjects arguably have emerged from abjection, reframing the affective response to that

history and taking away some of that history's power to wound has been the work of many black cultural producers" (30).

Scholars Wood (2021) and d'Harcourt (2022) pick up the discussion of abjection in their writings about Black feminist comedy and "post-network television's representation of gender and race beyond *Girls*." (d'Harcourt, 1). d'Harcourt's article, "From Assimilation Narratives to 'Regular Stories': Celebrity Image, Series Development, and On- Screen Visibility in The Mindy Project and Insecure," breaks down Wanzo's definition of the Precarious Girl trope. Wanzo defines the Precarious Girl trope as a storytelling device used to depict young women who typically exist in states of danger, instability, or uncertainty. This image often points to the vulnerability or marginalization of these characters, highlighting their unstable social, economic, and emotional conditions. This portrayal serves to develop characters deserving both empathy and critique from viewers. It also enables creators to strategically highlight the societal structures and systems that contribute to this state of precarity - thereby highlighting the intersecting forms of oppression that young women, especially those on the margins, encounter in society.

Within this article, d'Harcourt discusses Patricia Hill Collins' argument that Black women writers are shunning the controlling images of Black women and are subsequently "carving out new definitions of womanhood" (11). Wanzo further describes how writers like Issa Rae embrace the "otherness found in abjection as a desired end and an expression of authentic self." (29) This quote highlights how Black

women writers, like Issa Rae, are actively challenging and subverting the controlling images and stereotypes traditionally imposed on Black women. By rejecting these limiting narratives, they are carving out new definitions of womanhood that prioritize authenticity and self-expression. Wanzo's exploration of how writers embrace the "otherness found in abjection as a desired end" (29) emphasizes the connection to the Precarious Girl trope, as it reflects the precarity and vulnerability often associated with Black women's experiences. Despite facing systemic oppression and marginalization, these writers assert their agency and assert their own narratives, contributing to a broader reclamation of identity and representation within media and society.

In comedic settings, on television, Black women aren't allowed opportunities for self-exploration. This is not to say that there have not been any Black women characters in sitcoms or half-hour comedies who have periods of existentialist self-exploration, but Issa's intentional self-exploration throughout the series is her journey to becoming and embracing who she truly is. A large part of Issa's journey was leaning into authenticity, as Wanzo (2016) describes it, but that meant that she had to be honest with herself. Honesty brings clarity, but it also is a skill that is needed in order to live a truly authentic life. Issa had to learn to stand up in her truth out loud, and the comedic storytelling of this journey brought some humor to learning life lessons and getting older. The next section shows how Black feminist theory and

Black feminist criticism provide frameworks for analyzing *Insecure*, as well as the methods for evaluating the research and findings.

Section 2: Black Feminist Ways of Knowing

Black feminist ways of knowing are diverse, encompassing a range of perspectives and methodologies that center the experiences and knowledge production of Black women. Key theorists in Black feminist epistemology, such as Cynthia Dillard and Stephanie Toliver, have emphasized the importance of Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies (EFE) as a theoretical approach to understanding and analyzing Black women's lived experiences. Rejecting Western academia's extraction-focused approach, EFE emphasizes community accountability and acknowledges colonial legacies. Dillard underscores centering Black women's knowledge, while Toliver extends this to media analysis, highlighting EFE's transformative power. These perspectives challenge Western ideals of abstract logic, emphasizing the importance of theory that is grounded in lived and embodied experiences. Incorporating this insight into the analysis of shows like *Insecure* reveals how Black feminist storytelling in comedy television becomes a site of resistance and empowerment, thereby creating more authentic depictions of Black womanhood. This resonates with hooks' Oppositional Gaze, which urges critical engagement with media representations of Black femaleness, and Sterne's assertion that Black women must tell their own stories to ensure authenticity and representation.

Endarkened feminist epistemologies

The term "endarkened," intentionally selected by Cynthia Dillard and followed up by Stephanie Toliver, stands in direct opposition to the Western concept of enlightenment (preface, xvii), thus developing a basis for the Endarkened feminist epistemologies (EFE) framework.

> "EFE provides an alternative site of existence in the academy, as it implores researchers to rejoin and reclaim their cultural and historical roots. Dillard (2012) argued that Black women must restore our cultural memories and learn to remember the activities, communal experiences, and spiritual traditions we have been encouraged to forget. In remembering, we return to that which was stolen, that which we have been forced or seduced into ignoring." (Toliver, preface, xvi)

This act of remembering and reconnecting with our histories allows us to embody the full scope of our epistemological approaches to understanding ourselves and the world around us. This particular framework rejects the "positivistic, social con-structionist, critical, and postmodern paradigms," (preface, xvii) which directly shape the nature of western qualitative research. Moreover, EFE is a model that embraces the spiritual, effectively encouraging and requiring scholars to engage in research that honors our individual being and situates that existence in the context of the collective. This approach directly counters the hegemonic norms set forth in academia which dictate traditional and acceptable approaches to qualitative research. On the other hand, EFE requires embodiment and community connection which in turn creates space to uplift our collective, historical ways of being and knowing.

As a community-based approach, this framework also values accountability to the communities from which scholars collect data. This requires a continued reflective approach to engagement in the research process. EFE fundamentally rejects

the extraction-focused approach that often plagues Western academia due to the deeply ingrained legacies of colonialism and capitalism. In employing Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies as a framework for my analysis of Black women's representation in contemporary TV comedies, it is crucial to recognize the foundational work of Dillard in theorizing this approach. Dillard's seminal contributions highlight the importance of centering Black women's ways of knowing and lived experiences in knowledge production and representation (Dillard, 2000). This theoretical perspective provides a critical lens through which to examine how shows like *Insecure* challenge dominant narratives and create new legacies of Black womanhood. Toliver builds upon Dillard's work, emphasizing the transformative power of Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies in reshaping our understanding of Black women's cultural contributions (Toliver, 2021). By integrating Dillard's insights on the significance of spirituality, interconnectedness, and the collective memory of Black women (Dillard, 2006), Toliver extends the application of this framework to contemporary media analysis. Together, these theorists offer a methodology for exploring how Black feminist storytelling in comedy television serves as a site of resistance and empowerment, ultimately contributing to the creation of more authentic and multifaceted representations of Black womanhood.

Black women's storytelling

In "The Race for Theory," Barbara Christian asserts that as Black people, our theory diverges significantly from Western models and ideals of what she refers to as "abstract logic." She argues that our theories are deeply embedded in our lived

experiences, history, and cultural practices, rather than in detached, theoretical constructs. Christian emphasizes that Black theoretical frameworks are often expressed through storytelling, oral traditions, music, and everyday interactions, reflecting a holistic and integrated approach to understanding the world. She critiques the elitism and inaccessibility of Western theoretical paradigms and advocates for the recognition and validation of diverse forms of knowledge production within the Black community. Christian's work underscores the importance of grounding theory in the realities of Black life and culture, making it relevant and accessible to those it aims to represent and empower (1987). Building on Christian's assertion that Black theoretical frameworks are rooted in lived experiences and cultural expressions, it is essential to understand the broader role of theories in shaping our understanding of the world. As Toliver articulates:

> "Theories help us to explain, anticipate, interpret, critique, and broaden our worldview. They provide us with a blueprint for understanding a specific phenomenon and encourage us to investigate various elements that influence our studies. Theories help us to explain, anticipate, interpret, critique, and broaden our worldview. They provide us with a blueprint for understanding a specific phenomenon and encourage us to investigate various elements that influence our studies." (Toliver, 2021)

If we have the power to create our own theories, why *can't* we get deep and theorize about laughter? It is a form of vitality to us. Toliver and Christian's ideas around storytelling as its own form of theory highlights the value of various ways of knowing for Black women, inclusive of storytelling through mediums like comedy. Black women should be allowed to show up and be our full, human, authentic selves

without the reflexive scrutiny that comes with being a Black woman in a white cishet patriarchal society.

