

Embodying Sisterhood: Community Politics of Black Cisgender and Transgender Womanhood

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Abstract

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Embodying Sisterhood: Community Politics of Black Cisgender and Transgender Womanhood is an interdisciplinary project originating from my intellectual activism in the service of social justice to increase the chances of Black cis and trans women collectively surviving and thriving as Black women. Examining popular media representations of Black cisgender and transgender womanhood, I argue that Black Sisterhood, as a cultural practice of solidarity, should fundamentally be rooted in anti-trans ideologies of Black womanhood. A homogenized Black sisterhood that fails to perform labor for individuals that do not conform to dominant ideologies of family, gender, and sexuality directly contributes to the violence and discrimination that trans women face. *Embodying Sisterhood* intervenes in the invisibility of transgender identities within Black cultural politics and cisgender gender ideologies of Black womanhood to argue that cisgender women must confront our unconscious and conscious rejection of trans women from

Black sisterhood. It is imperative to our continued survival that we—Black cisgender women—leverage our privilege to open spaces for Black trans women to flourish.

The examination of sisterhood among Black cisgender and transgender women in *Embodying Sisterhood* utilizes theories from cultural studies, Black feminist studies, and transgender studies to unpack the ideological, material, and social constraints of sisterhood among Black cisgender and transgender women. *Embodying Sisterhood* shows the consequences of excluding Black trans women from various feminist spaces and Black communities of kinship, as well as the benefits of inclusion. I analyze popular cultural representations featuring Black trans women Laverne Cox, Shea Diamond, Amiyah Scott, and Janet Mock demonstrating moments in which Black trans women are devalued and ostracized or celebrated and included by Black cis women. When Black trans women receive support from Black cis women, they have a significant chance of flourishing; and without the support of Black cis women, Black trans women will continue to disproportionately encounter state-sanctioned and intra-racial violence. This dissertation is thus invested in how Black cisgender women can— and should *show up* and *show out* for Black trans women.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	iii
Introduction: Embodying Black Sisterhood	1
Sisterhood: Black Women, Kinship, and Survival	5
Intersectional Womanhood: Black Feminist Theorizing & Transgender Theory	16
Black Popular Culture: The Politics of Representation	22
Outline of the Dissertation	28
Chapter 1: Resisting the Cisgender Gaze: Transmisogynoir, Colorism, and Black Trans Womanhood	33
“I Am Her”: Misgendering and The Cisgender Gaze	36
“Keisha Complexion”: Colorism & Hegemonic Beauty Standards	47
A System of Hate: “Spilling the T” on Transmisogynoir	54
Chapter 2: Gazing at “It”: An Intersectional Analysis of Transnormativity and Black Womanhood in “Orange Is the New Black”	61
“Trans is, Trans Ain’t?”: Visualizing the Embodiment of Transgender Subjectivity	66
My Favorite Sister is Catholic: Idealizing White Hegemonic Femininity	70
My Other Sistas are Ratchet: The Ghettoization of Black Womanhood	75
Black (Cis)terhood: We Are Family	79
Chapter 3: “Don’t Come Back Until You Become a Man!”: Lateral Violence and Gender Socialization in the Black Family	88
The Darker the Girl, The Crueler the Words: The Strong Back Woman Syndrome	94
Next of Kin: Mama’s Baby, Daughter Maybe?	99
The Intergenerational Black Cis Woman Network: Safe Spaces	107
Chapter 4: “Being Exceptional Isn’t Revolutionary”: Reclaiming Representations of Transgender Exceptionalism	113

“Redefining Realness”: Identity and the Power of Self- Definition	117
Transgender Exceptionalism & The Politics of Passing	122
My Sister’s Keeper: The 2017 National Women’s March on Washington	127
Returning to Community: Sustaining Actions of Solidarity	134
Conclusion: Black Sisterhood Is Still Powerful	138
References	146

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Shea Diamond in the music video "I Am Her"	40
Figure 2: Shea Diamond at a nail salon in the music video "I Am Her"	42
Figure 3: Shea Diamond on the New York subway in the music video "I Am Her"	46
Figure 4: Shea Diamond in the music video "Keisha Complexion"	48
Figure 5: Shea Diamond in the music video "Keisha Complexion"	53
Figure 6: Shea Diamond in the music video "Keisha Complexion"	56
Figure 7: Ryan Destiny, Jude Demorest and Amiyah Scott in the television show <i>Star</i>	96
Figure 8: Amiyah Scott and Queen Latifah in the television show <i>Star</i>	104
Figure 9: Queen Latifah and Gladys Knight in the television show <i>Star</i>	110

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Introduction: Embodying Black Sisterhood

I stumbled upon the hashtag #sistersnotcisters while scrolling through my Instagram feed one day in early March 2017. I immediately stopped scrolling through images and clicked on the hashtag. The images posted under the hashtag included a variety of content in the form of photos of transgender women, artwork, and quotes such as: “Trans women are women. This is not up for debate”; and “Support your sisters. Not just your cis-ters.” The explicit message and choice of words to confront transphobia in cisgender women was intriguing for several reasons. The debate on what makes a woman is not a new debate but a debate that continually resurges in moments of gender panic. Gender panic, as conceptualized by Westbrook & Schilt (2014), occurs when a “disruption to biology-based gender ideology” causes people to “frantically reassert the naturalness of the male-female binary” (p. 34). The contemporary moment of gender panic is linked to the hypervisibility of transgender women in media. Black trans bodies and narratives are more salient to viewers because trans women defy cisgender individuals’ hegemonic understanding of the gender binary, and Black identities are represented as oppositional to White people. The recent proliferation of transgender women as series regulars in television shows, the mediated political activism of trans women such as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, and the public discourse surrounding the civil rights of trans people in the military and public spaces illustrate this contemporary panic over defining the boundaries of gender. The hegemonic ideology that trans women are not authentic women is an attempt to discipline and police the bodies of transgender and cisgender women, while simultaneously re-structuring a hierarchy of womanhood. #Sistersnotcisters implicates the role cisgender women play in frantically working to uphold transphobia to resolve gender panic through policing the gender of transgender women.

Cisgender women in feminist social and political movements have historically used sisterhood to label and create a shared universal experience of womanhood that includes and excludes specific individuals (hooks, 1981). The universal experience of womanhood posits that all women experience menstruation, sexism in the workplace, a gender pay gap, the stress of pregnancy, biological motherhood, and aging as similar and substantial markers of being a woman (Serano, 2007; Mock; 2014). Transgender identities not only question historical conceptions of gender but deconstruct gender identity as a stable category. The marginalization of trans individuals occurs because they threaten the naturalization of the categories man and woman, as they cross gender binaries and question hegemonic assumptions of gender-appropriate behavior (Serano, 2007). Their life experiences differ from biological markers of a woman, and as a result, the discourse surrounding women's issues excludes trans women through misgendering and devaluing their womanhood. If the definition of women does not include trans women, then they are prohibited from creating and forming bonds via sisterhood. The exclusion of transgender women from womanhood and, by extension, sisterhood, regards their lived experience of womanhood as inauthentic and re-inscribes a hierarchy of gender identity and gender expression. Movements such as #Sistersnotcisters are political tactics to challenge the social condition of cisgender women as the gatekeepers of authentic womanhood by denying the universal subject of woman as cisgender.

The goal of this dissertation is to examine ideologies of Black womanhood in contemporary media culture in order to illuminate how anti-trans ideologies exclude Black trans women from Black womanhood and Black sisterhood. My scholarship interrogates how media representations frame Black cisgender women's boundaries of womanhood through the exclusion or inclusion of trans women from Black sisterhood. As a Black cisgender woman, I was unaware of my cisgender

privilege until I learned the term in 2014 during a discussion with a White cis woman colleague. In our discussion, she asked if the term “cisgender” was necessary to expanding theories of intersectionality and scholarship of gender. In my ignorance, I dismissed cisgender as irrelevant; I was unwilling and incapable of connecting my womanhood with that of trans women. I was not ready to think that I, too, enacted the same behaviors or employed the same tools used to position my identity as deviant and abnormal. My dismissal of the womanhood, the evolving and diverse characteristics and experiences of femininity, of trans women was an unconscious process that was made conscious via unpacking conceptions of womanhood. This work theorizes Black sisterhood as an analytic to explore how gender, sexuality, class, race, and kinship operate in representations of interpersonal relationships among Black cisgender and transgender woman. The use of the concept of *sister* to describe solidarity with other women is a commitment to viewing each other as family, rather than strangers, friends, or political associates (Breines, 2007; Corrin et al., 1997; McDonald, 2007). Kinship among women is central to solidarity and coalition building. Black Sisterhood is a powerful tool of resistance against oppressive systems and a vital component of the survival of Black women. However, Black sisterhood that excludes rather than includes Black trans women, exposes the shortcomings inherent in cisgender-centered Black feminist spaces.

The notion that my cisgender identity provided me with societal privileges was hard to come to terms with, especially as a Black cis woman in the academy. Having just found my voice and while working on learning the language to talk back against my oppression, I was not ready to grapple with my cisgender privilege and prejudice against trans women. However, to oppose the hierarchy of womanhood, Black cis women must remain diligent about dismantling transphobia and utilize our cisgender privilege to support, celebrate, and uplift Black trans women. I argue that Black cisgender women abandon the concept of Black sisterhood when anti-trans

ideologies exclude Black transgender women from Black sisterhood. The bonds of sisterhood, for Black cisgender women and transgender women, are a central survival tactic that historically dates to the enslavement of Black Americans. Guided by the principles outlined in “A Black Feminist Statement,” such as “Black women are inherently valuable” and that these “politics evolve from a healthy love of ourselves, our sisters, and our community,” my scholarship is in service to my communities and illuminates the need to transform our politics to create a revolutionary Black sisterhood (Combahee River Collective, 1977). This dissertation is thus invested in how Black cisgender women can— and should *show up* and *show out* for Black trans women.

I argue that Black sisterhood seeped in a commitment to a Black trans feminist politic would dismantle hierarchies of cis and trans womanhood to improve the chances of Black cis and trans women collectively surviving and progressing as Black women. A Black trans feminist politic that is anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, and anti-trans asserts that all Black women are worthy of liberation and love. Black sisterhood as a form of resistance is only a benefit if both cisgender and transgender Black women collaborate. Lourdes Ashley Hunter (2015), the founder and National Director of the Trans Women of Color Collective, justly proclaims that “We’ll know Black Lives Matter when Black folk “SHUT SHIT DOWN” for the Black Trans Woman” (Hunter, 2015). The scrutinization, policing, and tightening of the reigns on gender and racial performances structure womanhood as unattainable for Black transgender women. Black transgender women deserve the affirmation and loyalty of Black cisgender women. Until we, Black cisgender women, show up consistently for Black transgender women as we do for Black cisgender men and women, we have yet to honor the battle cry *Black Lives Matter* and *Say Her Name*. In highlighting moments of an all-inclusive Black sisterhood, or lack thereof, my goal is to illustrate how to better support and serve the needs of Black trans women via the resource of Black sisterhood. As a result, Black

feminist theories of intersectionality, transgender theory, identity formation, and difference guide my research questions and textual analysis. (1) How do contemporary media representations of Black Popular Culture depict differences in Black cisgender and transgender womanhood? (2) How do anti-trans ideologies of Black womanhood isolate Black trans women from forming Black sisterhood with Black cisgender women? 3) Finally, what are the material and social constraints of sisterhood among Black cisgender and transgender women?

In the following sections of the dissertation, I first expound upon Black sisterhood as a theoretical concept and trace its history as a cultural practice of solidarity within Black cis women networks. Next, I situate this interdisciplinary research simultaneously within the disciplines of Black Feminist Studies and Transgender Studies. I then expound upon my methodology of analyzing Black popular culture representations within Communication studies and Cultural Studies as I analyze media from television shows, public speeches, books, newspaper reports, blog posts, and music performances. I end the introduction with an overview of the dissertation chapters.

Sisterhood: Black Women, Kinship, and Survival

My academic interest in Black sisterhood began in the Fall of 2015 while enrolled in the course “Women of Color in the Academy.” The nomenclature of “women of color” and the demographic diversity of the students enrolled appeared as a utopia to the numerous courses in which I was the only person of color¹. Furthermore, the lack of cisgender men in the course provided a space to interrogate our unique racial and gender identity experiences while navigating

¹ The class included two Black cisgender women; one mixed race (White and Latina) cisgender women; one mixed race (White and Latina) nonbinary genderqueer individual; two Latina cisgender women; one cisgender Korean American woman.

academia. As we read works by cis women of color and trans scholars such as Brenda J. Allen, Gloria Anzaldua, and Dean Spade, we engaged with our personal struggles to survive difficult circumstances and imagined a way to build a community of support outside of the course. I intended to lean on them and learn from them while in graduate school; however, our sense of community never came to fruition. When our politics about racial gender violence, activist techniques, and community responsibility collided, our fragile sisterhood disintegrated under our disparate ideologies for liberation. I quickly realized that “women of color” did not equate to sisterhood, no matter how many past and present experiences we shared about breaking down the patriarchy and calling out white feminism.

Collectively as a group, we were not sisters in the struggle but separate individuals desperately using our own methods to further our personal goals and careers. For example, while some of the cisgender women of color were only concerned with earning a Ph.D., others were activists in their communities, some attended political marches, and a couple completed community service projects at nonprofit organizations throughout the state of Washington. Many of the women applauded their single focus on earning a Ph.D. as making improvements for our communities. The phrase: “Being here, as a student on this campus, is an act of revolution,” was often tossed around during discussions on physically participating in political activism versus just discussing these issues in our scholarship. I believe that being present or belonging on a predominantly white campus as a Black cis woman is only an act of revolution if my presence changes those hegemonic structures. My individual progress is not just mine alone; it belongs to all the Black cis women who cared for me throughout my life. I made it out of poverty, out of neighborhoods flooded with violence, and into graduate school because Black cis women cared for me.

My disappointment with this failed attempt at sisterhood during a turbulent time of violent murders of Black cis and trans women revitalized my commitment to understanding the motivations and experiences of sisterhood. Black cis women were still mourning the recent death of political activist Sandra Bland on July 13, 2015, who died while in police custody; Black cis women filled the streets and our social media pages with outrage and demand for police reform (Nathan, 2016). Although officials ruled Bland's death a suicide, the suspicious circumstances surrounding her death contributed to her family and friends believing that mistreatment by law enforcement caused her death (Hennessy-Fiske, Muskal, & Mai-Duc, 2015). The conspiracy debates between suicide and murder fueled conversations in Black communities on police brutality, depression rates of political activists, and the vulnerability of Black women while in public alone. Eventually, Bland's family filed a lawsuit against that the jailers insisting that they failed to prevent Bland from committing suicide; however, her family maintains their belief that Bland did not kill herself (Nathan, 2016). In May 2019, Dallas-Fort Worth news channel WFAA unearthed a 39-second clip filmed by Sandra Bland during her arrest. The appearance of a video from Bland's cellphone that the police withheld from Bland's family and legal team four years after her death raises further suspicions (Laughland, 2019). We will never know what happened to Sandra Bland during her three-day incarceration. However, what we do know is that a Black cis woman died in jail, and if not for the Black cis women in her circle advocating for answers, our understanding of her death would be even murkier. Her mother, sister, and Black cis girlfriends insisted that Bland was not suicidal and that police officers murdered Bland while incarcerated. It was Black cis women who insisted that we "Say Her [Sandra Bland's] Name," along with the names of our Black cis brothers, as we protested on the streets and call for police reform. It is

Black cis women who feel the pain and fear of one day being Sandra Bland, or Reika Boyd², or Natasha McKenna³.

Sisterhood is a powerful tool of resistance to oppressive systems and a key component of Black feminist theory. The essay “Sisterhood: She’s Not Heavy, She’s My Sister” defines sisterhood as “calling the names of our marginalized sisters, to celebrating the relationships between women, to calling out sisters who don’t do right by one another” (Cooper, Boylorn, & Cooper, 2017, p. 272). My Black sisterhood is fundamentally about loving the diversity of Black (cis, trans, queer, and nonbinary) women. This research generates practical wisdom and uses theories and methods that honor my primary purpose as a researcher who "centers the communication practices of Black women with the explicit goal of empowerment and emancipation" from any ideologies that divide, rather than unite Black cis and trans women (Houston & Davis, 2001, p. 4). Black feminist scholars Cathy Cohen (1999) and Patricia Hill Collins (2006) highlight how contemporary Black politics often negate the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals within Black communities, contributing to exclusionary politics that have real-world consequences. Gay and lesbian individuals experience disproportionate rates of violence and death, a result of lacking support and resources from Black communities and churches; representation in social movements; and safe spaces for living their authentic lives (Allen, 2017; Williams, 2016). Cohen’s (1999) and Collins’ (2006) critiques seek to build a progressive Black

² In 2012, Reika Boyd was 22 years old when she was fatally shot in the head by off-duty police detective in Chicago, IL. Boyd was killed while hanging out with her friends in Douglas Park on Chicago’s West Side. The off-duty police officer, Dante Servin was not indicted on any criminal charges. However, the city of Chicago paid a \$4.5 million settlement to Boyd’s family.