"Storytelling is an essential component of Black existence, a component so integral to life that many African nations had their own storytellers, or griots, who acted as teachers, genealogists, historians, advisers, exhorters, witnesses, and praise-singers." (Hale, 1998, Toliver, 2021) This well documented piece of history sets the stage for the discussion of the relationship between Black women and storytelling; our Blackness inherently makes way for us to be storytellers. This was a common practice in West African life, according to Toliver, who also notes that this practice of storytelling "fostered intergenerational connections" and "encouraged the remembrance of people's histories, communities, and homelands." (xiv) The history across the diaspora has been preserved and/or uncovered because of storytelling; telling *our* stories, and not the stories and narratives that have been created for and assigned to us: "their stories continue to teach, to heal, to bring to life; therefore, storytelling is not a luxury for Black people, it is vital to our very existence." (preface, xv)

This rich tradition of storytelling is crucial when examining Black women's representation in media. Contemporary television shows created by and for Black women, such as *Insecure*, carry forward this legacy, providing platforms where authentic narratives can flourish. These stories resist the reductive stereotypes historically imposed on Black women, allowing them to reclaim their identities and express their multifaceted experiences. Through humor and nuanced character

development, these shows challenge and subvert oppressive norms, demonstrating the transformative power of Black feminist storytelling in contemporary media.

Waller (2023) asserts that Black women need to be the ones to tell their own stories, because only then will it be true; but also that there are multitudes of stories to be told by Black women, and the space needs to be made for that. Toliver also continues by saying that "the unique storytelling traditions of Black people, those synthesizing Black values and cultural practices, are often disregarded." (xv) - Applying this thought to television, we are seeing the mass cancellation of Black TV shows, like *The Wonder Years* (2023), *Rap Sh*t* (2021-2023), and *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019-2023) - these shows not only got canceled, but also sparked a discussion of awareness of a pattern that many are noticing: predominantly Black led/produced/casted TV shows have a very short shelf life in comparison to shows with predominantly white actors and producers - *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, for example, is in its 16th season since its debut in 2005; *Friends* ran for 10 seasons, while *Living Single* only had 5. The way we tell our stories involves a different kind of humor that white audiences often cannot resonate with or just don't want to see, thus, viewership, budget, and promotion for these shows are disproportionate (Ramón, Hunt, et al. 15; Ramón, Tran, et al. 67).

As Bergeson theorizes, storytelling is an act of reclamation and is capable of shifting narratives and perceptions of power:

> "Stories have the power to shape individuals, communities, and even nations in both negative and positive ways, and black Americans have tapped into the power of storytelling to combat negative stories that would control their communities. Slave narratives sought to expose injustice, Civil Rights activists wrote to fight for equality, and Black voices today share their experiences with racism through digital and social media channels to promote social and legal reform." (Bergeson, 99)

Bergeson continues by saying that she argues that storytelling redefines what it means to be "powerful" in America - applying this thought to storytelling on television, in keeping with the purpose of this study, the power to tell our own stories as Black people is one that is culturally significant; not because we need to be in positions of power just for the sake of representation, but because we empower ourselves and each other when we are able to make space for ourselves in the fullness of who we are. It's a part of our history, as Bergeson talks about in the quote above, but it's also an example of a resistance site where we resist the dominant white supremacist hegemony For marginalized communities, the ability to tell our own stories can serve as a tool of individual and collective empowerment. Through mediums such as television, Black people have been able to reclaim our history and reclaim power over our stories. This act of reclamation allows us to challenge pervasive dominant narratives that exist in service of white supremacy.

When it comes to seeing more Black stories told on-screen, the conversation usually circles around the "seat at the table" analogy. The discussion around that has since progressed into the thought that we need to dismantle the theoretical table altogether; that we shouldn't be aspiring to just be stakeholders in white spaces under the guise of representation. I agree with this notion. We need to tell our own stories, and if we rely on the white Hollywood execs to do it, we'll be waiting a long time just to be handed yet another stereotypical and inauthentic portrayal of us. *Insecure*

displays the importance of placing Black people in executive roles in order to create more authentic, but not monolithic, stories about Blackness. (Williams, 44)

Section 3: Methodology, Methodology, Methodology

Black feminist criticism

bell hooks' Oppositional Gaze is the argument that we should want to be critical and think critically about the images that we see of us. This argumentative theory stemmed from her interviewing Black women who went to the movies, but weren't expecting to see compelling representations of Black femaleness there (hooks, 119). When Black people in the U.S. initially encountered film and television, they were aware that these mediums were tools employed to reinforce and uphold white supremacy. Engaging with this form of media also meant facing a glaring lack of representation in film and media. Black cinema was birthed out of this iteration of the Black oppositional gaze. Black spectators viewed imagery in television and film media as a gauge for measuring ongoing progress of political movements for racial equality. (hooks, 117)

According to hooks (117), she extended the discourse on the oppositional gaze by using Foucault's theories of power relations as a framework. This inspired her critique of films through an oppositional gaze, challenging the dominant portrayal of black femininity perpetuated by Hollywood. In her 2015 article, "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness," she talks about the Oppositional political

struggle, which she defines as a "Movement away from the oppressive bounds set by race, sex and class domination, a defiant political gesture." (hooks, 15). hooks' deployment of worldbuilding through opposition lends itself to her other thoughts around criticism in Reel to Real - put frankly, she says that if *everybody* likes a movie, including

white folks, then something is wrong, because we shouldn't be producing anything that panders to their approval.

Furthermore, hooks names that "power as domination reproduces itself in different locations employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control." (hooks, 115) This reality manifests when considering the gazes of Black women vs Black men or Black women vs. white women. In the case of the former, both Black women and Black men are likely to critique imagery and stories from the lens of navigating racism. However, Black men may be less likely to engage in criticism related to sexism and patriarchy due to their ability to benefit from that power structure. Similarly, white women and Black women might engage with film media with a lens informed by their experiences with sexism, however, Black women's experiences with navigating racism and white supremacy would also inform their critique. In fact, feminist film theory has historically overlooked the role of the Black woman/femme.

hooks argues that the ability and capacity to shift one's perspective under different oppressive systems creates space for empowerment. (hooks, 116) This

notion is closely tied to the concept of critical Black female spectatorship, which emerges as a site of resistance.. hooks specifies that this emergence as a site of resistance is possible when Black women resist the influences of the dominant power structures and align their awareness of racism with politicization, which strengthens the depth of their understandings and creates room for a richer understanding of the images we consume of ourselves. (hooks, 128)

hooks also argues that Black women engage in visual analysis on multiple levels: "As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels." (hooks, 128) The spectatorship and oppositional gaze of Black women is not always reactionary in nature. It can be viewed as an inherent way of being, understanding, and visioning that manifests from existing in the margin. hooks asks a very poignant question about what we, as the margin, will position ourselves in what she calls the "complex and ever shifting realms of power relations," will we join the oppressor, or continue to stand with the oppressed - "making culture towards that revolutionary effort" by creating space for more knowledge, and more specifically, space where transformation is possible? (hooks, 15)

Black feminist critical media literacy

In the realm of film and television, Black suffering and trauma have become a commercialized commodity. Some of the most popular "Oscar-worthy" films in the last 10-15 years have centered around Black death and trauma, i.e., Steve McQueen's

12 Years a Slave (2013), Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2013), *The Help* (2011), and *The Butler* (2013). According to Paterson et. al, Black feminist critical media literacy is the combination of Black feminist theory and media studies/media literacy. Critical media literacy includes examining how "the consumption of media images plays a significant role in how we understand ourselves as individuals and as members of a larger collective of Black women." (41). In understanding that images do have the power to influence and inform the general public in both positive and negative ways, Paterson et al. question the ways that Black women are represented within the media, and Black feminist theory provides a lens with which we look at these images through. Black feminist theory provides skills like active self-reflection, self-love, and self-care, while also pushing us "to resist media images that attempt to delimit and diminish Black women's subjectivities." (Paterson et. al., 41)

Black feminism provides a framework in which Black women's/femme's experiences are centered and contextualized (I use "Femme" as an umbrella term for those who are feminine presenting or self-identify with femininity, but don't fully align with the term "woman," though "woman" is included in "Femme"). Not only does Black feminism center and empower Black women, it also provides context for the systems that work to oppress Black women. The Combahee River Collective, a Black lesbian feminist organization, released a public statement in 1977 that accurately describes the need for Black feminism:

> "Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a

> shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique." (The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977)

Historically, feminist movements led by white women have excluded Black women solely on the basis of race. The Suffragette Movement in particular, notoriously made their stance clear: Susan B. Anthony has been quoted as saying, "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman" (qtd. in Wesleyan University). As a result, Black women inherently understand the need for a political movement that focuses on equity, justice, and dismantling the various systems of oppression that impact a person's identities. Black feminism is a movement, but is also a school of thought, which is where the "theory" lends itself to the praxis.

A Black feminist theoretical approach to examining images of Black women produced in the mass media allows us to deconstruct these images, but more importantly, "to consider interactions between media and their consumers as we question the power dynamics that influence representations of Black women" (Paterson et. al, 41). This specific approach of looking at media as a relationship between the media and the consumer, as well as its "power dynamics" that influence the representations of Black women relates to scholar Dayna Chatman's assertion that television is its own industry: "Television is more than a vehicle for the distribution of cultural texts (e.g. television programs); it is also an industry and an institution." (Chatman 8) If television is an institution, then we, as the academy, should engage with it on a scholarly level – meaning that we are continuously finding new ways to theorize and to examine. To look at television as its own industry allows room for there to be more specific discussions and conversations about Black women on

television, as its own form of media. For example, I make a point to frame Insecure as a contemporary post-network comedy because during its run, viewers could access new episodes via HBO Max, HBO's streaming service in comparison to Living Single or Girlfriends, which aired on primetime networks - Fox and UPN, respectively. I argue that this distinction slightly alters the conversation surrounding representations of Black women, because network television has more restrictions in terms of elements such as language and content/subject matter.

Lastly, my research questions for this thesis were: 1) How have Black women historically used comedy and humor to represent their authentic experiences?, and 2) How does Insecure make an intervention in Black women's representation on TV through the Precarious Girl trope? As I analyze the scenes from Insecure, I am keeping in mind and acknowledging some of the implications of having a character like Issa Dee on television and how her presence creates the argument for it being a site of resistance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter allowed me to pose questions through my research, while also giving me the room to explore my research a little further - Black feminist criticism and Black feminist theory with a critical media approach have slightly different definitions, but they both work together in building the methodology that will provide a lens to critically analyze and examine the images in the scenes from *Insecure*. The critical media literacy piece will be used to approach the subject with knowledge of mass media and media production, including the notion that television itself is an institution. bell hooks' readings on Black feminist criticism engage theories

of resistance and of social criticism/commentary. Questions that will be explored are: What do these images suggest/say about Black womanhood specifically? Do they involve any cishet patriarchal norms? Who exactly do these images benefit? Who do they put at a disadvantage? The theories of storytelling also make for a more robust discussion of reclaiming our narratives and redefining ourselves, for ourselves. The next chapter will synthesize all of these theories, paradigms, and frameworks to analyze three scenes from the *Insecure* series finale that, I argue, speak directly to redefining Black womanhood using honesty and humor on TV to aid Issa Dee in becoming her truest, most authentic self.

In this study, I examine Black women's historical and cultural relationship to humor and comedy, highlighting how humor serves as a coping mechanism and how Black women have been traditionally represented in the genre. I explore how *Insecure* demonstrates that Black women can use their own humor to cope and survive, discuss how embracing vulnerability and precarity in Black women TV characters is creating a new legacy of Black womanhood, and analyze how this form of storytelling in comedy serves as a site of resistance to white supremacist and oppressive norms. I am bringing the methodology and theoretical framework together by examining *Insecure* using Black feminist criticism and Black feminist critical media literacy to analyze the images, show how they resist the "norms" surrounding Black women's representation, and also briefly engage storytelling (Christian, Toliver, Bergeson) as a means of creating that "new legacy" - by literally creating a new lane of characterization for Black women. I will also utilize Endarkened feminist epistemologies (EFE) as a means to open the door for me to lean into theorizing about what I have analyzed in

chapter 3, but also to make room the innate ways of knowing - as an individual and as part of the larger collective of Black women.

Chapter 3

PRECARITY, HUMOR, AND HONESTY

Introduction

The third chapter of this thesis analyzes how Insecure uses humor to address and challenge stereotypes, portray authentic Black experiences, and empower Black women through the lens of the Precarious Girl trope. Created by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore, Insecure debuted in 2016 and wrapped in 2021 after a successful five season run. The show is the byproduct of Rae's web series, Awkward Black Girl, and explores the adventures and misadventures of Issa Dee, the show's central character played by Issa Rae, as she navigates life as a Black woman in her twenties navigating relationships, her career, and friendships.