³. A few months prior to Bland’s death in a Texas jail, 37-year old Natasha McKenna died while incarcerated in a Virginia Detention Center. McKenna was tasered four times by a correctional officer in attempt to get her to bend her knees so she could be further restrained in a restraint chair; she suffered a cardiac arrest and died after losing consciousness. As her death was ruled an accident, the Fairfax County Sheriff Department did not file criminal charges against the officers involved.

community politic that moves beyond the boundaries of homophobia, to embrace Black individuals whose sexuality lies outside the boundaries of heterosexuality. A progressive Black community politic necessitates that accepting the diversity of class, gender, and sexuality within Blackness would further, rather than hinder, the global struggle for liberation. However, Cohen (1999) and Collins (2006) do not account for transgender identities in their critiques of racialized gender and sexuality, as discourses on Black trans individuals were, and continue to be rare. My scholarship's inclusion of transgender women fills a critical gap in research on Black womanhood and Black sisterhood.

I deliberately use the language of *sisterhood* in this dissertation because Black women developed sisterhood during enslavement as a survival strategy. The Transatlantic slave trade displaced biological families from their home countries, and while enslaved in the U.S., biological separation of biological kin occurred through being sold at auctions (Collins, 1991; White, 1999). Surviving these conditions meant seeking resources outside of normative family structures. For instance, during enslavement, it was better for Black women to find sanctuary and support with each other than to directly challenge their White owners or the overall system of slavery. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidya Hartman (1997) examines the everyday lives of enslaved individuals to explore strategies of resistance. Hartman (1997) asserts that community is “best understood in terms of the possibilities of resistance conditioned by relations of power and the very purposeful and self-conscious effort to build community” (p. 59). The social and material conditions of enslavement fueled the need for Black women to survive and progress together, rather than separately. Scholarship on Black cisgender women often refers to sisterhood through Black feminism.

The Combahee River Collective (1977) defines Black feminism as “the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.” The language of sisters and mothers invokes kinship among Black cisgender women, suggesting that Black cis women’s experiences of oppression create a connection of loyalty to each other. Black feminist theorists such as Valerie Smith (1988), Saidiya Hartman (1997), Patricia Hill Collins (1989), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Michele Wallace (1979), and Deborah Gray White (1991) highlight the historical oppression of Black cisgender women in the United States. These studies have detailed the lives of Black women during specific historical periods such as the founding of the United States as enslaved individuals, the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s-1970s, and television and films in the 1980s and 1990s. These moments of collective struggle led to Black women organizing together to survive and progress economically and socially. Black sisterhood was, and as this dissertation asserts, continues to be a means of empowerment for Black cisgender women.

Sisterhood, as a cultural practice of solidarity, is fundamentally rooted in Black women’s love for each other and their communities. With community, enslaved individuals were able to relax, find joy in the lives they were living, and design plans for the liberation of all enslaved individuals (Collins, 1991). Utilizing the only resource, they had -- each other -- enslaved Black women’s cultural practices of helping each other escape from enslavement, sharing the responsibilities of childcare and providing each other with medical care (White, 1999). This historical, epistemological position asserted that the dismantling of systems of oppression would only occur through collective action. In her research on enslaved women and their gendered experiences, Deborah Gray White (1999) emphasizes that “the supportive atmosphere of the female community was buffer enough against the depersonalizing regime of plantation work and

the general dehumanizing nature of slavery” (p. 131). The Black women’s network constructed during enslavement is a demonstration of ingenuity and worldmaking. Scholarship on Black cisgender women often refers to sisterhood through Black feminism. The language of sisters and mothers invoke kinship among Black cisgender women, suggesting that our experiences of Black oppression create a connection and loyalty to one other. The numerous studies on the erasure of Black cisgender women from universal sisterhood with White women showcase the difficulties in building coalitions across race (Dill, 1983; Collins, 1991; hooks, 1999). As a result, I advocate that the practice of an inclusive sisterhood within Black communities is a more feasible and worthwhile endeavor.

My commitment to my Black sisters and our survival compels me to highlight the benefit of an inclusive Black sisterhood that includes trans and cis women. The language of *sisterhood*, rather than *siblingship*, is consciously utilized not to reinforce an oppressive gender system, but to affirm the womanhood of trans women. The language of sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and siblings are often utilized by Black people to show solidarity with each other and to acknowledge the biological kin we all lost during enslavement in the United States (Collins, 1998; Gilroy, 1993). As trans women are often denied the authenticity of their gender identity as women, embracing Black trans women as *sisters* is an important act of solidarity. The term of *sister* rather than *sibling* asserts that trans women are and always have been women. Black trans women are simultaneously my sisters and my siblings, just as Black cis women are my sisters and siblings. However, the terminology of *sister* and *sisterhood* acknowledges the unique ways the matrix of domination similarly impacts black feminine identities.

The matrix of domination, as theorized by Patricia Hill Collins (1991) emphasizes the interlocking oppressions of multiple systems of domination such as race, gender, sex, class, and

nationality. Within the system of gender hierarchy, individuals who identify or present as a cisgender man are the most privileged. Viewing oppression as an interlocking system means that “depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed” (Collins, 1991, p. 225). The duality of oppression and privilege within the matrix of domination highlights the privilege that Black cisgender women experience in constructing hegemonic ideologies of Black womanhood. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the exclusion of Black trans women from Black sisterhood limits our collective resources and severely diminishes our chances of liberation from the matrix of domination

Our militant cis Black mothers, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, sacrificed countless times for our progress as Black cis women. In her work for liberation, Sojourner Truth believed that women’s suffrage and abolishing slavery should and could co-occur (Truth, 2018). Truth’s canonical speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” delivered in 1851 at the Women’s Rights Convention was an important challenge to anti-feminist sentiments from men and anti-Blackness from white women. Unwilling to separate her gender and race identity, Sojourner Truth illustrated the necessity of an intersectional analysis of oppression and her commitment to her Black sisters. The exclusion of Black women from the Women’s Suffrage Movement and subsequently, dominant ideologies of womanhood, highlight how lived experiences lead to vastly different oppressions and strategies to overcome those oppressions. In “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood,” feminist scholar Bonnie Thornton Dill (1983) outlines the limitations of sisterhood among White and Black women during the suffrage movement. Dill (1983) asserts, “Among their [Black women] immediate concerns were lynching and economic viability. Working-class white women were concerned about labor conditions, the length of the working

day, wages, and so forth” (p. 135). This erasure from early moments of coalition building is the catalyst for a Black feminist theoretical standpoint for critiquing monolithic notions of social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality (Crenshaw, 1991). Theories of intersectionality critique the dominant white feminist narrative that excludes Black cisgender women in political and social movements.

Black feminist thought “involves tapping sources of every day, unarticulated consciousness that has been traditionally denigrated by white, male-controlled institutions” (Collins 1990, p. 26). Kinship for Black women is a powerful strategy of long-term resistance to oppressive systems that are dynamic and hegemonic. Sisterhood is not new to Black women, nor was it invented by White women during the early women’s suffrage movement. For instance, the kinship that Harriet Tubman felt towards enslaved others and her desire to see all Black folks liberated led to her using the Underground Railroad to help others steal away to freedom (Michal, 2015). During her time utilizing the Underground Railroad, Tubman evaded capture and never lost a passenger (Michal, 2015). The act of stealing away or escaping from enslavement provided a short-term solution to survival, rather than a dismantling of a dehumanizing system. Individuals who escaped from enslavement were able to change their oppressive situation, but it meant a life separated from community and hiding your background to survive.

Harriet Tubman’s resourcefulness and Sojourner Truth’s outspokenness during the 19th century are the epitome of #BlackGirlMagic. Although the language of “Black Girl Magic” emerged during the 21st century, the ideology of magic embedded in Black girls and women highlights how Black cis women overcome circumstances that seek to destroy our spirits and bodies. Hay, Farrugia, and Smith (2018) assert that #BlackGirlMagic “does not stand outside of earlier forms of Black feminism that sought to bring awareness to the lived experiences and

intersectional identities of Black women” (p. 3). Tubman and Truth’s performances of sisterhood move beyond mere lip service of inclusion, to perform deliberate actions that contribute to the survival and progress of Black women. As a Black cisgender woman and a proud Black feminist theorist, my research is explicitly informed by a social justice praxis that requires me to show up for my communities. Black sisterhood is the praxis of Black feminist theory. *Embodying Sisterhood: The Politics of Black Cisgender and Transgender Womanhood* illustrates how kinship formation as a survival strategy currently operates for Black cisgender and transgender women. Any Black sisterhood that rejects trans women diminishes the integrity of Black sisterhood.

My Black sisterhood rejects Black respectability politics, interrupts transphobia, celebrates the ratchet, and honors the Black women who paved the way for my survival as a Black woman. Respectability politics, as defined by Higginbotham (1993), stressed: “reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations” (p. 187). Ideologies of respectability politics limit the ability to challenge oppressive systems as a powerful collective. Respectability politics condemn us to silence the diversity of our intersectional identities as Black cis and trans women so we may belong. My utilization of an inclusive Black sisterhood as a resistance strategy empowers all Black cis and trans women to live our lives authentically and to love each other. My Black sisterhood leverages my cisgender privilege to center Black trans women in my research and political activism. A Black sisterhood that is all-inclusive embraces the diversity of Black womanhood and does not silence its sisters that deviate from normative ideologies of gender and sexuality. The Crunk Feminist Collective (2017) asserts that: “Sisterhood is deliberate love and solidarity in action. Sisterhood is showing up and showing out for your friends. Sisterhood is saying what you mean and meaning what you say. Sisterhood is trans, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and cis”

(Cooper, Morris, et al., 2017). In moments of exclusion from sisterhood with Black cisgender women, the protection and support that Black transgender women deserve are nonexistent.

We need far more collaboration and listening to understand the needs and desires of Black trans women. Black trans women want to live without the fear of violence, job discrimination, homelessness, and rejection from their families (Hunter, 2015). Fifty percent of Black trans women surveyed in the Human Rights Campaign 2018 Anti-Trans Violence Report were homeless at one point in their life (Lee, 2018). These disproportionate rates of homelessness, tied to job discrimination, lead to most Black trans women engaging in survivor sex work, increasing their rates of violence and criminalization. I know that trans women, such as Janet Mock, are vulnerable to sexual abuse due to their feminine gender presentation (Mock, 2014). In addition, I know that trans women, like Shea Diamond, end up homeless as youths because their Black cisgender mothers refuse to accept them as women (Diamond, 2018). A Black trans feminist politic of liberation concerns itself with the racial aspects of subjectivity, as well as providing a framework for embracing myriad expressions of Black sexuality, class, and gender. The denial of transgender women as sisters within formations of solidarity replicates the devaluing of Black cis women's contributions in white cis feminist and Black civil rights social movements. Black sisterhood that includes trans women, rather than isolates them, posits new ways to care and love one another.

Black Sisterhood with trans women is still a messy thing; Black cis women are still finding our way. Black trans feminist politics value the uniqueness of all our sisters, but as Zimmerman et al., (2009) explain: "The person is not an isolated atomistic individual; but rather, an individual living with and for others" (p. 84). Similarly, feminist Communications scholar, Gayle Salamon (2008) asserts that the domination of a "liberal individualist notion of subjectivity" within trans studies and feminism ignores the systemic understanding of gender and its relationship to power"

(p. 115). Black cis women must remain vigilant in our language and actions to ensure we do not reproduce the same systems of oppression in our contemporary movements for liberation. Thus, the nomenclatures of Black Girl Magic and Black sisterhood highlight the necessity of sisterhood within racial communities. This dissertation project centers Black transgender women to contribute to research on the diversity of Black womanhood and build upon Collins' (2006) progressive Black sexual politics to expand upon the boundaries of Black womanhood and sisterhood. I focus on the diverse ways Black trans women navigate the intersection of anti-Black and anti-trans ideologies to highlight moments for Black cisgender women to leverage their privilege and care for their Black trans sisters. The struggle for liberation is exhausting and impossible to bear alone. We need a community to survive a world that is always cruel to Black cis and trans women. In the next section, I explicate the theoretical foundations of *Embodying Sisterhood* informed by the disciplines of Black Feminist Studies and Transgender Studies to illuminate the necessity of an all-inclusive Black sisterhood. Black sisterhood informed by a Black trans feminist politic is vital to the current and future struggles of Black cis and trans women.

Intersectional Womanhood: Black Feminist Theorizing & Transgender Theory

Embodying Sisterhood combines theories from Black Feminism and Transgender Studies to unpack representations of sisterhood, explore the diversity of Black womanhood, and advocate for a collective understanding of how the matrix of domination oppresses all Black women. The focus on the intersections of race, cisgender, transgender, class, and sexuality expand Black feminist theory and transgender theory to account for “multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social worlds is constructed” (Crenshaw, 1991 p. 1245). Black feminist theories and transgender theories seek to not only deconstruct binaries of gender, sexuality, and class but to *challenge* and *reconstruct* knowledge production. Transgender theorist Susan Stryker

(2008) states, “ignorance or misinformation about a less common way of being in the world can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and mischaracterizations” (p. 5). Ultimately, the combining of Black feminist and transgender theories in this dissertation seeks to raise consciousness about lived experiences and media representations of Black trans women. Theories of intersectionality, in which multiple social categories simultaneously create oppressions, is a fundamental analytic for considering issues of power, privilege, and oppression in a (post-) binary gender society. As I examine media representations of Black trans women Laverne Cox, Amiyah Scott, Janet Mock, and Shea Diamond, I highlight the historical and cultural implications of an inclusive Black sisterhood.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term *intersectionality*, to describe the social ramifications of a complex identity for Black women. At the center of intersectionality is recognizing that various identity categories will lead to vastly different experiences, and the oppression that Black women experience is a combination of the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Crenshaw’s explicit goal was to define a Black feminist criticism, as she recognized the consequences of viewing “race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience” (p. 139). Crenshaw’s seminal pieces “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black feminist critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist” (1989) and “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991) make use of intersectionality as an analytic for understanding how the U.S. legal system and other institutions deny Black women personhood in legal cases of discrimination against in the workplace. Many feminist and anti-racist critiques of systems of oppression excluded the intersection of racism and sexism.

Crenshaw’s theoretical framework of intersectionality is foundational to Valerie Smith’s

(1998) Black feminist theorizing as an analytic to expose power and domination. Smith (1998) asserts that intersectionality as analytic “challenges monolithic notions of Americanness, womanhood, blackness, or for that matter, Black womanhood” (p. xv). Intersectionality as an analytic that challenges the monolithic notion of Black womanhood to articulate all aspects of identities and the complex role that identities plays in lived experiences, allowing them an “epistemic advantage” (Narayan, 1989, p. 337). The epistemic advantage allows individuals to speak to the oppressor and the oppressed, providing a unique worldview and language to articulate experiences and understand other oppressions (Collins, 1991; Narayan, 1989). Black feminist theorizing centers the communication practices of Black women with the explicit goal of empowerment and emancipation. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) asserts that “reclaiming Black women’s ideas involves discovering, reinterpreting, and, in many cases, analyzing for the first time the works of individual U.S. Black women” (p. 13). As a result, this dissertation critically considers how race and gender are inscribed upon Black transgender women to reinterpret conceptions of racialized gender in Black womanhood and highlight moments where Black cisgender women can and should provide support for Black trans women.

Neglecting to highlight the experience of Black trans women as an authentic intersectional identity of Black womanhood produces a hegemonic experience that excludes women who are not cisgender. For example, In July 2017, Janet Mock appeared as a guest on *The Breakfast Club* to discuss her second memoir, *Surpassing Certainty* (Breakfast Club Power, 2017). The popular Hip-Hop morning radio show features discussion on topics that pertain to the Black community, often advocating for the safety and liberation of Black people. Throughout her time on the radio show, Mock was misgendered and asked several inappropriate questions about her genitals. However, these are questions that the hosts would never ask a Black cisgender woman. The hosts of *The*

Breakfast Club, DJ Envy, Charlemagne Tha God!, and Angela Yee, cite their lack of knowledge about trans identities and their struggle to find the language to have gender conversations. Angela Yee, the sole Black cis woman host, is the only one who read Janet Mock's autobiographies to prepare for the interview. Mock's demeanor and communication remain open as she educates the host on appropriate language and terminology that remain inclusive of trans identities.