Insecure is praised for its relatable depictions of Black life: Insecure (2016-2021) and became the pinnacle of relatable content for young Black Americans to identify with on a more substantial level than simply racial identity." (Williams 44) Horhn argues that, "Issa Rae's HBO television show, Insecure, is a form of public pedagogy that humorously folds the various strands or understandings of public pedagogy." (6) Public pedagogy is defined as the educational influences that happen outside of traditional educational institutions and spaces, surrounding the ways that public spaces like media, popular culture, social movements, and everyday interactions add to the distribution of knowledge and learning (Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick; Giroux). This perspective shows how Insecure's content functions beyond mere entertainment - by incorporating humor, the show makes complex social issues

accessible and relatable. This approach not only entertains but also informs and provokes thought, aligning with the concept of public pedagogy, which emphasizes learning through public and cultural engagement (5). By incorporating various strands of public pedagogy into its storylines, Insecure integrates multiple layers of learning. It presents teachable moments about social justice, personal empowerment, and community building, all while maintaining a humorous and engaging tone. Some viewers and critics view Insecure as a body of work that challenges the dominant culture by giving voice to experiences birthed from the "intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday relations." (Horhn, 5) As previously stated in chapter 2, Black feminist criticism and Black feminist theory are invoked in the analysis of these scenes and the images within them. Collins defines Black feminism as being "another tool of resistance to all forms of their subordination." (Collins, Wood, 7) Specifically this chapter analyzes the ways in which the themes in the scenes resist white supremacist patriarchal hegemonic messaging and ideals that affect both real lives and the ones lived through fictional characters on television.

Analyzing deeper it becomes necessary to understand what makes Issa Dee another important footprint in a legacy of representations of Black women in comedy television, outside of her being a Black face in an otherwise white crowd, where awkwardness is used for laughs. The seemingly "awkward" girl-next-door kind of character has already permeated Hollywood, with more identifiable white awkward girl protagonists within comedy TV [e.g., Liz Lemon (30 Rock, NBC, 2006-2013); Leslie Knope (Parks and Recreation, NBC, 2009-2015); Betty Suarez (Ugly Betty,

ABC, 2006-2010); Jess Day (New Girl, Fox, 2011-2018); etc.]. These characters are often celebrated for their quirkiness and endearing awkwardness, which are seen as relatable and charming. However, this role has very little representation for Black women (Sterne, 28), which reflects societal attitudes and racial stereotypes that do not give Black women the same space for vulnerability and complexity, limiting the opportunity for portrayal of their full humanity. Prior to Insecure, the precarious girl representation for Black women can be traced back to Freddie Brooks from A Different World (NBC, 1987-1993) or Synclaire James-Jones from Living Single (Fox, 1993-1998). Freddie and Synclaire demonstrate the Precarious Girl trope through their quirkiness and eccentricity against the backdrop of their more confident and assertive peers. Though differing in age and social setting, both characters navigate said social settings with a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability that challenge traditional stereotypes of Black women, much like Issa Dee.

While Issa Dee is not the first Black precarious girl we have seen on television, Issa leaning into the awkwardness is what makes her so different from the Strong Black Woman trope, for example, that is often assigned to Black women in the media. Unlike Synclaire and Freddie, Issa isn't just a side character or a punchline, and leaning into the precariousness is akin to the embracing of otherness and abjection, as discussed by Wood (2021) and d'Harcourt (2022). That specific "embrace" is what makes those white characters relatable and charming, and I argue that it has the same effect for Issa Dee. For example, her nervous self-talk in the mirror scenes and her clumsy attempts at navigating social situations show a relatable vulnerability that resonates with viewers. These portrayals challenge the limited representations of

Black women in media, which showcase a more nuanced and comprehensive depiction of Black female identity.

For the purpose of this study, the focus is on the final season of the show, which provides a culmination of Issa's journey. The examination centers on the final three mirror scenes of the series in the finale, aptly titled "Everything Gonna Be, Okay?!" (2021). By contextualizing the mirror within the broader narrative arc of Insecure, the analysis sheds light on its progression as a motif throughout the series. Serving as a form of introspective self-reflection and a symbol of empowerment, the mirror "mirrors" Issa Dee's journey towards self-acceptance and authenticity. In essence, by foregrounding the mirror as a storytelling technique, a pathway is created to show a nuanced exploration of the mirror's role in the legacy of the Precarious Girl. The series finale of Insecure serves as a poignant conclusion of the characters' journeys. We travel through time with the characters as they celebrate multiple birthdays over the span of roughly three years. As the episode progresses, the viewer watches how much their lives change as their characters continue to grow and further solidify their footholds in adulthood. Over the seasons, Issa's experiences with employment, intimacy, and personal growth specifically set the stage for her character development, which is poignantly reflected in the mirror scenes of the final episode. These scenes offer a unique perspective on Issa's inner thoughts and struggles, making them crucial in understanding her character evolution and the representation of Black women in comedic television programming.

The mirror imagery serves as a motif in Insecure, which will be discussed in this chapter. Attention is drawn to the mirror as a pivotal, key storytelling device. While seemingly appearing as a reflection of physical appearance, its deeper meaning

lies in its role as a conduit for Issa Dee's subconscious. The mirror makes itself a powerfully significant storytelling tool that sheds light on themes of precarity, vulnerability, humor, and self-discovery. It is Issa's reflection of herself, in the literal sense, and is also a reflection of her inner self, her deepest thoughts, feelings, desires, doubts, fears. This episode and these scenes were specifically chosen for two reasons: 1) because they each, in their own way, speak to precarity, humor, and vulnerability, and 2) when analyzed in chronological order, we see an evolution of Issa's characterization from being completely unsure of herself and feeling pessimistic to living in full contentment and feeling secure in herself. Though she has many mirror scenes in this series, the final three were chosen because their placement in the season finale provides a greater opportunity to analyze the scenes, both in context of the whole show and as an amalgamation of the key overarching themes in the show.

The theme of self-discovery and personal growth is central to the analysis of the final mirror scenes in the series. The first mirror scene takes place after her boyfriend Nathan breaks up with her after a tumultuous run-in with Issa's ex-boyfriend at Issa's friend Tiffany and her husband Derek's going away party. Issa's best friend Molly comes over to comfort her. As Issa is in the bathroom getting ready to take a shower, she has an encounter with the version of herself in her head which tends to reveal what Issa is truly thinking and feeling at any given moment. The second mirror scene is on another one of Issa's birthdays (a marker that we have traveled forward in time), as she is getting ready for a romantic evening with her boyfriend at that time, Nasir - she is in the bathroom fixing her hair and her outfit as Mirror Issa pops up with a declaration of how happy Issa is in her life right now and how she's "going after what she wants" just like everyone else in her life, except that

isn't actually how Issa is feeling and we see it in her facial expressions and subsequent dialogue with herself. The final mirror scene is the last one of the series – it's another birthday, and she is getting ready to go out with Lawrence, who she is in a relationship with (they are engaged as we see by the ring on her finger) and she stops to take a look at herself in the mirror; she is able to see herself for who she is, and smiles at her reflection. These scenes illustrate the major themes of self-reflection, authenticity, and the journey towards self-acceptance, providing a transition to the significance of Black feminist storytelling in presenting a more nuanced and comprehensive depiction of Black female identity.

Black feminist comedic storytelling in post-network contemporary television shows are creating a new legacy of Black womanhood by embracing honesty, otherness, and precarity through humor, while also acting as a site of resistance to the oppressive structures that plague our lives. The analyzed cases were selected because they embody the use of humor to embrace vulnerability and precarity through Issa's innermost thoughts and feelings (as the protagonist, rather than a side or guest character). When synthesized, they paint a picture of Issa Dee's story as she moves toward living an authentic life, working with her precarity instead of working against it; learning to love and accept herself for who she is, rather than harping on who she isn't and what she doesn't have.

In analyzing these scenes from Insecure, Black feminist theory and Black feminist criticism were utilized to examine the humor techniques, highlight Black feminist comedy, and explore characterization within the show. The characterization of Issa was explored through questions such as: Who is Issa at the time of these scenes? Where is she in her life, and how does Mirror Issa reflect that? An important

element of the show, and Issa's development, is honesty. Despite Issa being a fictional character, her story is told with a level of honesty that humanizes her. This is significant within the realm of precarity and abjection, as it illustrates how Black women use humor to cope. Through the mirror scenes, which feature Issa's innermost thoughts, themes emerge that employ humor to embrace vulnerability and precarity. These themes both reinforce the argument and contribute to the broader work of humanizing Black women through the nuanced portrayal of characters like Issa Dee. By delving into Issa's inner world and examining the issues raised therein, this analysis sheds light on how her character contributes to a more genuine and multifaceted representation of Black women, thereby advancing the goal of depicting these experiences with further nuance, depth, and complexity.

In terms of Black feminist criticism, Issa's mirror technique, "Mirror Issa," intersects with the theory of the oppositional gaze, as discussed by bell hooks (2012). In essence, Mirror Issa is a visual manifestation of the precarious Black woman's internal self-talk, showing viewers a portrayal of self-reflection and self-awareness that hasn't quite been tapped into prior to a mainstream show like Insecure. Through hooks' notion of the oppositional gaze, which asserts that marginalized individuals have the agency to resist and subvert dominant narratives imposed upon them, Mirror Issa provides a platform for Issa Dee to reclaim her narrative and challenge societal norms. By "gazing" into the mirror, Issa confronts her own vulnerabilities and insecurities, in turn disrupting conventional representations of Black womanhood perpetuated by white supremacist patriarchal ideals. (129-130)

By examining the oppositional gaze and female spectatorship in relation to the mirror in Insecure, it provides deeper insights into the lived experiences of Black

women beyond the confines of white supremacist gazes. This analytical approach speaks to how Black women navigate their identities within hegemonic structures, presenting a quasi counter-narrative to the dominant representations bell hooks talked about. Analyzing the mirror through the lens of the oppositional gaze shows us how Issa Dee actively challenges the gaze of both external observers and internalized societal expectations, even if she has to do it in the confines of her own space, and not quite externally throughout the show's progression. Through her self-reflection, both literally and figuratively, Issa asserts her autonomy and asserts her agency in shaping her own narrative. This analysis also sheds light on the precarity that can be inherent in Black women's experiences, highlighting the need to identity oneself and the simultaneous struggle for self-affirmation in the face of systemic oppression. By engaging with hooks' oppositional gaze, this thesis examines how the show makes an intervention in the limitations of mainstream media representations of Black women, namely in the context of the new age contemporary TV comedies.

While analyzing the humor techniques used in Insecure, the alignment with conventions of popular sitcoms as outlined by Hohrn (16) are also analyzed. Additionally, the ways in which the show employs elements of Black feminist comedy within the scripted television comedy form, as opposed to the stand-up comedy framework referenced by Wood (2021), were also analyzed. Issa Rae draws upon humor and situational humor from what is described as the "Golden age of the modern Black sitcom" (Hohrn, 16), with inspiration from shows like the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (NBC, 1990-1996), Moesha (UPN, 1996-2001), Living Single (Fox, 1993-1998), and Girlfriends (UPN, 2000-2008); Hohrn notes how Rae dismantles the situational comedy form by including more social commentary and quirky humor into the writing

and themes of the show, but still keeping elements of the sitcoms like racial inside jokes, or what Hohrn refers to as our codified set of communication practices (i.e., exchanging glances without saying anything/non-verbal communication), contemporary slang usage, references to popular culture, and also leans into "digital functionality" as described by Horhn (16). An example of this is the usage of social media, and smartphones in the methods of storytelling in the series (Lawrence blocking Issa on Facebook, Issa "stalking" Nathan's instagram to try to find out where he is after he ghosts her, Issa measuring the success of her Block Party in season 4 by looking at the comments and feedback about it on social media).

Katelyn Hale Wood's articulation of Black feminist comedy offers another way to read the mirror scenes within Insecure. For example, Wood asserts that Black feminist comedy brings forth a politic of joy, allowing for truth-telling about race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship (4). The mirror scenes in Insecure serve as a sort of platform for the truth-telling nature of the show, highlighting the realities of the characters' personal and collective interior worlds. Through humor and introspection, the scenes create space for the expression of pleasures, and arguably "spiritual" experiences that "thrive in the face of racialized grief"(4). Laughter, as a core part of Black feminist comedic performance, serves as a physical release and a means of revealing cultural recognition and release, allowing for the expression of truths that may otherwise be silenced or marginalized by the dominant majority.

Furthermore, Black feminist comedy, as exemplified in Insecure, exposes the systems of marginalization and oppression used to silence Black women. By "cracking up" (Wood 2021) historical legacies of racist and gendered violence, the show sheds light on the societal powers that exist with the intent to constrain and limit the

experiences of Black individuals. Through laughter, the characters use and take up space not only for enjoyment, but also as a platform from which to speak their truths about what it means to be American in their historical and political circumstances. The mirror scenes in the series finale of Insecure embody the spirit of Black feminist comedy, allowing for the exploration of Blackness, womanhood, and precarity in both public and private spaces, while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming agency through laughter and self-reflection.

Case 1: Mirror B*tch, Part 1

The first mirror scene of the episode captures Issa's vulnerability and the precariousness of her personal relationships, illustrating how Mirror Issa becomes a channel for her inner turmoil and self-reflection. This scene takes place the morning after Derek and Tiffany (Issa's friends)'s going away party. During the party Issa's current boyfriend, Nathan, and her ex-boyfriend, Lawrence, get into a physical altercation after Nathan witnesses Lawrence telling her that he is in love with her and wants to give things a try again because he realizes that he is not happy without her. Nathan drives her home, and as they approach Issa's house, Nathan tells Issa that he's ready to end things because the situation is too toxic for him. This saddens Issa, and she goes inside of her apartment where we see her fall asleep on her couch amid tears. When she wakes up the next morning, her best friend Molly comes over to comfort her. She tells Molly that she's going to take a shower, probably to avoid having to go any deeper into how she's feeling with Molly, and as she enters the bathroom, Molly is heard off camera telling Issa that she and Nathan will get past this incident and that they will laugh about it one day, to which Mirror Issa makes her appearance.