Unpacking ideologies of Black cisgender and transgender womanhood via Black feminist theorizing exposes possibilities for Black sisterhood as a means of resistance and liberation. The week after Mock's interview on *The Breakfast Club* (2017), the hosts facilitated a conversation about trans identities with Black cis male comedian Lil Duval. During the interview, Lil Duval was asked his opinion on the military Trump Administration ban that prohibits transgender people from serving in the U.S. military (H. Jackson & Kube, 2019). Unwilling to discuss trans identities, Lil Duval attempts to change the subject; however, the conversation leads to a discussion about cis men being deceived into having sex with trans women. Lil Duval explicitly states: "They have to die. I can't live with that. I have my own repercussions," implying that any sexual encounter with a trans woman will result in her death. Lil Duval evokes the deceptive trans trope to position trans women as "sexual predators who fool innocent straight guys into falling for other 'men.' At this moment, the 'deceiver's' appearance (her femaleness) is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (maleness) becomes the real identity" (Serano, 2007, p. 36–7). The use of the deceptive trans trope is a hegemonic ideology that invalidates trans womanhood as inauthentic in comparison to cis womanhood.

Discourses of exclusion deny the womanhood of Black trans women through deeming their physical appearance, gender performances, genitalia, and sexuality as fundamentally distinct from cisgender womanhood. Angela Yee laughs several times throughout the interview and hesitates to

challenge anti-trans statements from Lil Duval explicitly. Instead, Yee advocates the need for political correctness when it comes to anti-trans terminology, rather than citing the humanity of trans women such as Janet Mock. However, these conversations do not bring us closer to a Black sisterhood that liberates all, nor do they provide an accurate understanding of experiences of Black trans women. The cis hosts have the power to open or close spaces of inclusion for trans people with Black communities. Black feminist theorist Valerie Smith (1998) states, “social transformation will become possible only as we understand how the dynamics and relations are inscribed and produced” (p. xvi). Essentially, “notions like cisgender and transgender explore further how embodiment, perceived identification, and lived experience take gender beyond the confines of the binary oppositions of feminine/masculine and butch/femme” (Miguel & Tobias, 2016, p. 6). This conversation amongst Black cis individuals about Black trans women specifically highlights a moment in which a Black cisgender woman, Yee, should have showed up to defend her Black trans sisters. However, Yee fails to use her new-found knowledge from the previous week's show to educate her Black cis brothers, and as a result, her silence further contributes to transphobic violence.

The ideology that trans women are not “authentic” women directly contributes to the disproportionate rates of homelessness, unemployment, violence, and death of Black trans women. Black trans women face astronomical rates of discrimination compared to other trans individuals (Lee, 2018). A systemic issue plaguing Black trans women is the erasure of their existence via misrepresentation and invisibility from historical accounts of Black culture. Black trans activist, Raquel Willis (2017), rightfully so, states:

Cis women don't need to feel threatened by trans womanhood. If you feel that your identity and experience mean less because trans women exist, that's your problem. When you

belittle and devalue trans women and their womanhood, you are operating as a tool of the patriarchy.

I know that it is a privilege to have the voice and language “to speak truth to power,” and as my sister’s keeper, I refuse to allow transphobia to remain unchecked within Black sisterhood. Black sisterhood that is informed by a Black trans feminist politic is not a utopian ideology but a way of life that should be embodied daily.

The dismantling of the systems of oppression is central to trans studies and black feminist studies, as each theory is political and seeks at its core to be activist and advocate for social change. Transgender theorist Susan Stryker (2006) asserts that transgender theory is “as concerned with material conditions as it is with representational practices, and often pays particularly close attention to the interface between the two” (p. 3). Similar to Black feminist theories, trans theories are about the embodied knowledge that trans identities produce through living every day as marginalized subjects in the United States and globally. Gayle Salamon (2010), in her research *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, emphasizes that “trans studies need feminism” to dismantle the domination of “a liberal individualist notion of [trans] subjectivity” (p. 96). In dismantling the individualist notion of trans identity, trans studies would better account for the role of race, class, sexuality, and community in trans subjectivity. According to Martinez-San Miquel & Tobias (2016) and Serano (2009), the transgender subject is essential to disrupting the gender binary and provides a lens to “read” contemporary embodiments of cisgender and transgender subjects.

Through shifting my focus to expand the diversity of Black womanhood to include trans women, I utilize theories of intersectionality and transgender theories to explore the convergence of race, gender, sexuality, and class identities within media representations. Next, I locate my

methodology of analyzing Black popular culture representations within Communication studies and Cultural Studies as I analyze media from television shows, public speeches, books, newspaper reports, blog posts, and music performances. Popular culture and mass media representations are significant sources of evidence for Critical/Cultural studies within in Communication Studies. As Black transgender women are so often erased from media and scholarship on women, I bring their experiences into the larger conversation on intersectional Black womanhood and coalition-building through Black sisterhood.

Black Popular Culture: The Politics of Representation

In “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”, Stuart Hall (1992) asserts that the diversity of Black experiences is worthy of “our undivided creative attention” in critiquing popular culture representations (p. 30). Hall (1992) theorizes popular culture as a dominant means of ideological production in the construction of identities of difference. Focused on understanding how cultural ideologies are embedded, produced, and reproduced through the visual, the study of Black Popular Culture in this dissertation seeks to expand the meanings of Black womanhood and sisterhood through unpacking instances of transphobia of Black cis women such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Nigerian Feminist cisgender writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, predominantly known for her TEDx talk “We Should All Be Feminists” and the novel *Americanah* (2013), posted a lengthy Facebook post defending transphobic conceptions of womanhood (Adichie, 2017). Adichie's popular TEDx talk has over 5 million views on YouTube and brought ideologies of Black feminism to a broader public audience. In addition, snippets of “We Should All Be Feminists” were featured on Beyoncé’s 2013 track *Flawless* (Beyoncé, 2013). In her Facebook post, Adichie (2017) asserted:

I said that they are people who, having been born male, benefited from the privileges that the world affords men and that we should not say that the experience of women born female is the same as the experience of trans women. I think the impulse to say that trans women are women just like women born female are women comes from a need to make trans issues mainstream. Because by making them mainstream, we might reduce the many oppressions they experience.

Adichie (2017) based this assertion on her belief that trans women benefited from male, cisgender privilege. This essentialist notion assumes that all trans women benefited from cisgender male privilege, ignoring the intersectional nature of identities. Just as there is diversity in the experiences of cis women, there are a diverse number of experiences that trans women face. However, Adichie's denial and the ability to define Black womanhood is a key privilege of being a Black cisgender woman. The nomenclature of cis and trans should delineate intersectional experiences of womanhood, rather than create ideologies of authentic Black womanhood. To oppose the hierarchy of womanhood, I argue that Black Popular culture representations offer lessons on how discourses of transphobia in Black communities diminish sisterhood between Black cis and trans women.

Robert T. Craig (1999) asserts that Communication "is a coherent field of metadiscursive practice, a field of discourse about discourse with implications for the practice of communication" (p. 120). Similarly, Beniger (1983) emphasizes that: "communication serves to link the material and symbolic levels of both culture and cognition, and thus-the individual -through culture- in the dyad, the group, the organization, and the society" (p. 21). In conceptualizing communication as a method for understanding society, Beniger embraces the multi-disciplinary foundations of the field and advocates varied paradigms and methods for studying communication. For example,

critical/cultural studies, as a paradigm in the field of Communication can be viewed as a hybrid of critical theory and semiotics as explicated by Craig (1999) who argues that semiotics theorize communication as “intersubjective mediation by signs” and critical theory theorizes communication as “discursive reflection” (p. 134). Within the paradigm of critical/cultural studies, discourse is defined as a discursive process of language that produces knowledge about a specific topic within a specific historical period. Discourse on a subject has the power to define that subject’s identity and control the representation of that identity. As a result, it is essential to critique discourses and media representations of Black and trans identities, as these representations are produced, reproduced, and read as reality.

Within the field of Communication, scholars who study difference reconstitute meaning through unpacking historical, social, and political conditions of lived experiences and media representations. It is vital to analyze visual artifacts to gain insight into how a particular culture or group regards a topic, “for images, like language, have a structure—they appear in contexts—and they must be interpreted so as to extract meaning from them” (Brummett, 2006, p.162). For example, in *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*, Communication scholar Ralina L. Joseph (2009) raises “vital political questions about ‘who speaks’” and deems “meaning, language, and representation” as “critical elements in the study of culture” (Hall, 2000, p. 22). In the introduction, Joseph (2013) states, “popular representations, where identity is imagined as both a site of social domination and agency, transform seeming fictions of racialization and sexualization into something close to reality” (p. 3). Likewise, Communication scholar LeiLani Nishime (2014) articulates in *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture* that “understanding how ideological narratives of race, sexuality, gender, and nation intersect to create or erase multiracial representation is central”

(p. xii). As both Joseph (2009) and Nishime (2014) are concerned with issues of power and have at the forefront “issues of textuality, subjectivity, identity, discourse and pleasure in relation to culture” their research highlights the importance of communication practices within media representations (Hesmondhalgh, 2009, p.42).

The systemic nature of discourse is shown to function via the creation of binary opposites that we view as mutually exclusive. For example, Adichie’s discourse on trans womanhood has identified trans women as benefiting from male cis privilege prior to their visible transition. Therefore, identities are also coded and constructed through cultural representations and hence, as stated by Hall, are “structured representation[s] which only achieve its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself” (cited in Grossberg, 1993, p. 10). Historically, Blackness and transness are coded in harmful and dehumanizing ways (Bey, 2017; Hall, 2011; hooks, 2009; Snorton, 2017; C. R. Squires, 2009). The earliest forms of representation of Black individuals in the United States occurred during enslavement. Through these depictions, images of Blacks ideologically functioned to justify enslavement, the commodification of bodies and lands, and the superiority of White folks (Collins, 1991; Hobson, 2005; White, 1999). Blackness has been framed narrowly into controlling images of Black men as superhuman beings with brute strength and uncontrolled sexual urges; Representations of Black women ideologically present us as angry, masculine, and as unfit mothers (Collins, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Wallace & Dent, 1998). The complicated relationship between identity and representation is where the paradigm of Critical/Cultural Studies in Communication, as a political project, challenges and resists hegemonic discourses of Blackness, womanhood, sisterhood, and transness. The construction of transgender women and cisgender women as binary opposites mirrors the representations of Black and White people as the binary opposites. The

earliest depictions of trans identities presented trans people as horrors to be gawked at, individuals who deliberately deceive cisgender people, or as comedic relief (Mock, 2014). Cisgender people have defined trans identities through media and performances, much in the same way white people have set the terms in which Black identities appear in media.

Black feminist bell hooks (1995) asserts that “mass media are neither neutral nor innocent when it comes to spreading the message of white supremacy” (p. 118). Blackness has proliferated in recent cable television sitcoms *Black-ish*, *Empire*, and *Star*; reality television shows *Black Ink Crew*, *The Rap Game*, and *Vivica’s Black Magic*; musical performances and videos from Beyoncé, Solange, and Kendrick Lamar; Academy-Award-winning movies *12 Years a Slave*, *Moonlight*, and *Fences*. The increased visibility of diversity in popular media has led to more representations that feature Black and trans folks; however, very little research has examined the diversity of Black womanhood and Black sisterhood. The 2013 casting of Laverne Cox, a Black transgender woman, in the role of Sophia Burset on the Netflix Original show *Orange is the New Black* signaled the first time a Black transgender woman was a series regular on a television show (Trim, 2013). Laverne Cox’s representation as Sophia Burset provides evidence of the diversity of Black womanhood. However, the 2019 Hollywood Diversity Report found that Black cis and trans women’s representations still lag behind Black cis male identities in broadcast scripted shows and Hollywood films (Hunt, Ramon, & Tran 2019).

The visibility of power embedded in popular cultural representations allows me to examine the role discourse plays in influencing and shaping cultural ideologies of Black womanhood and Black sisterhood. Julian Kevon Glover's (2016) examination of media representations of Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, and TS Madison provides a vital critique of Black trans identities within the field of Black Popular Cultural Studies. Glover (2016) discusses the respectability politics that

position Black trans women as either respectable or subhuman. Glover (2016) argues that “Mock and Cox’s engagement with media also produces a definition of transnormativity, a process shaped by adherence to respectability politics, heteronormative standards, and class privilege” (p. 340). Glover's (2016) critique does not consider how the employment of practices such as respectability politics is a survival strategy employed with limited agency. Pre-existing cultural conditions of transphobic violence limit agency; the strategies that are available to Black trans women are a product of constricted agency and lack of community support. The ostracization from Black communities and anti-trans legislation implies that Black trans women of color do not matter and are disposable. Transnormativity is an outcome of the visibility of trans women, a strategy that some Black trans women can employ to circumvent discrimination and violence. *Embodying Sisterhood: The Politics of Black Cisgender and Transgender Womanhood* engages Black feminist and transgender theories to historicize and analyze contemporary representations of Black womanhood, to examine how political and social struggles intersect to Black popular culture to construct identities of belonging and exclusions.

This dissertation analyzes the production of Black cis and trans women in its complex media forms to investigate the social and political context in which representations of Black trans women, Black cis women, and Black sisterhood come into being. Hall (1996b) asserts that cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being”; this epistemological position challenges the naturalization of representation as a reflection of our everyday lives rather than a reconstruction. The current media moment of Black trans visibility provides a space for Black people to negotiate our understanding of racialized gender performances to encompass gender as a fluid social construction. *Embodying Sisterhood* contends with the ways race and gender organize our lives and posits that it is up to Black cis women to reorganize and resist dominant and binary understandings

of our Black womanhood. How can we value the femininity of Black cis women if we do not value the femininity of Black trans women? How can we value Black lives, if we do not value the Black lives of Black trans women? These questions are vital to unpacking ideologies of Black sisterhood constructed via media representations. An embodiment of a Black trans feminist politics means leveraging cisgender privilege to kick down doors, have uncomfortable conversations, and demand a better world for our trans sisters and us. In expanding narrow definitions of Black womanhood, we -- Black cis women, can begin to value and care for each other and our trans sisters in more nuanced ways. To illustrate the dissertation's key arguments and interventions, *Embodying Sisterhood* is composed of four case studies that highlight the connection between anti-trans ideologies of womanhood and rejection from Black cis sisterhood. Beginning with the most severe case of rejection from sisterhood with Black cisgender women and ending with a case study of the highest inclusion in cis formations of Black sisterhood, I theorize the necessity of an all-inclusive Black sisterhood throughout the chapters of the dissertation.

Outline of the Dissertation

The first takes Shea Diamond, a Black trans musician whose music articulates her lived experiences of structural violence and rejection from Black communities as its subject. In the second case study, I analyze the Black trans character of Sophia Burset on the Netflix television show *Orange is the New Black* (2013) and her interpersonal relationships with cis women; Sophia is rejected from sisterhood with Black cis women but receives support from a white cis woman. The third case study analyzes the FOX television show *Star* (2016) and its representation of Black trans womanhood via analyzing the character of Cotton (Amiyah Scott) on network television. With a cast of predominantly Black cis women, *Star* (2016) demonstrates the diversity of Black cis womanhood and provides evidence of Black cis women as both transphobic and trans

affirming. The last case study follows the public discourse of Janet Mock, a mixed-race Black trans woman who lived stealth and publicly outed herself as trans in a 2011 *Maire Claire* article. Janet Mock highlights a case study of a Black trans woman who received acceptance with Black cis women, mainstream feminist movements, and her career to show how Black trans women can thrive with support through Black sisterhood. The case studies of Laverne Cox, Amiyah Scott, Janet Mock, and Shea Diamond, collectively articulate nuances in experiences of Black trans womanhood and Black sisterhood.

Black transgender women, similar to Black cis women, are constantly involved in a never-ending battle to resist controlling images of their womanhood. Chapter One, “Resisting the Cisgender Gaze: Transmisogynoir, Colorism, and Black Trans Womanhood,” examines how Shea Diamond, a Black trans woman, utilizes her music as a political tool of resistance to explicate her experiences of structural violence and rejection from community with Black folks. In this chapter, I analyze two music videos from her first album *Seen It All* (2018) to explore how a Black trans woman utilizes her voice to self-define her womanhood. “I Am Her” asserts the necessity for a coalition between Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Trans Lives Matter (TLM) to adequately address the intersections of anti-Black racism and anti-trans legislation in contemporary culture. In particular, many Black cisgender women advocate and march for BLM but remain absent when it is time to support Black trans women and men. The second music video, “Keisha Complexion,” addresses the intersection between colorism in the Black community and transmisogynoir. Shea Diamond’s music videos highlight the diversity of Black trans womanhood, while simultaneously resisting the matrix of domination.