The context here is that Issa and Lawrence were in a relationship for five years until Lawrence found out about Issa's infidelity, which she tried to hide from him during the first season, but he eventually found out, ending their relationship. Throughout the series, as Issa grapples with her identity and aspirations, she begins to understand what truly makes her happy, leading her to reassess her relationship with Lawrence. Their relationship evolves significantly over the course of the series. After their breakup, both characters undergo individual growth. Lawrence's development, his understanding of his own mistakes, and his eventual willingness to take responsibility for his actions play a crucial role in their reconciliation. This is what makes him more appealing than he was to Issa in the first season, where he was in a stagnant place mentally which affected Issa's perception of herself and her positionality in their partnership.

Mirror B*tch Scene 1 - What I See:

When she first pops up, Mirror Issa looks exactly the same as Real Issa, her mascara is running, hair is messy, etc. However, Mirror Issa is a lot more expressive and sarcastic than Real Issa. Mirror Issa mocks Real Issa's crying. Real Issa looks on and listens while Mirror Issa shames, judges, and makes fun of her, even as she's feeling low. She listens, and her face shows us that she doesn't disagree with what Mirror Issa is saying. In the next mirror scene, however, though, she does talk back to Mirror Issa and push back against herself when the self-doubt comes in about things "never going to work" with Lawrence, which leads me to infer that if she had the energy and believed that she had the self confidence to do so, she would push back. We then hear Mirror Issa exclaim, "Ya hate to see it," in a standup comedian style. Why? Because the joke is on Real Issa, according to Mirror Issa (her subconscious).

This is a deployment of the self-deprecating humor that can be found in exploring spaces of abjection in comedy through the Precarious Girl trope. Solemnly, Issa looks into the mirror and says, “I just wanna fast-forward to the part of my life where everything’s okay,” to which Mirror Issa sarcastically replies, “Good luck, champ!” with a disingenuous, sarcastic smile/smirk, as the show cuts to its title card.

Wanzo (2016) talks about how comedy as a genre has a tendency to dip into shame and abjection to produce laughter. Mirror Issa makes fun of her real self and shames her for being unhappy with her decisions even after trying to thoughtfully and carefully make them. This is an example of how the storytelling through Mirror Issa leans into the honesty and precarity that is creating a new legacy in defining Black womanhood through the Precarious Girl trope. Whether or not Issa agrees with what her honest self thinks or says, the very act of introspection and self-reflection are pivotal in how we view Black women characters on television; given that this show itself, is a mirror of Black women like Issa who are precarious or have been at one point or another, the mirror motif also holds honesty within its gaze.

Case 2: Mirror B*tch: The Sequel

The second mirror scene of the episode serves as a pivotal moment in Issa’s self-reflection, marking her transition from precariousness to a state of contentment, yet highlighting the nuanced difference between contentment and true happiness.. In this scene, Issa isn’t as precarious as she was in the previous scene. This is because there is a part of her who is content with her life as it is. However, the difference between “content” and “happy” can be seen in Issa’s facial expressions and tone of voice in this scene. She also isn’t completely confident in herself as we see what that looks like in the last mirror scene. This scene comes after a scene of a birthday party

for Issa's friend Kelli. -Seconds before this scene begins, Tiffany and Kelli are discussing plans for motherhood, while Issa looks on. Feeling left out of the conversation, but also seemingly examining her own positionality in going after what she wants in life, Issa questions what made Kelli decide to have kids after not wanting any. She admires Kelli's fondness for the guy she is dating and him having her open herself up to new possibilities, like starting a family. After not being able to contact Molly (who also serves as a sort of anchor to reality in all three scenes) to tell her that Kelli is having a baby, she starts to have an internal conversation with herself about where she is in her life currently.

Mirror B*tch Scene 2 - What I See:

"It's so great that everyone we know is actually making decisions and going after what they want! And we on that path too!" proclaims Mirror Issa. Real Issa replies "Yeah… it's great!" but we can see that she doesn't really believe it or feel confident in that feeling. This is a good example of the theme of honesty - Mirror Issa's staunch optimism doesn't match Real Issa's feelings - she's content with her life but clearly isn't 100% happy. "I can finally start claiming you to my friends!" Mirror Issa proclaims, which is an example of using humor even while having these moments of brutal honesty. Whether Issa realizes it or not, or decides to accept it or not, these moments in the mirror are moments of honesty. Next, there is a moment where Lawrence calls her and she immediately looks up in the mirror at herself, likely trying to seek validation from her inner self, and Mirror Issa tells her not to answer because she's with another "fine ass man" on this particular birthday, by then telling herself "Because it's never gonna work, you dumb bitch!" in reference to her and Lawrence. Issa asks herself, "How do you know that?" Mirror Issa fails to give a concrete

answer. Real Issa walks away and gives Mirror Issa the middle finger - this is also the last time we see an actual dialogue between Mirror Issa and Real Issa, so I infer that this is a symbolic gesture where Issa finally decides to stop giving in to her doubts, because as we see in the next mirror scene, Issa doesn't have any self-doubts because there aren't any interior conversations being had with Mirror Issa at all, especially not ones that are contrary to her reality.

This case speaks to precarity the most blatantly out of the three scenes, because there is so much contradiction and distance between where she is at in life versus what she actually wants her life to be and look like. In this scene, we see continued increases in stability and positive life experiences. Mirror Issa feels more confident, but real world Issa is still uncertain. In context of all three scenes, this one is also likely the most tumultuous, as it happens in the middle of the episode and is in the middle ground between where she started in this episode and where she ends up by the last frame of the last episode. When Issa finally stops panicking about Lawrence calling her and asks herself, "How do you know that?" in response to Mirror Issa saying that it's never going to work between her and Lawrence (and calling herself a "dumb b*tch"), we are starting to see a shift in how Issa thinks about herself in relation to the real world around her, not just the world in her head. But, as time is measured in birthdays in this episode, we see that it does take Issa some time to get to the point of not being afraid to show up in the fullness of who she is, or to go after what she wants. This is also a nod to the pilot episode, in which Issa asks herself how different her life would be if she actually went after what she wanted, and to the earlier part of this episode, where she expresses to Mirror Issa the desire to "fast-forward to the part of her life where everything is okay." What we see in the time from this scene

to the next one, is that it takes time and effort to do the self-work to get to being your best, truest, most honest self.

Case 3: Mirror B*tch: The Finale

The final mirror scene of the series encapsulates Issa's journey towards self-acceptance and contentment, challenging "traditional" notions of family structures as well as societal norms to highlight the power in embracing an imperfect, but fulfilling life for Issa. It's important to note the positionality of this scene - it's the final scene of the series, as well as the final mirror scene of the series as well. Not only does this scene encompass and complete the episode itself, it also completes the series as a whole. It is important to note that in the previous scene Issa reflects on her past via montages of people, places, and things in her neighborhood as she drives through it. She drives past her previous job at We Got Y'all, the nonprofit organization that no longer served her career goals or interests, past a RiteAid where she sees a guy in a Best Buy uniform (a nod to her now-fiancee Lawrence in the first season of the series when he ended up having to take a job there), and lastly, past the apartment complex that she and Lawrence used to live in. She makes her way to her home where we see her family, albeit a blended family - her, Lawrence, and his son Elijah. This is a pivotal moment because Issa originally did not want to move forward with giving things another try with Lawrence because he was expecting a child with Condola, the woman he was dating in the previous season, who also was Issa's consultant in getting her business ideas off the ground. This depiction of what is known as a blended family - a family that isn't a traditional family where all of the children have the same two parents/one parent is married or partnered to someone else who isn't the child's other parent - goes against the grain of tradition and of hegemonic traditions rooted in

heterosexism and patriarchy, but it's what Issa wants and what brings her joy/pleasure. Her acceptance of this "imperfect" family structure in pursuit of what she really wants out of her life is part of the silent power we see in this final Mirror Issa/Real Issa dynamic. As the series consistently explores themes of precarity and self-acceptance, particularly in relation to Black womanhood, Issa's journey from uncertainty to self-assuredness mirrors the experiences of many Black women who navigate complex social and personal landscapes. Her final decision to reconnect with Lawrence is a significant one, displaying a moment of self-acceptance and empowerment, while also highlighting the importance of authenticity and personal agency.