Chapter Two, “Gazing at ‘It’: An Intersectional Analysis of Transnormativity and Black Womanhood in *Orange Is the New Black*,” examines the first representation of a Black trans

woman as a series regular in a television program on the streaming platform Netflix. I analyze the sole Black transgender character, Sophia Burset, on *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) to theorize a framework for transgender subjectivity that interrupts dehumanizing tropes. Sophia's narrative on the show constructs transgender subjectivity through Sophia's medical transformation, relationship with a White Catholic nun, and lack of community with Black cisgender women in prison. Ultimately, Sophia Burset's narrative functions as a non-threatening trans woman to alleviate transphobia and render Blackness invisible in Laverne Cox's embodiment of Sophia Burset. This case study highlights the intersection of discourses of authenticity and community belonging. The writers of *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) produce Black cis and trans womanhood through a dominant White cis gaze that represents Black cis women as incapable of accepting trans women into their formations of Black sisterhood.

In Chapter Three, "Don't Come Back Until You Become a Man!": Lateral Violence and Gender Socialization in the Black Family", I examine kinship among Black cisgender women in Lee Daniel's Black musical drama *Star* (2016). Families in which cultural norms are learned and embodied by its members provide a template for appropriate gender performances and roles. The television show *Star* (2016) provides diverse representations of Black cis womanhood and multifaceted interpersonal relationships between Black cis women and a Black trans woman. This representation highlights the hierarchies of gender socialization in which Black mothers love and protect Black cis children, while reducing Black trans children to a *bare life* of family rejection, transphobic violence, and cruelty. The connection between Black motherhood, Black women centered kinship networks, and Black sisterhood illuminates that Black cis women are both capable of including and excluding Black cis and trans women within these networks.

In Chapter Four, I analyze Janet Mock's public discourse, specifically her speech at the 2017 Women's March on Washington; her memoir *Redefining Realness My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More*; and her role as a director, producer, and writer for the FX television show *POSE* (Murphy, 2018). This last chapter departs from the previous three by providing evidence of a Black trans woman who received community support throughout her life. Through analyzing Janet Mock's public discourse, we can identify how a Black trans woman navigates the intersection of anti-Black and anti-trans sentiment and discrimination, with support, allowing her to flourish as her authentic self. Janet Mock's access to respectability politics and transnormativity provide her a public platform, but her commitment to sisterhood and use of what Ralina L. Joseph (2018) defines as strategic ambiguity, guides how she utilizes that platform. This chapter illustrates moments for Black cisgender women to leverage their privilege and care for our Black trans sisters through modeling Mock's individual actions.

Throughout this dissertation, I examine the interrelation of language, gender, race, sexuality, class, and power to produce marginalized subjects. The system of representation has worked in tandem with U.S. laws, science, and medicine to determine what "being" Black, trans, and woman means. As explained by Hall (2000), this system of representation consists of "different ways organizing, clustering, arranging, and clarifying concepts, and of establishing complex relationships between them" (p. 17). I show how Black trans women navigate exclusion or inclusion from various Black communities, resist systems of oppression, and celebrate their authenticity as our sisters. I expand upon the limited research on Black trans women and Black cis women to expose how transphobia diminishes Black sisterhood as a resistance to the matrix of domination. I make this commitment because, in one of my darkest moments, one of my Black trans sisters valued me when I did not know how to value myself.

“For Victoria, In love, struggle & Black Sisterhood,” Janet Mock wrote these words the night she signed my copy of *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*. After placing my book back in my hands, Janet Mock wrapped her arms around me and embraced me as we smiled for a picture I requested. After leaving her talk that October night in 2014, I took a bus to my new home: a room I recently rented after living in an extended day hotel for two weeks. Janet Mock’s words reminded me that I was not alone; I had a sisterhood waiting to support me and lift me up in my current and future struggles. I felt an instant connection to Janet Mock and her intuition of writing those words. Her words became the springboard of this dissertation project and guided my research to examine contemporary conceptions of sisterhood. The struggle for liberation is exhausting and impossible to bear alone. We need a community to survive a world that is always cruel to Black girls and women. As a whole, this dissertation focuses on how Black sisterhood, informed by a Black trans feminist politics, is vital to our current and future survival. In the first chapter, I examine the most extreme media example of how anti-trans ideologies and cis notions of Black womanhood exclude Black trans women from Black sisterhood.

Chapter 1: Resisting the Cisgender Gaze: Transmisogynoir, Colorism, and Black Trans Womanhood

“If you had to wear my shoes, you’d probably take them off too.”

(Shea Diamond, “I Am Her,” 2016)

In October 2016, Shea Diamond released her first music video, “I Am Her” on YouTube. In the contemporary climate of anti-transgender legislation and anti-Black racism, many trans women of color never live to see their dreams come to fruition. Trans women of color have an average life span of thirty-five years (Hale, 2018). To produce multiple music videos as a Black trans woman artist is no small feat, especially in a world that suggests that trans people “should not exist” (Hayward, 2017, p. 191). Diamond wrote her first single “I Am Her” while incarcerated in a men’s penitentiary in Michigan, perhaps never imagining she would record and produce a music video for her song years later (Diamond, 2016). The black and white music video set on the streets of New York City gives a glimpse into her lived experiences as a formerly incarcerated Black trans woman. The moment her soprano voice sings the first lyrics, “There’s an outcast in everybody’s life, and I am her. I Am Her,” Shea Diamond directly engages with her positionality as marginalized. Through claiming the pronoun of *her*, Shea (pronounced “She-ah”) rejects the common practice of misgendering trans women. On her website, Diamond’s bio emphasizes her daily struggle: “Shea has always had to fight to live her truth. Indeed, she has fought to live her very she-ness.” Cisgender, as the ideal, devalues Diamonds’s lived experiences of womanhood. As a form of transphobia, misgendering fails to recognize and validate a trans person’s gender identity (McLemore, 2015). Misgendering of trans women is a microaggression that causes psychological harm and political oppression and domination (Kapusta, 2016). The misgendering of trans women often leads to them being unable to utilize public bathrooms or access relevant

identification documents (Lee, 2018). “I Am Her” makes the connection between the linguistic harm of transphobic language and detrimental social conditions salient.

Shea Diamond’s placement in a men’s penitentiary illustrates one of the consequences of misgendering on an institutional level. There are very few prisons nationwide that incarcerate transgender women and men with populations that match their gender identity. Diamond does not have cisgender privilege and her trans womanhood others her; as a result, she spends ten years incarcerated in a gender-segregated institution in which the State of Michigan sought to discipline *her* into *him*. In the “Foreword” to *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, CeCe McDonald (2015), also a formerly incarcerated Black trans woman, outlines how correctional staff reinforces transphobic ideologies through dismissive and evil behavior in men’s institutions. In a Billboard (2018) interview, Diamond states: “I’ve been a product of every system already. So, I just thought that’s what my life would be. I thought I would probably even die in prison. But seen it all, you know. I made it out of there.” Patricia Hill Collins (2006) in *Black Sexual Politics* contends, “routine practices such as strip searches, verbal abuse, restricting basic privileges, and ignoring physical and sexual assault among inmates aim to control prisoners by dehumanizing them” (p. 89). Diamond received extended time for presenting as a woman; she was labeled a sexual deviant for wearing lipstick and performing femininity. As a result, guards forcibly shaved Diamond’s head and made her wear clothing for males in a dehumanizing attempt to “fix” her gender (HuffPost, 2018). Transphobia in prison institutions moves beyond microaggressions and utilizes fear, intimidation, rape, violence, and solitary confinement in an attempt to correct deviant gender behavior (Spade, 2018). In these oppressive circumstances, it would suffice that Diamond (2018) would indeed think that institutions would be all she would ever see.

The constant threat of harassment and violence while incarcerated produces psychological trauma through the use of what Foucault (1977) classifies as disciplinary power. In his examination of the social function of punishment and prisons, Foucault (1977) asserts: “disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom its subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (p. 187). Power, as a discipline, polices individual acts and seeks to socialize Black transgender women into proper subjects. Through her gaze, Diamond’s music introduces listeners to snippets of misgendering, lack of access to health care and safe public spaces, disparate rates of incarceration, colorism in the Black community, and hierarchies of gender that marginalize transgender women. In her debut EP *Seen It All* (2018), Shea Diamond’s five original tracks document her lived experiences of being shunned in various communities that led to incarceration, poverty, exclusion, activism, and self-love.

In this chapter, I analyze two music videos from *Seen It All* (2018) to explore how Diamond represents her intersectional identity in her song lyrics and video aesthetics. The music videos “Keisha Complexion,” along with “I Am Her,” narrate experiences of Black trans women that are often silenced and devalued in mainstream music and society. I begin the dissertation with the analysis of Shea Diamond’s music to highlight how cis notions of Black womanhood reduce the livelihood of Black trans women. For many Black trans women, Black sisterhood is symbolic only. “I Am Her” asserts the necessity for a coalition between Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Trans Lives Matter (TLM) to adequately address the intersections of anti-Black racism and anti-trans legislation in our contemporary culture. In particular, many Black cisgender women advocate and march for BLM, but remain absent when it is time to support Black trans and nonbinary individuals. “Keisha Complexion,” the second music video, addresses the intersection between

colorism in the Black community and transmisogynoir, to challenge anti-trans ideologies of Black womanhood.

“I Am Her”: Misgendering and The Cisgender Gaze

There's an outcast in everybody's life. And I am her (I am her).
There's a shadow in everybody's front door. And I am her (I am her).
There's a dark cloud in everybody's sunlight. And I am her (I am her).

(“I Am Her,” Chorus)

Language, power, and ideology are constructed via signs and symbols to privilege and naturalize dominant voices. As stated by transgender theorist Leslie Feinberg (2010), “many of the terms used to describe us are words that cut and sear” (p. 133). To change this narrative, Diamond centers her trans identity and queers dominant discourse and images of Black transgender women with her first single “I Am Her.” Diamond is a singer and songwriter of “soul rooted music of resistance and liberation” born in Little Rock, Arkansas (Herman, 2018). As an outcast, Diamond’s trans womanhood is devalued and often represented as inauthentic. Diamond’s lack of family acceptance and cultural invisibility with Black cis networks leads her to produce music within the genre of soul music. Joel Rudinow (2010) asserts that soul music “in particular has helped to heal the soul of a nation in crisis” (p. 3). Diamond’s music speaks explicitly to her Black trans sisters and her Black cis sisters To heal trauma faced by many Black trans women. As Diamond’s primary audience, Black trans women are uplifted, and her secondary audience of Black cis women are called out for their cis notions of womanhood. Describing the lived experiences that lead to her writing “I Am Her,” Diamond states: “I began writing ‘I Am Her’ as a *statement* to a world that said I shouldn't exist. I wrote it as an *anthem* for all those that felt shunned for simply being who they were” (Bruner, 2016). Shea Diamond’s transgender standpoint illuminates the unique

oppressions she faces as a Black woman and highlights the consequences of anti-trans sentiment for trans women who do not easily pass as cisgender.

Like many Black trans women, Shea Diamond is ostracized and shunned by various communities to do transphobia. Diamond spent her teen years in the foster care system before eventually being incarcerated for ten years after being kicked out of her home at the age of fourteen for being trans. The rejection from her mother, her primary caregiver, illustrates the first time a Black cisgender woman invalidated her gender identity and failed to provide a haven of support. Lori A. Saffrin (2011) asserts:

Due to rejection from the lesbian and gay community, as well as the structured realities of racism, many transpersons of color who are victims of violence have limited support systems in place and thus, for survival purposes, often have to consider performing dangerous work. (p. 162)

This early experience of adversity and isolation from Black family members and communities directly contributed to Diamond's institutionalization. As a result, Shea Diamond spent much of her life institutionalized and committing crimes "to find the financial means to transition to [her] true gender" (Herman, 2018). Declaring that her trans "existence was a rebellion," Diamond's album *Seen It All* is "merely an introduction to the woman she fought hard to become" (Herman, 2018). Shea Diamond's "I Am Her" represents her survival of her ten-year incarceration in a men's penitentiary, transmisogynoir, and Black respectability politics.

In an interview about "I Am Her" before the release of the music video, Diamond states: "While incarcerated, I found a community that shared my trans experience - it was there where I found my voice." Forming community while incarcerated, is an important survival strategy for Black and trans folks. The United States prison population is disproportionately saturated with

Black trans bodies, such as Diamond's, due to structural racist practices in social institutions such as enslavement and Jim Crow laws (Alexander, 2012). Incarceration reproduces the conditions of enslavement to degrade Black, trans, and queer folks. During enslavement, notions of savagery sought to justify the deplorable and inequitable conditions used to dehumanize and colonize the minds of Black people. The binary opposition of racialization during enslavement was experienced differently by Black cis men and Black cis women; however, much of the literature on enslavement does not account for transgender identities and the unique challenges they faced (Collins, 2006; Davis, 2003; Giddings, 1984; Hartman, 1997). Hannah Rosén (2009) and C. Riley Snorton (2017) redress this erasure in their research of enslaved Blacks to account for transgender identities; in particular, they focus on transgender women Francine Thompson and Mary Jones. Both of these women face additional violence and ridicule during enslavement and while incarcerated. Rosén (2009) states: "thus in addition to an unwanted and intrusive medical exam, public humiliation, imprisonment, and hard labor. Thompson, it seems she was subjected to further sexual violence at the hands of those guarding her in jail" (p. 237). The intersection of transphobia and anti-Blackness has a long history; as a result, it is no coincidence that both Thompson and Jones are both incarcerated after enslavement (Rosén, 2009; Snorton, 2017). Incarceration is a consistent reality for many Black and trans folks as ideologies of racism, domination, and capitalism drive the prison industrial complex.

When Diamond bellows out the chorus, "There's an outcast in every body's life, and I am her," she references the common transphobic practice of misgendering and the stigma attached to her gender identity as a woman. Misgendering, as defined by Kapusta (2016), "includes the use of gender terms that exclude transgender women from the category woman, or that hierarchize that category in a way that marginalizes transgender women" (p. 502). Susan Stryker (2008) also

asserts that “ignorance or misinformation about a less common way of being in the world can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and mischaracterizations” (Stryker, 2008, p. 5). Likewise, Communication scholar, Gayle Salamon (2010) in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, explains that “the importance of self-definition for trans people must already recognize the power of language and a name in the process of subject formation.” As discourse functions to gain and maintain power, the use of language to devalue and marginalize transgender identities is a powerful tool of domination (Hall, 2001). The practice of misgendering transgender women occurs in a variety of societal institutions and during interpersonal interactions with cisgender people. As an everyday experience, misgendering shapes how transgender people feel and evaluate their social identity and self-esteem (McLemore, 2015). Using her music as activism, Shea Diamond brings herself into existence and frames her gender identity as authentic.

“I Am Her” takes place on the streets of New York City and represents the everyday existence of Diamond in black and white. The black and white video further adds to the narrowness of the cisgender gaze, heightening how the examination of difference is structured in binary oppositions. The stark realism of wire fences, chains, and generational poverty incorporated in three and a half minutes is an unapologetic story that centers the diversity of Black womanhood and rejects cisgender privilege in her formation of womanhood. The camera zooms in and out of Diamond’s life; each scene shown briefly remains on the screen before quickly moving to highlight other locations. The music video aligns each location change to match the rhythm of the track. As Diamond sings, she stretches every melodic note while proudly strolling through her neighborhood wearing a Maxi dress and tall open-toe wedges. The music video utilizes close, quick shots to move back and forth between various scenes of Diamond walking down a street, dancing through a tunnel, sitting on the subway, in a grocery store shopping, and hanging with her friends in her

living room. The constant movement of the camera is disorienting, mirroring the hegemonic cisgender gaze incapable of clearly seeing and acknowledging Diamond's gender identity. Cisgender as an adjective intentionally makes the often-invisible hegemonic system of gender visible; cisgender as the dominant gender identity is associated with numerous privileges such as access to health care and the acknowledgment of our gender identity as immediately valid. Transgender theorist, A. Finn Enke (2012), asserts that: "cissexual privilege is instantiated in part through the activity of 'reading' and assigning male or female sex/gender to others" (p. 66). As a result, a fundamental privilege afforded to cisgender individuals is that we have the power to structure interactions with transgender individuals as *aberrant* or *conventional*.



Figure 1: Shea Diamond in the music video "I Am Her."

As the camera rushes from one location to another, it mimics the quick process in which we formulate perceptions (Figure 1; Figure 2). The cisgender gaze as the dominant way of seeing produces a constant negotiating of gender behaviors as authentic or inauthentic, as natural or unnatural, and acceptable or deviant. In the second verse, Shea Diamond knowingly sings, "Don't look at me immediately and whisper behind my back, thinking I'm naïve. That's my southern hospitality; tolerates more BS than even I can believe," referencing the hegemonic gaze and the

piercing voices of cisgender privilege (“I Am Her,” 2018). Cisgender privilege, much like white privilege and male privilege, is often invisible (Spade, 2015; Mock, 2014). However, the hyper-focus of the cisgender gaze on determining the gender identity of transgender folks labels them as the other. As cisgender Black women, we set the normative standard for Black womanhood; Black trans women who do not conform or pass as cisgender women in their physical appearance often gawk at face danger while in public places (McDonald, 2018). The cisgender gaze is most salient in the video when three Black children glare at Shea Diamond as she walks down the street; their faces immediately turn to confusion, fear, and disgust when they see her. As the kids visually witness Diamond’s embodiment of womanhood, they inadvertently begin questioning their limited understanding of gender roles and norms. These questions will be directed at the adults in their lives, Black cisgender women and men, who are often reluctant to have complex and controversial discussions with youth about gender and sexual identities that deviate from the norm. Through representing neighborhood children as the protagonists of the cisgender gaze, we are given a glimpse into the process through which cisgender privilege remains in place. The hegemonic cisgender gaze is representative of Black communities’ childlike understanding of trans identities who have yet to learn a gaze rooted outside of oppression.



Figure 2: Shea Diamond at a nail salon in the music video "I Am Her"

Shea Diamond's "southern hospitality," or respectability politics, is a generational tactic of survival for Black women (Collins, 2006; Higginbotham, 1993). Through performances of respectability, Black cis women "act like ladies" to dispel rampant myths of sexual deviance. Patricia Hill Collins (2006) asserts that "by claiming respectability through their manners and morals, poor and working-class Black women might define themselves outside the parameters of prevailing racist discourse" (p. 71). Diamond's respectability politics differ from that of cisgender Black middle-class cis women, in that her use of respectability is directed primarily at Black community members in an attempt to be protected and valued by her community. However, this tactic is not an adequate resistance strategy to dismantle transphobia in societal institutions, public spaces, or the Black community. According to Bettcher (2014), transphobia "systematically disadvantages trans people and promotes and rewards anti-trans sentiment" (p. 249). The collective gawking at Diamond illustrates our hegemonic gaze of trans identities, and our failure as Black cisgender women to teach our children not to stare at our trans sister who does not pass as cisgender. If we are only cognitively capable of selecting the most salient things to recall about individuals and communities, then it is imperative that we restructure the gaze through which we

interpret identities. As the primary caregivers of Black children and youth, Black cisgender women are in a unique position to resist passing on generational ideologies that support patriarchy and devalue sisterhood between cis and trans women. To undermine ideologies of transphobia, Black cisgender women must be the loudest voices asserting, “We are Sisters.”

This erasure from early moments of coalition building is the catalyst for a Black feminist theoretical standpoint for critiquing monolithic notions of social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality (Crenshaw, 1991). The Stonewall Riots of the late 1960s, held as an important event contributing to the Gay liberation and Gay Pride, was pioneered by Black transgender woman activist Marsha P. Johnson (Hunter & Robinson, 2018). However, much of the literature and media accounts of Gay liberation fails to mention Johnson and her contributions to dismantling oppression for the LGBTQ community. Marsha P. Johnson was a trans activist who spent her life walking the streets of New York in an attempt to make life better for her communities through feeding, clothing and giving resources to others needier than her (Hunter & Robinson, 2018). Johnson later went on to co-found the “Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries” with Sylvia Rivera, where they both “worked to end homelessness among young queens, trans, and gay people, organizing for space, advocacy, and survival” (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 70). Diamond references Johnson in her music through her lyrics and pays homage figuratively through footage of marches for liberation. As Diamond walks the streets of New York, the steps symbolize solidarity to walk the same path that Johnson and all Black trans women walk daily. Shea Diamond chooses imagery that explicitly illustrates her political allegiances. There are three protest scenes in the music video, representing police and prison abolition, anti-Black racism, and anti-transgender bias. “I Am Her” features footage from Black Lives Matter (BLM) Marches and Trans Lives Matter (TLM) protests in the music video. Each of these protests occurs separately, although the

oppressions that each movement is seeking to dismantle are intertwined. The separation of each movement is counterproductive to political and social progress; as a coalition, each movement would benefit from shared resources and be better equipped to succeed.

Shortly after singing the line: “All that glitters isn't gold. At least that's what I've been told,” the screen cuts to people of multiple races marching together with signs that read: “Abolish Police” and “Stop Police Terror.” Protestors marching with both hands directly above their heads, with their palms, open wide appear in the video, referencing the “Hands Up, Don't Shoot.” The “hands up” gesture became a symbol of protest for Black Lives Matters following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Garza, 2014). A posture of surrender, the “hands up” gesture, is appropriated in anti-police brutality protests to highlight how police brutality occurs even when Black individuals are surrendering or just living their everyday lives. Diamond's assertion that things are not what they first seem asks us to look carefully at the things that divide us. Many Black cisgender women remain motionless when it is time to march for our trans sisters and remain voiceless during verbal attacks and jokes that devalue their womanhood. Gender and sexual politics, such as cisgender privilege and transphobia, divide horizontal coalitions and are “the master's tools” (Lorde, 1984, p. 123). Our silence is violence, and without the embodied support of Black cis women, Black trans women are more susceptible to violence. Although Diamond claims the pronoun of “her,” she acknowledges that the identity of a woman is fraught with exclusion from many communities. As a transgender anthem and political statement, Diamond's lyrics highlight the distinct ways in which cisgender people negate the authenticity of transgender identities. Having to choose between one oppression prevents Diamond and other Black transgender women from adequately addressing their needs and desires in all of their communities.

Erasure from Black politics and mainstream queer politics prompts the necessity for a movement that centers the needs of Black trans-identified individuals. Through her personal-is-political activism, Diamond makes salient the difficulties in organizing across differences within mainstream queer movements and Black communities. In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Defining Difference,” Audre Lorde (1984) warns of the dangers of hierarchical ideologies of womanhood and sisterhood; she states:

Our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each other’s difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles. (p. 122)

Sisterhood, informed by a Black trans feminist perspective, depends on collective resistance between Black cis and trans women. As Diamond sings in “I Am Her,” “Your ignorance leaves a hell of a stench. The aroma lingers on generations have known. Ain't it ironic, the smarter we get. The less we understand 'bout the simplest shit.” (Diamond, 2018). For all the technological, medical, and scientific progress that we have made as a society, our nation-state and personal anti-trans ideologies remain dehumanizing to trans, queer, Black, and incarcerated individuals. If Diamond is the sister of Black cis women, then the gawking gazes would become head nods and big smiles when we see each other in public spaces (Figure 3). To change generational transphobia, we must join Shea Diamond and be both visible and vocal in our activism and individual actions.



Figure 3: Shea Diamond on the New York subway in the music video "I Am Her"

To resist the confines of the cisgender gaze and transphobia in her life, Diamond directly responds through openly critiquing transphobic ideologies in her lyrics and featuring trans women in the music video for “I Am Her.” Visibility for queer individuals is fraught, and many individuals within Black and Brown communities experience violence, alienation, and discrimination at disproportionate rates compared to their White counterparts. People often view Black trans women as dangerous, violent, manipulative, and lacking conventional morality (Stanley, 2015). “I Am Her” begins a discussion in which Diamond self-defines her identity as a Black woman and rejects ideologies that seek to discipline her gender identity. In the next section, I further elucidate Diamond’s experiences of structural violence and rejection from Black cis communities via analyzing her music video, “Keisha Complexion,” which continues Diamond’s self-definition through making “trans beautiful” and “dark skin sexy and desirable” (Farley, 2018). Diamond’s representation of her identity as Keisha rejects the binary opposition between cis and trans womanhood to empower both cis and trans dark-skinned women. As an empowerment anthem, Diamond’s “Keisha Complexion” employs the Black name “Keisha” as a point of identification to disrupt hegemonic cis ideologies of Black womanhood and position herself firmly as a sista.

“Keisha Complexion”: Colorism & Hegemonic Beauty Standards

“Got a fine dark skin like Keisha up in *Belly*” (*Tyga*, 2011)

“I’m just as Black as my cousin Keisha” (*Logic*, 2017)

Black cultural studies scholar Herman Gray (2005), defines the burden of the politics of difference for marginalized identities: “Whites are the ideal subjects of consumerism and representation, while people of color are simply political subjects on whose behalf civil rights advocates must make special appeals for recognition and representation” (p. 94). As political subjects, Black transgender women, are always involved in a never-ending battle to reclaim and rename images of their womanhood. Shea Diamond, as a dark skin transgender woman, is rarely represented as sexy and desirable in Black popular culture. Diamond restructures this historical ideology and constructs her subjectivity as a political activist through using her voice and labeling her experiences as a normative, rather than deviant. For Diamond, “Keisha Complexion” is a resistance strategy to position her as sexually attractive and desirable. The music video for “Keisha Complexion” features Diamond exclusively as the subject of desire in a heterosexual monogamous relationship with a cisgender Black man. Primarily dressed in bright, vivid colors of yellow and red, Diamond’s body illustrates the music lyrics in a series of locations that conclude with explicit sexual acts at her partner’s home. In claiming the right to be desired and express desire, “Keisha Complexion” creates a space of possibilities for darker skin Black transgender women to celebrate their sexuality and womanhood.

“Keisha Complexion” centers Shea Diamond in multiple locations, such as a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a swimming pool in what appears to be her private residence. At the beginning of the video, Diamond is lounging on an inflatable pool float in a swimming pool. She is wearing a brown and white reptile print tankini. Diamond wears her long, wavy, Black hair

swept to the left side, and she smiles while eating a popsicle. This scene changes to show Shea is now wearing a spaghetti-strapped short nightgown with small white pearls. The camera zooms in for a close up to highlight the white pearls lying across Diamond's dark complexion as she reaches to cover herself with a large white robe. The camera pans back to Diamond once again in the swimming pool with a medium-long shot (Image 1). The medium-long shot showcases body language, some facial expression, and the surrounding area simultaneously (Mercado, 2010). As Diamond leans back on the inflatable pool lounge, she strokes her large dark thighs and legs as she sings the lyrics: "Just look at me, just look at me! Well, I'm sexy. I'm cool. But you're taking me back to school. I'm yearning. I'm burning; you're learning me something new." Diamond's facial expression is fierce and strong, looking directly at the camera with an unapologetic look of boldness that dares the audience to see Diamond as she sees herself, "sexy" and "cool" (Diamond, 2018).



Figure 4: Shea Diamond in the music video "Keisha Complexion."

The name Keisha functions as a prototype for Black cisgender women, bringing to mind visual images of dark chocolate skin and large buttocks. “Keisha” describes a particular type of Black woman that is the binary opposite of a white woman, evoking imagery of Sarah Baartman, “The Venus Hottentot,” and her *genitals* and *buttocks* specifically on display as the markers of “Blackness” in the female body. Sarah Baartman’s body was exhibited and displayed to White audiences throughout London and Paris as evidence of the natural differences between the pure white female body and the sexual black female body (Willis, 2010, p. 4). The lived experiences of Baartman provide evidence of the desires of racist white people to construct anti-Blackness ideologies using real life Black bodies. This objectification of Baartman’s bodies became a symbol of the otherness of Black womanhood. Black cisgender and transgender women as objects historically remove them from the category of woman and Western beauty standards. Keisha, as a symbol for a Black cisgender woman, illustrates how naming as a cultural process of creativity within Black communities expresses cultural values. Black or African - American names are represented within popular culture to denote Black bodies and ideologically mark Black as out of the ordinary. Keshia as a synonym for Black women, and now an adjective for darker skin highlights how ideologies become embedded in language. Diamond, as an incarnation of Keisha, parallels her Black womanhood with that of Black cisgender women. To grammatically use “Keisha” as an adjective to indicate the color of a woman’s complexion, Diamond references the common tactic of dehumanizing Black cisgender and transgender women, viewing us as objects rather than subjects. Similar to Black cisgender women, Diamond’s womanhood intersects with her race to position her as less than ideal. This hierarchy of womanhood also elevates cisgender womanhood above transgender womanhood. As a result, Black transgender women such as Shea Diamond are far from ideal.

The dominant cultural gaze within our White patriarchal capitalist society labels Black trans women and Black cis women as physically unattractive. Dark skin as undesirable historically links to controlling images of Black cisgender women as grotesque in comparison to White cisgender women (Hobson, 2005). The privilege of Whiteness intertwining with gender identity highlights the intersectional nature and hierarchy of womanhood that constructs White cisgender women as ideal and Black cisgender women as flawed. Controlling images of Black women function to naturalize difference and justify hierarchies of womanhood that privilege “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” characteristics traditionally reserved for White women (Collins, 1989, p. 71). As a result, Diamond’s life experiences and media representations of her identity do not place her as desirable or explore her sexual desires outside of sex work. For example, the television representation of Sophia Buset in *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) is a desexualized Black transgender woman. Although Sophia is married throughout the show and has opportunities to pursue sexual relationships, the show deliberately avoids discussions or images of sexual interactions with the single transgender character for seven seasons. This choice implies that for transgender women, sexuality is not a significant component of their identity or lives. The symbolic annihilation of transgender sexuality in media representations and the stigmatization of transgender women’s sexual practices in everyday life reinforce the ideologies of nonnormative women’s sexuality as deviant. The absence of Black transgender women from popular Black representations drives Diamond to self-represent desire outside of controlling images.

To understand Diamond’s use of “Keisha,” we must keep in mind that hegemonic cisgender whiteness as the ideal standard of beauty operates on a continuum. Alice Walker (1993) describes this continuum as colorism, “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (p. 290). Darker skin Black women are less attractive than lighter skin

Black women; as a result, individuals treat light-skinned Black women more favorably. Keith and Herring (1991) assert that this continuum contributes to “social and economic stratification patterns in the Black community” (p. 761) that emerged during chattel slavery. Lighter skinned enslaved individuals cost more to purchase, and often their occupational duties were service positions such as cook, butler, and sex worker. Lighter skin provided enslaved individuals with the opportunity to purchase their freedom (Keith & Herring, 1991; Tharp, 2016). Robert L. Reese (2018) also explains that: “When a group —Black people— is forced to acknowledge the supposed superiority of group higher on the social hierarchy—White people—they may also offer them preferential treatment, explaining why Black people also tend to favor lighter-skinned people” (p. 6). Colorism, the favoritism of light-skinned Black individuals, primarily describes intra-racial prejudices and discrimination within Black communities. Black community politics of colorism are rarely discussed in public settings. The favoritism and privileges assigned to lighter skinned Black folks remain a taboo topic within family conversations (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013; Joseph, 2009). The politics of colorism articulated in “Keisha Complexion” locates this taboo topic in ideologies of desirability.

Colorism, as a system, contributes to ideologies of darker skin Black women as ugly, masculine, and undesirable. In the case of Shea Diamond, the intersection of her transgender identity with her skin complexion positions her further down the hierarchy than darker skin cisgender Black women. Fundamentally, Keisha is a modern reincarnation of the controlling image of the Jezebel through the eyes of Shea Diamond. Historically, the Jezebel figure was embodied by lighter skinned or mixed-race Black women, and ideologically illustrates Black female sexuality as deviant (White, 1999). As darker skin women embody the Jezebel figure, they expand its meaning to include Black women of all shades. Keisha represents Black women as sexually

aggressive and “governed almost entirely by her libido” (White, p. 29). This modern reincarnation, replacing a cisgender woman with a transgender woman, still conforms to dominant norms of Black women’s sexuality. The sexual desires of Black women are structured around patriarchy and ideologies of respectable women. Keisha’s insatiable appetite for sexual pleasures is controlled through loyalty towards one Black cisgender male. As Patricia Hill Collins (2005) asserts:

The legacy of seeing women as property or ‘booty,’ the spoils of warfare, establishes this theme of needing to exert male authority over at least one woman, typically a girlfriend, wife, or daughter. Representations of Black masculinity within mass media that depict working-class Black men as aggressive thugs or as promiscuous hustlers seem designed to refute accusations that Black men are ‘weak’ because they cannot control Black women. (p. 189)

As the object of the main character’s desire and sexual pleasure, Keisha replaces White women as the ideal. Shea Diamond, as the trans embodiment of Keisha, becomes the ideal woman to possess sexually in the music video.