Mirror B*tch Scene 3 - What I See:

As the previous scene fades out, Cleo Sol's "Rose in The Dark," plays in the background. As the scene opens, the lyrics fade out, echoing a message of reassurance: "Just hold on a little longer, cause/It'll be alright/It'll be alright" (Sol, 2020). This song depicts a journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-forgiveness. The singer conveys a state of being that reflects a trust that everything will unfold as it should, regardless of the outcome, informed by a commitment to authenticity. We see Issa putting her lipstick on, smiling at herself in the mirror and being truly satisfied with who and what she sees. There is a sense of solidity as we see her standing firm in who she is - no overthinking, no negative self-talk, just her existing in her confidence. As she walks away, there's a single shot of the mirror, but no one is there. It's just a mirror. No one is there to make her second-guess herself, or overthink things, or have any lingering thoughts. I don't think the point here was to show that Issa doesn't have any doubts or fears, because that's simply not realistic, but that she is happy, as opposed to just being content, and that doubts and fears do not

have to take the driver's seat in our lives - meaning that making decisions that feel true and authentic to us as individuals is what matters most. For Black women, I argue, this is a luxury that many of us are afraid to indulge in because on one hand, we worry about how other people will feel about the choices we make for ourselves, and on the other, Black women are shunned from a life that involves "luxury" - when I use this term, I am not referring to the capitalist definition of having expensive things and living lavishly, I am using the word in the sense of indulging in something that provides comfort and satisfaction in return; in the sense of pleasure.

By allowing Issa to indulge in the things that bring her pleasure throughout the series - whether it be physical, sexual, professional, romantic, etc., (but generally personal) this is an example of a site of resistance. As Wood (2021) discusses the relevance of pleasure and joy in the comedy world of the 21st century, she asserts that the comic in the Black feminist comic sphere works to surpass or break through the confinement of being Black in entertainment media, "rupturing the structural silences produced and facilitated by Black social and physical death." Though Wood is discussing Black comediennes and stand-up comedy in her writing, some of her theories can be applied to this analysis of *Insecure.*

Essentially, by engaging in and exploring the various facets of her own pleasure, including laughter and humor, Issa Dee (slowly, albeit surely) resists the shame and ridicule that comes from societal norms that are rarely applicable to Black people. In this final scene, we see shared certainty between Real Issa and Mirror Issa, which is then visually interrupted (but not in a negative way) by Molly giving her a call for her birthday. Molly's positionality in this final scene is pivotal to the three scenes as a whole, but also to Issa's journey to her secure self. Her friendship with

Molly was a point of contention for a good portion of the series, but in these final scenes, we see Molly as being a pillar that holds Issa up and allows her to feel stable and confident. Throughout the series, though Issa and Molly differed in how they approached the different situations that arose in their lives, they both struggled with their relationships across the board. As Black women, they each experienced personal growth and expansion. Although they frequently have conflicts throughout the series, they find their way back to each other and are able to reconnect through vulnerability and compassion for each other. This repair in their relationship translates to their relationships with other friends, family members, coworkers, and partners. Ultimately, embracing truth and vulnerability paves the way for their individual paths of growth and healing. I argue that, albeit in a small way in this episode specifically, Issa's community is what helped to propel her into this stage of her life. This is also an example of Black feminist thought in the realm of collectivism and community, two principles that are rooted in Black feminism, as discussed in The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977).

The Common Thread(s)

Issa's journey to becoming more confident and sure within herself plays out in the synthesis of all of the aforementioned scenes. We, as the audience, watch Issa go from being completely unsure of what she wants (precarious), to being kind of sure in the middle of the episode, to being completely sure and secure by the end. As she walks away from the mirror, there's no one left standing there to make fun of her or make her second-guess herself. Insecure shows us through Issa that introspection is a large part of self-acceptance - this is also what humanizes Issa and relates to the precarious girl trope - leaning in to the otherness/abjection in pursuit of an authentic

self (Wanzo, d'Harcourt). Black women on television, but specifically in the comedy genre, generally don't get to have these fleshed out, messy, character developments, as they are often written in context of the male gaze, and/or are limited by the situational comedy bounds, for example. This is what categorizes Insecure as what I refer to as a "post-network contemporary TV comedy."

Conclusion

Insecure essentially says to itself and to its audience, okay, we know that as Black people, we are always going to have ties to our history & experiences related to oppression and marginalization, but how can we take that a step further? How can we create stories that critically challenge some of that oppression using humor? Throughout the series, Issa learns to accept her precarity, and still chooses to show up authentically. Imperfections are okay. These scenes also show us, even through some of Mirror Issa's blunt/honest humor, that we aren't always the nicest to ourselves, but when we make the choices we want to make, that feel authentic for us, that is self-love. It is self-care. Black women aren't really allowed the space to fully love themselves in real life, much less on television. White supremacy maintains that Black women's happiness does not matter, and that we don't deserve to live unapologetically. Issa went after what she wanted, and that was what was most important in this series through Issa's journey - she showed us that confidence doesn't always mean that you have no doubts or fears, but that you don't let them stop you from going after what you really want. That was Issa's journey in this series – going from full-blown precarity and chaos to manageable precarity and minimal chaos. Sometimes we create more chaos by not being honest and truthful with ourselves. In Issa's case, dating someone who has a child with someone else may seem chaotic or

complicated. However, dating in general is full of different forms of chaos and uncertainty. For example, dating people you're not genuinely interested in, whether to avoid loneliness or conform to societal norms, is a common dating challenge that often results in chaos. The irony lies in the fact that settling for relationships that may seem "safe" can sometimes lead to tumult and overall dissatisfaction. This act of ignoring your own desires can eventually lead to a cycle of emotional turmoil and discontentment. Therefore, while Issa's current dilemma comes with its own set of challenges, there is an overall level of uncertainty and potential for chaos that can accompany relationships in general.

Both on television, and in real life, Black women are moving towards living in our truth, whatever that may look like, and, in the words of Issa Dee in the pilot episode of *Insecure*, "[Black women] are just tired of being expected to settle for less." (Rae & Wilmore, 2016). Gone are the days where we stick around in situations that don't serve us because it's the comfortable or safe option, like Issa staying with Lawrence even though she was unhappy and dissatisfied with the nature of their relationship (at the encouragement of Molly, her best friend - she tells Issa she should stay with him, as if being single and in the dating pool might actually be worse than being in an unhappy partnership). If actions are only taken to check boxes that were not self-created, are these actions truly fulfilling? And who are these actions for, if not for oneself?