Black female sexuality, as embodied in Keisha, deviates from respectability politics of middle-class Black womanhood (Thompson, 2012). Shea Diamond’s gender and sexuality are excessively ratchet. Black feminist theorist Brittany C. Cooper (2018) defines ratchetness or ratchet behavior as “crude, socially unacceptable, and, more often than not, associated with lower-class Black vernacular” (p. 144). Similarly, Kristin Warner (2015) suggests that ratchet behavior is “excessive and hyper-visible” social and linguistic acts that challenge Black respectability politics. Diamond’s attire in the music video ranges from a bright yellow dress with flowers; to hair rollers, a bonnet and plain white robe, and lastly, her naked body covered in bath bubbles (Figure 5). As Diamond navigates her sexuality as a Black trans woman, she performs crude and

over-top actions such as mimicking the performance of oral sex on the leading man, lounging on a float in a pool while licking a popsicle, and sucking a lollipop as two men dance exclusively for her. Shea Diamond's trans body provides evidence of the desirability of dark skin Black trans women and social commentary to dismantle ideologies of domination that exclude Black trans women from self-defining as sexy women. Explaining the inspiration behind the song, Diamond (2018) states: "You don't see Keisha as being sexy. Making dark skin sexy and desirable, and that being alright." "Keisha Complexion" is ratchet, sinful, and claps back at respectability politics and colorism.



Figure 5: Shea Diamond in the music video "Keisha Complexion."

This dominant world view situates representations in a politics of difference, in which representations code identities as political, rather than social and cultural. The deployment of ratchet sexuality in "Keisha Complexion" is a resistance strategy to respectability politics and an indication of Diamond's identity formation as a Black woman. In their research on transmisogyny and microaggressions among trans women, Arayasirikul and Wilson (2018) assert that the inability

to pass contributes heavily to unemployment for trans women. As a result, Black transgender people are four times as likely to be unemployed than the U.S. general population, according to a report by the Human Rights Campaign (Lee, 2018). Diamond's inability to pass as cisgender and lack of community support from Black cis women inhibit her from using traditional performances of respectability politics. Shea Diamond's embodiment of ratchetness in her womanhood is indicative of her Blackness and membership in a social, economic class that prevents access to respectability as a survival strategy (Arayasirikul & Wilson, 2018). As a result, this narrative of open desire for a dark skin Black transgender woman resists dominant ideologies of white femininity and colorism. In theorizing the complexities of her Black trans identity, Diamond's representation of Keisha emerges in a political climate in which Black trans women are brutally murdered by cisgender men who are ashamed of their sexual desire for trans women. Shea Diamond's literal remix of the Jezebel and Keisha accentuate her gender identity as an unapologetic Black woman.

Through the symbolic use of the name Keisha, Diamond denotes Black sisterhood with cisgender women symbolically, as she experiences rejection from several Black cis women. This rejection leads to disproportionate rates of violence against Black trans women. In the final section of this chapter, I show how anti-trans stigma within Black cis networks supports the ideology of transmisogynoir.

A System of Hate: "Spilling the T" on Transmisogynoir

Discourses of being *deceived* or *tricked* into sexual interactions often mask the desirability of transgender women as a deviant act. When Shea Diamond sings, "You know you love that Keisha Complexion," she alludes to this common practice of utilizing the defense of sexual deception as the only reason, a cisgender male would partake in sexual acts with transgender

women. The emphasis on “know” is a nod to the conscious awareness of loving a Black transgender woman. Diamond rejects the ideology that her gender presentation is a form of sexual deception, and instead states that it *is* because of her transgender identity and a darker complexion that she is desirable. Transgender theorist, Talia Mae Bettcher (2007), in her canonical essay “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion” highlights this connection, arguing that “this notion of sexual deception is fundamentally grounded in sexual violence against women and in race-based oppression” (p. 45). As a political testimony, “Keisha Complexion,” illuminates the often-invisible connection between ideologies of sexual deception and transmisogynoir that contribute to the deaths of many Black transgender women at the hands of cisgender men. Transmisogynoir is a particular type of oppression in which transphobia, misogyny, and antiblackness intersect to create disproportionate rates of violence and discrimination. In 2018, the year “Keisha Complexion” was released, 16 of the 22 transgender women murdered that year were Black (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). The disproportionate rates of violence against Black transgender women are a deadly consequence of ideologies and media representations of nonnormative women’s sexuality as deviant.

Transmisogynoir, as a concept, departs from transmisogyny in that it accounts for antiblackness and its exclusion from trans discourse (Krell, 2017). Transmisogyny, as coined by Julia Serano (2007) in *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, is oppression faced by trans women who express femininity and asserts that this occurs due to our hegemonic cultural belief that maleness and masculinity are superior. Transmisogyny, in this conception, does not account for the intersection of race and other identity categories. Shea Diamond’s use of sexuality as a site of resistance is indicative of how transmisogynoir is culturally expressed on the individual and collective level. Patricia Hill Collins (2006), in *Black Sexual*

Politics, asserts that “sexuality also can be seen as a site of intersectionality, a specific constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converge” (p. 11). Sexuality, in this classification, showcases the historical rejection of Black trans women from the category of sexy or desirable. Before releasing the music video for “Keshia Complexion,” Shea Diamond discusses the political and personal intention of the song, stating “I’d like for this song to stand as my personal testament that Black trans women are loved, desired and not a joke all of which we’ve been programmed to believe” (2018). The ideology of Black trans women as undesirable intersects with hegemonic masculinity to create shame and fear in those who desire women like Diamond. To challenge the dominant ideology of “undesirability” of Black trans women, Diamond’s music lyrics and video utilize her body as the object of desire (Figure 6). Diamond visually presents a new ideology in which Black trans women dominate our television screens as normalized sexual objects.



Figure 6: Shea Diamond in the music video “Keisha Complexion.”

The Black cis men featured in the music video are also singularly focused on gaining Shea Diamond’s affection and attention; they dance for her, caress her body with longing, and kiss her

neck seductively. The deviance attached to the desire for Black trans women becomes embodied in one Black cis man, who attempts to figuratively and physically “turn off” his desire for Diamond. The main Black cis male protagonist of the video is a darker skin man with cornrows; he is watching television on a sofa when Shea Diamond appears on the screen. She seductively moves her body, swaying to the song lyrics as she smiles brightly into the camera. He presses multiple buttons on the remote, seeking to change the channel, only to have Diamond appear again and again in different places. Unable to change the television channel, the Black cisgender male engages his desire for her by placing the remote down and giving her his full attention. As the Black cis man gives in to his desire for Diamond, he too is liberated from the stigma attached to his desire. Front and center, Diamond brings Black trans women’s desirability into the light, away from secrecy and shame. Shea Diamond proudly and unabashedly represents desirability as she narrates Black men’s sexual yearning for the Black trans woman in a variety of public and private spaces.

The use of the name Keisha in a song that celebrates Diamond’s physical appearance also references Hip-Hop culture (Black culture) and its representation of Keisha as the object of the Black male gaze. Her features are phenotypically associated with Black folks; Diamond’s broad shoulders and thick thighs highlight the strength in her body. Shea Diamond is not conventionally beautiful. Her large frame and average appearance do not pass for a cisgender woman or the ideal standard of beauty. Keisha, as a name for Black women, appears numerous times throughout TV shows, films, and music in the 20th and 21st centuries. Images of Black cisgender women within Hip-Hop culture commodify us as the property of rappers, and thus, culturally, Black female bodies always remain in need of disciplining by our dominant patriarchy culture (Balaji, 2010; Peterson, 2000). For example, the 1998 Hip-Hop cult film, *Belly*, starring Nas (Sincere) and DMX

(Tommy), features a Black cisgender woman character named Keisha. *Belly* centers on two Black cisgender male street criminals and their drug hustle in New York City. Keisha, portrayed by dark-skinned actress Taral Hicks, is the main love interest of Tommy. Keisha's dark skin and strong athletic body are sexy and desirable through the Black male gaze. As a representation of Hip-Hop culture, and as a result, Black popular culture, *Belly* illustrates how desire and ownership of Black women's sexuality are often controlled and defined within the standards of both the White male gaze and the Black male gaze. This hegemonic system locates the Black transgender woman below the bottom of the hierarchy; her womanhood remains in the shadows as insignificant and unworthy.

In the second verse, Diamond sings: "When you say you love my Keisha complexion and the way I ain't ever respected. Got me admiring my own reflection." As Diamond sings, the Black cis male protagonist appears behind her, kissing her neck and rubbing his hands up and down her body. Diamond is wearing a light pink spaghetti strapped teddy and a White robe as she leans on the kitchen counter. Her body melts into his as she smiles coyly into the camera and fans her face. Eventually, they leave the kitchen and return to the sofa in the living room. Diamond forcibly pushes him down and onto the couch, and the Black cis male smiles seductively as he looks up towards her. The camera angle has changed points of view, and the audience is now viewing Diamond from the same angle as the Black male. This point of view, replicating the male gaze, sexually objectifies Diamond. She strips for him and eventually straddles him, as she slides her body down the couch, insinuating she is performing oral sex. He tilts his head back, enjoying her body and sexual performances. The explicit nature of the video shots leaves no room for ambiguity towards what is happening. After finishing oral sex, she slides back up and whispers in his ear, "You know you really love that Keisha Complexion," reminding the audience again that the desire

for Black trans women exists and is valid. The constant disrespect that Diamond receives from numerous communities leads her to self-define and represent her experiences through her music.

Through the use of Keisha, Diamond represents Black sisterhood with cisgender women symbolically, as she experiences rejection from several Black cis women. This chapter provides a look into representations of Shea Diamond born out of her lived experiences of being kicked out of her home by her mother, shuttled through many foster and group homes, and serving ten years in a men's penitentiary. The autobiographical and political performance of "Keisha Complexion" negotiates ideologies of the self within multiple systems of oppression. The inclusion of anti-Blackness with transmisogyny is valuable in understanding the oppression that Black trans women face when it comes to devaluing their appearance, sexuality, and personhood. Diamond resists transmisogynoir through explicitly sexualizing herself and illustrating the pure unabashed desire that cisgender men have for Black trans women. Through connecting her lived experiences and musical abilities, Shea Diamond's resistance to systems of hate is to self-define her womanhood and uplift her communities. Diamond provides another ideology to denounce colorism and celebrate dark skin Black trans women. In the words of Shea Diamond (2018), "This song is honoring the mother of everything. This is the strong coffee you're gonna get without any cappuccino. This is pure coffee." Diamond brings forward a taboo topic to illustrate how it relates to broader social problems, such as disproportionate rates of unemployment, poverty, and homelessness of Black trans women (Lee, 2018). Our approaches to political activism through our intersectional lived experiences highlight the similarities of Black cis women and Black trans women *and* highlight the diversity of Black womanhood.

It is imperative to our continued survival as sisters that we—Black cisgender women—leverage our privilege to open spaces for Black trans women to flourish. Alienation and separation

from communities take an enormous toll on the mental, spiritual, and physical health of Black trans women. Through resisting dominant discourses, such as misgendering, transmisogynoir, as identified in this chapter, we can tighten the gap that prevents Black cis and trans women from forming kinship. In the next chapter, *Gazing at "It": An Intersectional Analysis of Transnormativity and Black Womanhood in "Orange Is the New Black,"* I explore another resistance strategy to navigate oppression employed by a Black trans woman who receives little social or political support from Black cis women. Chapter two highlights the consequences of exclusion from Black sisterhood, while also illustrating moments in which Black cis women failed to show up and show out for a Black trans woman.

Chapter 2: Gazing at “It”: An Intersectional Analysis of Transnormativity and Black Womanhood in “Orange Is the New Black”

“It’s okay, honey; you can look. I spent a lot of money for it,” Sophia Burset states while squatting in an open bathroom stall, wiping herself after urinating (Burley, 2013). Sophia is speaking to Piper Chapman, the protagonist of *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB), during season one. The “it” Sophia references is her vagina. Piper, a white cisgender woman, declines this invitation. Piper is uncomfortable because Sophia is a trans woman, not because Sophia is Black; Piper arrives at the prison with Black and white cis women and attempts to make friends with someone as soon as possible. The juxtaposition of a Black transgender woman and a White cisgender woman discussing female anatomy is representative of ideologies of womanhood as authentic or inauthentic. The invitation to look at “it” is read literally as the vagina of Sophia and figuratively as a lived experience of transgender women. The use of the word “it” as a reference to Sophia’s genitalia is also indicative of language that communicates the subject position of transgender women as less than human. Transgender individuals transgress gender boundaries, and their gender presentation is often the core of transphobic language to dehumanize them. The pronoun of “it” is grammatically used to refer to objects; Sophia’s use of “it” objectifies her body and her personhood. Sian Heder, the cis woman writer of this episode, chose to have Sophia speak these lines reduces trans identity to genitals. Our choice to look at “it” or to look at “her” must be a conscious decision to engage with difference on a television program.

Like Shea Diamond, Cox’s representation of Sophia Burset illustrates the consequences of excluding Black trans women from forming sisterhood with Black cis women. Hall (2001) asserts that media representations make use of similarity and difference “to establish relationships between concepts or to distinguish them from one another” (p. 17). Sophia’s isolation from

sisterhood with Black cisgender women suggests that Black cisgender and transgender women do not form strong familial bonds with each other. By constructing Sophia's personhood outside of racial classifications, *Orange is the New Black* creates a non-threatening transgender woman worthy of subjectivity. Since Sophia's storyline purposely circumvents critical dialogue on race and anti-Black racism in prisons, she functions to appease societal anxieties of trans people as deviant and dangerous. Sophia's narrative further reaffirms a post (race) colorblind society that erases her racialized sexism and establishes her transgender identity as operating outside of racial categories; thus, Sophia achieves transgender subjectivity by making her embodiment of Blackness invisible. This de-racing of Sophia occurs via the show's failure to place her in community with Black cisgender women. Through ignoring Sophia's racial identity and foregrounding her gender identity, the writers of *Orange Is the New Black* reproduce ideologies of a single-axis identity and issue. I read Sophia's narrative as a neoliberal coming of age story in which ideologies of individualism, colorblindness, and white hegemonic womanhood become embodied in trans subjectivity.

Orange Is the New Black (2013) is a Netflix original comedy-drama series based on the book *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison* by Piper Kerman; the series diverges from the book to incorporate drama, comedy, and excitement into a television series (Kerman, 2010). Kerman is a Smith College graduate whose book details her privileged lifestyle of international travel that resulted in a one-year prison sentence. Kerman's memoir provides readers with a look at prison life through the lens of a white, blue-eyed, blond-haired, cisgender "All-American nice Girl." Through this gaze, Kerman's construction of womanhood in prison focuses predominantly on traditional second-wave feminist ideologies of sexual harassment and assault, female sexual liberation, and prison reform, rather than abolition. Throughout seven seasons,

Orange Is the New Black features representations of women from diverse backgrounds; however, Sophia is the sole transgender character in Piper's life. Sophia Burset is distinct because she provides evidence of a Black transgender woman on television and because Laverne Cox, a Black trans woman, is cast in the role. Laverne Cox has a double burden; she must succeed in a hegemonic industry as the first Black trans actress to be a series regular. The success of *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) in popular culture thrusts Cox into the position of being a national spokesperson for the transgender community via media interest in her trans identity.

The casting of a Black transgender woman as a cast member in a television series is a significant shift in representations of trans identities. Before the production of *Orange Is the New Black*, trans portrayals have predominantly been negative and stereotypical; television shows and films have primarily created narrative plots where transgender characters are either prostitutes or people who intentionally deceive others in their gender presentation (Bettcher, 2007; Booth, 2011). The year 2013 was coined as the *Transgender Tipping Point*; this assertion posited that as a country, the United States was poised to acknowledge transgender identity as legitimate (Steinmetz, 2014). *Time Magazine* featured Laverne Cox on the cover of "The Transgender Tipping Point," making her the first transgender person to appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*. Cox's visibility as Sophia Burset catapulted her advocacy for transgender civil rights to the forefront of news media outlets. Cox's visibility led to television interviews with Katie Couric, NPR radio interviews, and an interview with Janet Mock on MSNBC. Consequently, Laverne Cox's fame and popularity led to her being the first openly transgender person to appear on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*.

Cox's representation of Sophia Burset paved the way for current shows such as Netflix's *Sense 8* (2015- 2018), FOX's *Star* (2016 -2019), and FX's *Pose* (2018 – present), to not only hire

transgender women but to center their lives as significant plots within television shows. For example, *Pose* (2018) is the first show to hire more than one transgender woman of color and to provide various representations of transgender identities throughout the series. The characters on *Pose* are predominantly transgender women of color, and the show explores the day-to-day oppression faced by Black and Latinx transgender individuals. The show takes place within the context of Ballroom culture in New York City during the late 1980s and effectively highlights the role of queer kinships in the continued survival of transgender people (Murphy, 2018). In addition, Black trans activist Janet Mock is one of the writers for *Pose*. The stories presented on *Pose* (2018) move beyond gazing at genitalia and allow trans women to discuss their lives beyond their gender identity. The inclusion of trans women in television writers' rooms writing stories about trans women diversifies stories of trans life. Although the visibility of transgender individuals in media is increasing, this does not necessarily equate to positive changes for trans people. Feder & Juhaz (2016) state:

Trans people are not yet authorized to set the terms of our own visibility. To be visible, we must conform to the demands placed on us by a public that wants to buy a story that affirms their sense of themselves as ethical.

The current visibility of transgender individuals in media is highly formulaic and supports dominant structures that uplift White neoliberalism ideologies of acceptance and equality. Sophia Burset's character illustrates societal anxieties over the recognition of trans people as worthy of personhood and protections under United States law. Laverne Cox's representation of Sophia on *Orange Is the New Black* constructs transgender subjectivity through Sophia's medical transition and lack of racial community within the prison.

By constructing Sophia's personhood outside of racial categories, *Orange is the New Black* creates a non-threatening transgender woman worthy of subjectivity. The viewers of *Orange is the New Black* are predominantly liberal cisgender women, who relate to cisgender protagonist, Piper. Christopher Pullen (2016) theorizes that "female audiences, who see representations that are similar to themselves within media texts, potentially expressing aspects of similar cultural interest, political stance or emotive context, may experience a deeper interest in the narrative evoked by the text" (p. 24). In Pullen's conceptualization, the "hetero media gaze" functions to create a process of indication in which female spectators actively look and scrutinize the subject for pleasure. Since Sophia's storyline purposely circumvents critical dialogue on race and anti-Black racism in prisons, she functions to appease societal anxieties of trans people as deviant and dangerous. Sophia's narrative further reaffirms a post (race) colorblind society that erases her racialized sexism and establishes her transgender identity as operating outside of racial categories; thus, Sophia achieves transgender subjectivity by making her embodiment of Blackness invisible. This de-racing of Sophia occurs via the show's failure to place her in community with Black cisgender women. Through ignoring Sophia's racial identity and foregrounding her gender identity, the writers of *Orange Is the New Black* reproduce ideologies of a single-axis identity and issue. I read Sophia's narrative as a neoliberal coming of age story in which ideologies of individualism, colorblindness, and white hegemonic womanhood become embodied in trans subjectivity.

I begin my analysis by focusing on the representation of her medical transition during the episode, "Lesbian Request Denied," that constructs her personhood via visual evidence of her crossing gender binaries to achieve womanhood (Burley, 2013). Next, I consider how the character of Sophia Burset affirms the humanity of trans people via framing a trans woman as non-

threatening, desexualized, and morally capable of being socialized into a neoliberal subject. Sophia's openness about her sexual reassignment surgery, family, and battle for hormones are the center of her narrative. Lastly, I focus my analysis on interpersonal relationships of kinship among Sophia, Sister Ingalls, and Black cisgender women. Unlike Diamond, although Sophia is rejected from Black sisterhood with Black cis women, she finds acceptance with a white Catholic nun. Sophia's separation and disassociation from the Black cisgender women suggest that transgender civil rights are more salient to her personhood than Black civil rights. Also, it posits that Black cisgender women are transphobic and incapable of accepting Sophia due to cis ideologies of Black womanhood. Furthering my argument that anti-trans ideologies of Black womanhood isolate Black trans women from formations of Black sisterhood, this chapter illustrates moments in which Black cis women refused to use their resources to care for their Black trans sister, Sophia.

“Trans is, Trans Ain’t?”: Visualizing the Embodiment of Transgender Subjectivity

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey (1975) asserts that, “As an advanced representation system, the cinema poses questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” (p. 7). The gaze of the camera provides the audience subjectivity and permission to gaze upon “the other.” As a result, the history of “seeing” and “looking” is a gaze of privilege, often only afforded to the dominant group. For example, enslaved Black people in the U.S. were punished for looking directly at white people (hooks, 2009). Similarly, for transgender women, visibility is simultaneously a privilege and oppression. A. Finn Enke (2012), a transgender theorist, asserts that: “cissexual privilege is instantiated in part through the activity of ‘reading’ and assigning male or female sex/gender to others” (p. 66). When Piper is offered a chance to look at Sophia, she occupies this position of privilege to view Sophia's body as a spectacle and to label her gender identity. Furthermore, the

opening scene of “Lesbian Request Denied” marks Sophia simultaneously as a man, a woman, transgender, Black, middle class, and firefighter. The sole focus on her body in this episode represents how society reads gender identity; individuals look for identity markers on the body (Hall, 2001; Stryker, 2008). Approximately one minute of screen time is utilized to focus exclusively on Sophia’s naked body, deliberately avoiding her face. As visual markers of her transition appear in this episode, it highlights how “gendered identity helps racialized identity become operative” (Joseph, 2013, p. 4). To gaze upon Sophia’s body in this episode is paramount to represent Sophia’s gender transition. In this episode, we also learn about Sophia’s family, the transphobia she experiences within and outside of prison, her previous occupation, and how Sophia became an inmate at Litchfield Prison.

Sophia’s gender transition is predominantly represented through the use of a private bathroom stall and a mirror. Sophia searches for a private bathroom stall in the locker room to hide her gender identity from the other firefighters. The silence and lack of eye contact from Sophia while in the locker room illustrate her disconnection with her male, cisgender identity. In the private bathroom stall, Sophia begins to change clothing. This scene replicates dominant representation in popular media in which “exposure scenes in which the transgender status suddenly is disclosed through either a violent removal of clothing or through voyeurism abound in both popular films and television” (Keegan, 2013, p. 13). The use of an exposure scene allows the audience to have a secret that the other characters do not know and foreshadows the drama that will ensue once the secret is revealed. The gaze of the camera is positioned on Sophia’s torso and moves up to showcase her chest. Her masculine chest adorns a lacy pink bra, and the camera focuses our gaze on the juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity in the fire station locker room. The objectification of Sophia’s body occurs the moment she pulls her shirt up and partially covers

her face, preventing our gaze from viewing the rest of her person. The covering of Sophia's face, while the camera gazes at her body, highlights the cisgender gaze. The cisgender gaze refers to how transgender and other nonbinary individuals are scrutinized for pleasure and consumption by cisgender individuals (Pullen, 2016). The audience's gaze is from the dominant position of a cisgender person, and thus, when Sophia gazes upon herself, she reads her image within a cisgender perspective of gender norms. Underneath the cisgender gaze, the ambiguity of a transgender body is a *spectacle*. The cisgender gaze is thus a dominant way of seeing that privileges bodies that are easily read as "male" or "female." The cisgender gaze objectifies Sophia and attempts to solely emphasize her gender identity; the camera solidifies this identity through a full appraisal of Sophia's body.

The screen momentarily goes black and zooms out to show Sophia in a different bathroom, once again gazing at herself in the mirror. Sophia's use of the mirror allows her to gaze at her body, while the audience gazes at her. The mirror scene in "Lesbian Request Denied" is a film trope that produces a "dysphoric experience" in which the character does not feel at *home* in their body (Keegan, 2013). The scene morphs the locker room in the fire station into the bathroom at Litchfield Prison. The camera repeatedly zooms in on typically sexualized parts of Sophia's body. Her pert breasts, flat stomach, and muscular legs fill the screen. The focus on her breasts multiple times emphasizes her womanhood: albeit, an object that is sexualized. This frame, in particular, is representative of the male gaze preoccupied with visual pleasure of feminine bodies (Mulvey, 1975). Sophia's body is the ideal trans body in its performances of femininity. Cisgender assimilation is the expectation that transgender women should conform to cisgender (and often heteronormative) standards of appearance, behavior, and performance. This notion essentializes transgender identity as an imitation of hegemonic womanhood and reduces transgender gender

identity to body presentation alone. Sophia holds her head high, looking directly into the mirror, beaming with pride and enjoyment. The male and cisgender gaze of Sophia simultaneously produces a transgender subject that is both woman and object. The cinematic shift of Sophia's gaze in "Lesbian Request Denied" implicates Sophia's transition as central to her personhood and development, while also indicating she is more than just a transgender woman in prison.

Sophia's previous occupation as a New York firefighter in a (post) 9/11 society, and her family relationships bring complexity to Sophia's narrative that moves beyond traditional transgender tropes of deceivers (Bettcher, 2007; Malatino, 2016). Sophia Burset's character provides evidence of the existence of transgender people as non-threatening through reinforcing transnormativity via her media transition and relationships with other characters. The prison, as the primary location of *Orange Is the New Black* is a further level of gender correction that disciplines the transgender subject into gender binaries, emphasizing gender sameness over race difference. As Sophia was arrested and imprisoned shortly following post-operation, the majority of her visibility as a trans woman occurs while incarcerated. Caputi (2015), in her examination of social justice issues on *Orange Is the New Black*, states that prisons are "total institutions, places where guards and officials exert complete control" (p. 1141). The disciplinary power of prison seeks to socialize deviant bodies and identities into proper subjects creating a prison industrial complex (Davis, 2003; Spade 2015). The restriction of Sophia's hormones during "Lesbian Request Denied" simultaneously affirms her gender identity and marginalize her in interactions with cisgender people (McIntyre, 2018). The medical staff in prison lowers the dosage of Sophia's prescribed hormones to save money and appropriate it to other departments. Racism and economic profit drive the prison industrial complex, an ideology that is explored during Season 3 when Management & Correction Corporation (MCC), a private prison company, purchases the prison.

Sophia is assimilated into gender under the structure of the prison through her relationship with Sister Ingalls and the cisgender Black woman.

As with many transgender incarcerated individuals, Sophia receives very little protection, support, and respect from inmates within the prison institution. In the next section, I explore Sophia's relationship with Sister Inglass, a white cis Catholic nun, who provides Sophia guidance and support while incarcerated. The support that Sophia receives from Sister Ingalls posits that cis White individuals are capable of including trans women in their formations of womanhood. While Sophia's exclusion from Black sisterhood provides insight into cultural marginalization that Black trans women face when Black cis communities deny their womanhood; her acceptance with Sister Ingalls illustrates that moments of support from cis women help combat the hostile political climate and cultural marginalization trans women face.

My Favorite Sister is Catholic: Idealizing White Hegemonic Femininity

Sophia's desire to maintain her medical transition causes her to befriend Sister Ingalls to gain access to estrogen in the episode "The Chickening" (Burley, 2013). Sister Ingalls is well respected in the prison community and continues to practice her Catholic religion daily. Sophia uses this to her advantage and agrees to meet Sister Ingalls for bible study in the library. The camera swiftly focuses on Sophia, providing a close up of her face as she says: "So you do understand what I've been going through?" Sister Ingalls looks intently at Sophia and compassionately replies: "I know changes in the body can be painful. But remember, your body is just the ship. Your soul is the passenger." Sophia looks at Sister Ingalls with disbelief, chuckling slightly; her chuckle implies she is not getting the answers she wants. The metaphor that Sister Ingalls invokes separates the body from the mind and acknowledges that gender identity and gender presentation are distinct. However, Sister Ingalls simultaneously minimizes Sophia's desire

for her “ship” and “passenger” to be one. The minimization of Sophia’s gender transition is transphobic and representative of neoliberal ideologies of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” (Bassichis, Lee, & Spade, 2015, p. 32). Sister Ingalls insinuates that losing medical access for a transgender woman equates to an opportunity to learn a moral lesson. Sister Ingalls not only functions as Sophia’s moral compass in prison, but she represents the type of respectable subjectivity that Sophia should embody as a trans woman; sexually pure, ethical, and focused on self-sacrifice.

Sophia tries harder to create empathy, paralleling changes of menopause with her hormonal changes. Sophia lowers her head, in respect to Sister Ingalls’ status as an elder, and states: “See, it’s especially hard for me...because... it’s taken me so long to get to this point. And I’m...just not ready to give it up, you know?” Sophia’s language deliberately invokes ideologies of White feminism via equating the experience of menopause with that of losing her hormones. She continues her plea for help, never breaking eye contact with the camera or wavering from her convictions, stating, “I sacrificed so much.”

Sister Ingalls: Yes, you said.

Sophia: I feel like finally! Finally, I’m the woman that God intended me to be, you know?

Sister Ingalls: That’s wonderful. You’re not getting my hormones (Burley, 2013).

Sister Ingalls’s tone mirrors Sophia’s: empathetic and firm, gently chastising Sophia for her attempt at manipulation. Sophia’s admission of “not giving it up” and “I’m finally the woman God intended” indicates that both her gender presentation and gender identity are equally important. Sister Ingalls chastises Sophia’s desire to maintain her womanly figure and instead attempts to

save her soul by making her a “true woman.” Matt Richardson (2013) expounds upon the significance of gender to trans individuals stating: “for the trans person, to deny one’s gender identity is comparable to suspending life: one is alive but not living” (p. 115). The loss of hormones for Sophia is a genuine fear indicative of the daily nightmare transgender women face as they struggle for health care in an oppressive system that devalues their medical needs (Spade, 2015). This is especially true as Black trans women are “disproportionately impacted by physical and structural violence” (Hunter, 2015).

Sophia and Sister Ingalls’ relationship begins as a way for Sophia to get hormones but eventually continues as Sophia gains knowledge into White hegemonic womanhood. Sister Ingalls and Sophia’s relationship continues to flourish through co-directing a Christmas pageant, church visits, and talks in which Sister Ingalls counsels Sophia on personal and family problems. In the season one episode “Fucksgiving,” Sophia seeks Sister Ingalls counsel on her marriage with her wife Crystal. Sophia’s marriage to a Black cisgender woman provides an opportunity for *Orange Is the New Black* to explore a same-sex relationship outside of prison and represent intimacy and desire between cisgender and transgender Black women. Crystal supports Sophia during her transition, helping her try on women’s clothes and style her hair prior to her incarceration. Crystal’s support of Sophia’s transition provides Sophia a space to come into her womanhood with the help of a Black cisgender woman; this, however, is shortlived as Sophia is incarcerated. Throughout the series, Crystal regularly visits Sophia with their son and provides Sophia with financial and emotional support. For example, in season four, Crystal comes to the prison to advocate for Sophia while she is in segregation by surprising the warden in the parking lot and threatening him by calling the ACLU (Power Suit, 2016). Sophia’s physical separation from Crystal is further disconnection from a Black cisgender woman. In addition, Sophia is desexualized in her

relationship with Crystal. On their Thanksgiving visitation, Crystal states that she is “lonely and misses men” and is in love with her Pastor (Burley, 2013). She requests Sophia’s blessing to have a sexual relationship with him. Sophia immediately refuses to give her approval and discusses her predicament with Sister Ingalls while in the chapel.

Sister Ingalls’ advice is to give Crystal her blessing, stating: “She married a man with a penis because I assume she wanted to use it occasionally. You got what you needed at a pretty big cost to your family. It’s the *right* thing to do.” Sister Ingalls’ advice reduces Sophia’s gender transition to a moral choice and reinforces heteronormative relationship structures. In addition, Crystal’s need for a penis occurs through a sexual relationship with a religious leader. Sister Ingalls presents her advice as logical and compassionate, a moral choice that a good woman would make to keep her marriage, effectively legitimizing Crystal’s extramarital affair through the eyes of God. Sophia eventually takes the advice of Sister Ingalls and gives her wife permission to have sex with her church pastor. However, Sophia has no sexual relationship with her wife or any other person, expressing no desire for either men or women throughout the series. The exclusion of sexual desire from Sophia’s personhood mirrors that of Sister Ingalls, a nun. As a desexualized subject, Sophia bypasses tropes of transgender women as violent sexual predators (Bettcher, 2007). Sophia’s disciplining into a desexualized transgender subject within White hegemonic femininity occurs through modeling her personhood after Sister Ingalls.