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

As a Black woman, I recognize that our silence is part of the many ways that white supremacy works to oppress us, and in turn, I use this research to theorize about the many ways that we already have, and continue to resist that oppression. Creatively, more and more of us are using our words to speak out about issues that we face, the experiences that we share, and the ways we make space for ourselves in a world that wants us to be silent. Although television shows are a visual medium, someone has to write the words that the characters say - I use this specific method of storytelling to make my arguments about how Black women's representation in contemporary television shows are creating a new legacy through the Precarious Girl trope.

This research contributes to Africana Studies by highlighting the transformative power of humor in deconstructing oppressive structures and fostering authentic portrayals of Black womanhood. This study addresses the gap in scholarship on Black women's representation in media, particularly in comedy television. It emphasizes how humor serves as a form of resistance and self-expression, adding depth to the understanding of Black women's agency in media. This scholarship also significantly contributes to Africana Studies by employing Black feminist criticism, such as the oppositional gaze and critical media literacy, to analyze representations of Black women in contemporary media. These frameworks emphasize the importance of Black women examining media images through unique perspectives that challenge traditional theories. Also, by engaging with storytelling theories, the scholarship

underscores the importance of self-narration for Black women in comedic television. Scholars like Bergeson, Christian, and Toliver discuss storytelling as a form of theory, power reclamation, and truth declaration, aligning with the humor and character development in *Insecure*.

This study explored how *Insecure* uses Issa Dee as a reflection of this resistance to the silencing of Black women through her precarity - an example of the Precarious Girl trope. Issa is awkward, unsure of herself at times, and doesn't always act in her best interest, but her development as a young Black woman shows her grappling with some of those life issues as we see her grow as a person throughout the series' run. This method of telling a millennial young Black woman's story allows us to see Issa in a humanizing way, which I conclude, is part of the legacy being created here - allowing us to simply exist, to mess up, to stumble, and to find oneself. Black women characters on television have messed up or stumbled, but it's the nuanced and multi-layered exploration of it, as well as the backdrop of it the show taking place in the late 2010's - early 2020s that allow for a more relatable viewing experience, which sets Issa Dee apart from an Annalise Keating or an Olivia Pope.

To be more specific, In Chapter 2, the exploration of Black feminist comedy showed how Black women wield humor as a tool for empowerment and social critique, as outlined by Wood (2018, 2021). This examination looks at the significance of embracing "a politic of joy while telling necessary truths about race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship" within the context of Black women in America. By delving into this framework, the study zoomed in on the empowerment of Black feminist comedy, showing its inherent intersectionality and its role in providing a platform for Black women to shape and redefine humor based on their lived experiences. Wood's

insights also peeled back the intricate layers of Black feminist comedy, highlighting its capacity to challenge dominant power structures such as white supremacy and heteropatriarchy while celebrating Black women's joy as a form of resistance. Building upon this assertion that joy serves as both a political stance and a mode of resistance, this thesis contends that humor within contemporary TV shows is instrumental in reshaping narratives of Black womanhood by undermining oppressive structures through comedic expression, as seen in my examples of scenes in *Insecure.*

Chapter 3, which was an analysis of the three mirror scenes in the show's finale, expounded upon the tenets of Black feminist comedy, while also engaging the theories of Black feminist theory and criticism. The selection of this particular episode and its scenes serves two purposes within the framework of this study on Black feminist storytelling in contemporary comedy TV shows. Firstly, these scenes were chosen for their poignant showing of precarity, humor, and vulnerability/honesty, each contributing to the multifaceted portrayal of the protagonist, Issa. Through a chronological analysis, the evolution of Issa's character arc becomes more and more apparent, transitioning from uncertainty and pessimism to a newfound sense of confidence and contentment. This journey culminates in the last scene, coinciding with the series finale, symbolizing Issa's journey towards self-assurance and fulfillment. In contrast to the dominant representations of Black women on television, particularly within the comedy genre, the depth and complexity of Issa's character development in *Insecure* stand out, challenging traditional narratives of the male gaze and of situational comedy tropes, which can be limiting. This characterization aligns with the thesis's exploration of "post-network contemporary TV comedy," highlighting the

show's significant pivot away from conventional norms, as well as its contribution to reshaping representations of Black women in media.

In addition, the analysis of Black feminist storytelling within contemporary comedy TV shows, particularly through the lens of *Insecure*, shows the intersectional critique that is inherent in Black feminist criticism. Drawing upon hooks' notion of the oppositional gaze, I examined how the show confronts and dismantles systems of marginalization and oppression, particularly those that seek to silence Black women. This aligns with the principles of Black feminist critical media literacy as advocated by Paterson et al. (2022), where they discuss how media representations are deconstructed to reveal underlying power dynamics and hegemonic ideologies. In tandem, the comedic resistance shown in *Insecure* mirrors hooks' and Christian's theories on resistance to white supremacist ideologies, as laughter becomes a tool to challenge dominant narratives and reclaim agency. The mirror scenes in the series finale serve as a powerful embodiment and example of Black feminist comedy, giving a platform for the exploration and reframing of Blackness and womanhood within both public and private spaces. Through this analysis, *Insecure* emerges as a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on Black feminist storytelling and its role in reshaping cultural narratives and claiming a new space within the comedy genre landscape.

The exploration of Black feminist storytelling in contemporary TV comedies opens several promising avenues for future research. One area of exploration could involve a comparative analysis of Black women’s representation across different genres and platforms, such as streaming services versus traditional networks, to assess the impact of production contexts on narrative diversity and authenticity. Additionally,

examining the reception of these shows among specific, varying audiences can provide insights into their cultural significance and the extent to which they influence societal perceptions of Black womanhood. Finally, exploring the behind-the-scenes dynamics, including the roles of Black women writers, directors, and producers, can shed light on the structural changes necessary to sustain and expand this transformative storytelling. By continuing to investigate these dimensions, scholars can further understand the evolving landscape of Black feminist media and its profound impact on both the entertainment industry and broader cultural discourses.

The purpose of this thesis was to illustrate how Black women as decision-makers in Hollywood productions contribute to more accurate, authentic, and unique representations of Black women in television, using *Insecure* as a case study. Recognizing the cultural significance of Black women's creative expression, contemporary television has started to correct historical misrepresentations. To further destigmatize and combat racial othering, it is crucial to provide more opportunities for Black women to create impactful, relevant works that resonate with audiences and contribute to the liberation and humanization of Black women on-screen and in real life. This thesis advocates for a culturally responsive approach to the future of Black women's representation in television, aiming to produce intentional and informed content that continues the legacy of shows created and/or written by women like Mara Brock Akil, Suzanne de Passe, Yvette Lee Bowser, and Debbie Allen, for example. By leading these conversations through their characters and storylines, Black women can resist white supremacy in the entertainment industry and pave the way for new voices to achieve creative freedom within Hollywood that can hopefully make positive changes in our collective livelihood.

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