Sister Ingalls represents the moral good of White women and their acceptance of trans women. Sophia’s friendship with Sister Ingalls serves as evidence of her decency. Sister Ingalls gains a “daughter” and an audience to bestow her neoliberal religious wisdom; this relationship serves as Sophia’s only kinship within the prison. Sophia recognizes that the women of color at Litchfield marginalize her, while they form racialized communities with each other. For example,

the Latina women flock to protect their sister, Gloria, after she makes transphobic statements about Sophia. The Latina women refuse to use Sophia's salon and convince other inmates to boycott Sophia in support of Gloria ("We Can Be Heroes", Season 3). Sophia asks Taystee for support, in which Taystee replies: "I don't want to get involved." Taystee's refusal to "get involved" communicates that Black cisgender women do not value Sophia and will not protect and support her. In the next episode, Sophia suffers a hate crime perpetrated by a Black cisgender woman and receives no words of support from other inmates or prison staff ("Don't Make Me Come Back There", Season 3). During this confrontation, transphobic comments about Sophia's genitals indicate that she does not belong in a women's prison. As Black cisgender inmate violently grabs Sophia, she states, "You still got your dick, and my man is having a hard time at Lexington. Meanwhile, you are hiding out here pretending to be a female." These words from a Black cisgender woman seek to isolate Sophia from community with Black women and equate her personhood as a trans woman to her genitalia. Her transphobic words lead to a physical altercation when she tries to view Sophia's genitalia as proof of her gender identity. The scuffle heavily bruises Sophia's face, and her wig is ripped off.

After the attack, Sophia requests that the prison staff undergo "crisis and sensitivity training" to better handle incidents of transgender hate crimes at Litchfield. Sophia's white liberal solution to social justice mirrors a "quest for inclusion and recognition by dominant US institutions rather than questioning and challenging the fundamental inequalities" inherent in prison systems (Spade, 2015, p. 30). Sensitivity and diversity training does not provide adequate resistance to the structures that led to Sophia's hate crime. However, Sophia continues to push her neoliberal agenda and threatens to sue the prison and make national news via sensational headlines, such as "She-Male Jail Fail" and "Balls to the Wall in Tranny Prison Brawl." After being rejected and

attacked by the Latina cis women and the Black cis women, Sophia seeks solace and comfort visiting with Sister Ingalls. With a sad voice, Sophia tells Sister Ingalls, “I’m here because I realized you *might* be my only friend.” Sister Ingalls advises Sophia to accomplish her goals through nonviolence, once again replicating a liberal politic that historically has done very little to progress the lives of transgender individuals. Sophia is to remain civilized, suffer in silence, and take the morally higher ground of the path of least resistance. The choice to cast a white nun as a Black transgender woman’s best friend functions to remove her from community with Black cisgender women, while socializing Sophia into a proper neoliberal citizen.

My Other Sistas are Ratchet: The Ghettoization of Black Cis Womanhood

Sophia’s interactions with Sister Ingalls and the Black cisgender women are drastically different. Sister Ingalls is kind, compassionate, and nurturing to Sophia. The Black cisgender inmates: Taystee, Janae, Black Cindy, Poussey, and Suzanne (Crazy Eyes) are petty-minded, loud, rude, crazy, conniving, and transphobic in their interactions with Sophia. However, they are supportive and loving with one another. For instance, Taystee and Poussey are best friends, and together they overcome the many struggles of incarceration by making each other laugh, uplifting each other with positive affirmations, and allowing each other to cry without shame. Although Suzanne beats up Poussey one night, she is still allowed to be in community with the Black cisgender women. Taystee and Poussey both provide emotional support to Suzanne when she has nightmares and allows her to eat meals with them in the cafeteria. The difference in Sophia’s relationship with Sister Ingalls and the Black cisgender inmates is illuminated during the first season in which we learn about the prison’s social system based on race in the episode “W.A.C. Pack.” This episode features an election in which each residential unit can vote for one member to

represent the interests of the group in political matters with the prison administration. Inmate Lorna Morello explains the election process while advocating for herself to represent the White women:

You can only vote within your race or your group. See, everyone elects a representative from their own tribe: white, Black, Hispanic, golden girls, others. And those five gals, they meet with Healy, they tell him what we want, then he speaks to the higher-ups. It's like student council (Burley, 2013).

The racial nature of the election process reveals the ideologies of each group via whom they choose to represent them and what each group deems as politically significant. Racial difference is visual and verbally coded as Black, White, Latino, Asian.

With each racialized community, the women support and protect each other from the institution and other racial groups at Litchfield. The group of White cisgender women: Red, Nicky, Piper, Alex, Sister Ingalls, and Lorena support each other through drug addiction, smuggling contraband into the prison, hunger strikes, and illnesses. Gloria, Aleida, Daya, Maritza, Maria, and Marisol, the Latina women at Litchfield, are also very close-knit, and look after each other while incarcerated. Sophia and the Black cisgender women make up the racial group labeled as “the ghetto.” The use of the term “ghetto” is not only an offensive, racially charged word, but it cruelly makes a mockery of historical injustices experienced by Black Americans. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) notes:

Because Blacks had limited options in a context of racially segregated housing, landlords raised rents and pushed families into overcrowded and unhealthy housing conditions — limited job opportunities and residential segregation combined to produce a new form of prison, racially segregated Black urban neighborhoods that became known as ‘ghetto.’ (p. 69)

The use of the label “ghetto” to describe the inmates and the residential space solidifies their Blackness to viewers; not only are we given visual evidence of their Blackness but verbal confirmation as well. Although Sophia is a member of “the ghetto” because of her race, she is absent from many of the scenes in which the Black cisgender women create communities of support, friendship, and kinship. Within the context of prison, Sophia’s alienation and emotional detachment from Black cisgender women disassociates her identity from controlling images such as the welfare-queen, the angry and loud Black woman, and the hypersexual Jezebel.

The same Black bodies that are expendable in the “free world” are a significant source of profit behind bars (Davis, 2003). As profit, their bodies are commodified to make money, and their personhood is aberrant. The background of the Black cisgender women inmates before prison, along with their actions at Litchfield, are racially coded via negative controlling images of Black women (Collins, 1991). Negative images of Black cisgender women are abundant and historically tied to racial formations in the United States that represent Black cisgender women as less than human. Controlling images of Black cisgender women are fundamentally about marking Black womanhood as deviant and uplifting white neoliberal womanhood as ideal. These controlling images, as explicated by Nash (2014), “render black female bodies synonymous with certain images, oftentimes of the spectacular, the exaggerated, the hyperbolic, and the grotesque” (p. 43). The cisgender Black women are coded as “inferior” via historical tropes of Black women as bad mothers, corrupt citizens, and flawed women.

Taystee (Tasha) has been an inmate twice at Litchfield; she spent her childhood in group homes and juvenile detention centers. Taystee eventually leaves these institutions as a teenager to live and work for a Black cis woman drug dealer, Vee. Janae goes into solitary confinement for her defiant attitude on her first day in prison; she returns to solitary confinement once more for her

participation in an underground cigarette gang. Cindy is referred to as “Black Cindy” because the prison also has another inmate named Cindy. While working as a TSA agent, Black Cindy steals from passengers’ luggage. Poussey has been at Litchfield for two years before the beginning of the show and is responsible for making toilet hooch for the women in prison. Lastly, Crazy Eyes (Suzanne) shows signs of mental illness in her erratic sexual behavior and has frequent trips to the psychiatric ward of the prison. The addition of the character Vee as season two’s main villain reinforces the ideology of the deviance of Black cis women. Similar to Taystee, Vee (Yvonne) is also at Litchfield for the second time and is ruthless, conniving, and frightening. At Litchfield, Vee uses violence, deception, and humiliation to be a ringleader in smuggling in contraband and selling cigarettes in prison.

Most conflicts within the prison are predominately forged and resolved as a racial group; however, Sophia is independent of racial kinships. Sophia’s interactions with Black cisgender women construct a difference in trans and cis embodiments of Blackness. Bey (2017) asserts that in particular contexts, “black people or transgender folks work toward assimilation through buying into a proper black or transgender citizenship” (p. 277). Sophia’s assimilation tactics of White hegemonic femininity provide her with transgender subjectivity but do not serve her best interest as a Black transgender woman. Blackness is erased/made invisible within Sophia’s narrative to render transgender and Blackness as oppositional. Sophia’s values and problems throughout the series do not align with the Black cis women. As a result, Sophia lacks a crucial resource for survival. Forming kinship is central to thriving for Black folks; historically, the Black community has banded together to battle social justice issues such as poverty, racism, inadequate healthcare, state-sponsored violence, and detrimental living conditions. In the next section, I illustrate how the

Black cisgender women's tactic of kinship and community, rather than assimilation, contributes to their collective survival within the prison system.

Black (Cis)terhood: We Are Family

The Black cisgender women, much like the White women and Latinx women, develop a close familial bond with each other and spend the majority of their time with each other while incarcerated. They celebrate each other's successes and provide advice and support through difficult times. These acts of service are currency and are virtually the only way to create kinship. For example, the Black women plan a going away party for Taystee before her release from Litchfield in the episode, "Fucksgiving." During Taystee's party, Poussey and Miss Claudette attempt to alleviate Taystee's concerns about surviving outside of prison, telling her she is intelligent and has a lot to offer to the world. After giving Taystee advice, the women begin dancing to Kelis' (2003) "Milkshake" in celebration of her release and future success. Sophia does not attend Taystee's party and thus misses this moment of fellowship with the other women. Sophia also provides no words of support for Taystee when she leaves the prison. She does not have the same concerns or fears as the Black cisgender women. Sophia is instead concerned with her predicament about her wife beginning a sexual relationship with a cisgender man. Sophia's outsider status and absence from this celebration and others throughout the series alienate her from community with Black women.

In the episode "W.A.C. Pack," Sophia and Taystee campaign for votes to represent the "ghetto." Taystee platform is "waterbeds and fried chicken for everybody." The inclusion of fried chicken is tongue in cheek, playing with racial tropes to highlight their connection as Black people. Taystee looks around the dining hall room, addressing the other Black cis women at the table, loudly and skeptically stating: "If 'yall want a man representing you, be my fucking guest." Taystee

looks directly at Sophia to emphasize “be my fucking guest” and rolls her eyes with disapproval. Taystee’s statement devalues Sophia’s womanhood and asserts the superiority of cisgender women. Taystee’s crass words about Sophia being a man show lack of awareness and respect for transgender women, reifying notions of rampant homophobia and transphobia in the Black community (Eguchi, Calafell, & Files-Thompson, 2014). However, a study by The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), found that “Black transgender people who are out to their families found acceptance at a higher rate than the overall sample of transgender respondents” (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2015). A transphobic slur coming from Taystee undermines sisterhood between transgender and cisgender Black women and advances notions that Black cisgender women are not in solidarity with Black trans women.

While holding her glass of orange juice, Sophia returns Taystee’s glare with a discerning look. Taystee continues her speech, adding, “That bitch got a plastic pussy or some shit.” Her tone remains disapproving and arrogant. Furthermore, her cursing and loud voice present her as incapable of being dignified. The frame widens, and we see the rest of the women at the table. Sophia, looking Taystee directly in the eye, mockingly replies, “You wanna see it?” Once again, Sophia invites others to view her vagina. Scoffing at Sophia’s invitation, Taystee responds with more criticism: “Please! You flash that shit like it’s made out of diamonds.” Shrugging her shoulders with disregard, Taystee continues, “I done seen it about ten times already today.” Several Black women begin to laugh at Taystee’s statement, turning Sophia’s identity into a transphobic joke. The use of humor to devalue Sophia is reminiscent of tropes of transgender women as jokes, rather than authentic identities worthy of respect and recognition. The reference to her genitalia once again highlights the difference in her and the Black cisgender women.

With a condescending tone, Sophia looks at Taystee and states: “Listen, honey, I know all you care about is what you get to watch on the TV, but me and my diamond kitty here wanna prioritize things around this place.” Sophia uses Taystee’s transphobic rhetoric along with her platform to highlight the differences in the priorities of a Black cisgender woman and a Black trans woman. Sophia asserts she will make “real” change; in comparison, Taystee’s campaign promises, in Sophia’s eyes appear trivial and silly in the framework of neoliberal human rights (Spade, 2015). Sophia elaborates on her platform, conceitedly announcing her promises for changes, “...like health care, basic human rights.” Human rights, in this sense, essentially means trans rights. Sophia’s priorities align with contemporary politics happening outside of the prison and highlight her commitment to trans civil rights. This ideological battle between accepting trans folks as *human* or rejecting trans folks as *less than human* is a choice that becomes easier if we can identify with Sophia’s political and social ideologies. Issues of gender, for Sophia, are presented as more progressive than issues of race. Sophia occupies the interstitial space of a complex identity; her community ties are complicated, and her personhood remains questionable to both the prisoners and the prison staff; yet, her narrative reaffirms a post (race) colorblind society that erases racialized sexism and establishes her transgender identity as operating outside of racial categories.

The Black women mock Sophia's idealist notions of prison reform and position Sophia as an outsider in their group. Sophia is civilized and well-spoken; Taystee, on the other hand, is represented once again as ignorant and foolish. Looking intently into the camera lens, Taystee straightforwardly tells Sophia: “You ain’t never gonna change that shit.” Laughing with ridicule, Taystee continues: “You think this is white people politics?” The camera zooms out, and the frame widens to show other people in the dining hall listening in on their conversation. Elaborating on “white people politics,” Taystee and Poussey mockingly personify vernacular and ideologies they

code as “white.” Their voices become higher in pitch and are gleeful about the topics of the conversation.

Taystee: Let's talk about health care, Mackenzie.

Poussey: Oh, Amanda, I'd rather not. It's not polite!

Taystee: Well, did you see that wonderful new documentary about the best sushi in the world? Of course, now that I'm vegan, I didn't enjoy it as much as I might have before.

Poussey: You know, I just don't have the time. Chad and I have our yoga workshop, then wine-tasting class, and then we have to have *really* quiet sex every night at 9.

Taystee: Did you hear that new piece on NPR about hedge funds?

Poussey: Amanda, let me ask you - do you like my bangs these days? I mean, do you like them straight down, or should I be doing a sweep to the side?

Taystee: Sweep to the side, oh my god! (Burley, 2013)

When finished, Taystee and Poussey laugh and reach across the table to give each other praise for their imitations; they physically touch hands and move their fingers back and forth in a display of familiarity. This conversation provides the audience insight into conversations that specifically occur within one's specific racial group. Taystee and Poussey silence Sophia, while simultaneously reminding her of the differences in class privileges, and the ways socioeconomic class identity contribute to our political demands. Taystee has been institutionalized in the foster care and correctional facilities her entire life and has not had a legal job, while Sophia was a firefighter and grew up in a stable home. Furthermore, Sophia committed a white-collar crime due to access to wealthier individuals' homes, while many of the Black cisgender women committed violent or drug-related crimes due as they only had access to lower-income areas. Through their

imitation of white upper-class cisgender women, Taystee and Poussey, mark Sophia's ideologies as white and elitist; and thus, not in alignment with many of the cis women living in the ghetto.

Sophia's campaign to represent the ghetto assumes that an unjust system can become a just system via democracy and nonviolent action by model Blacks. Litchfield eventually undergoes social change, but this occurs via the death of a Poussey, a riot, the privatization of the prison, and a hostage negotiation led by the Black cisgender women (Burley, 2013). The contrasting ideologies of Taystee's and Sophia's campaigns position them as adversaries in the Women's Advisory Council (WAC) election and within the confines of the prison. Taystee's campaign is built on material changes in the prison for all the women, while Sophia's campaign strategy employs contemporary rhetoric on trans civil rights that support her needs only. Taystee wins the election, and Sophia glares at the Black women with anger and disappointment. The results of the election highlight Black cisgender women as ignorant. However, I assert that the Black cisgender women are painstakingly aware of the limits of human rights and health care within a prison. Our oppositional gaze provides us with the ability to reject and negotiate dominant ideologies that seek to devalue our personhood as Black cis women (hooks, 2009). The oppositional gaze is mostly absent in Sophia's engagement with prison institutions. The Black cis women quickly realize that the prison administrators do not want to make substantial changes — a prediction that comes to fruition during the first meeting of the Women's Advisory Council. The representatives receive *Dunkin Donuts*, and the staff tells them that prison will only provide the funds to purchase coffee and doughnuts monthly.

The predominantly White cis writers' room of *Orange Is the New Black* frequently replicate racial stereotypes about women of color or address intra-racial conflict rather than deal with the complexities of an overpopulated prison system filled with Black and Brown bodies

(Brinkhust-Cuff, 2017). In the 2017 report “Race in the Writer’s Room: How Hollywood Whitewashes the Stories that Shape America,” a respondent interviewed about their experiences in Hollywood writers room stated: “So in a diverse writers’ room you have more opportunity for inclusiveness, understanding, and tolerance. I mean that’s been my experience, especially if the writers of color are upper-level” (Hunt, 2017, p. 13). The writers of *Orange Is the New Black* fail to address systemic racial injustices in U.S. criminal justice system until the fourth season’s premiere in July 2017. The writers evoke the contemporary social movement, Black Lives Matter, and the Ferguson protests during the prison riot to further illustrate the difference in Sophia and the Black cisgender women (Ransby, 2018). Black Lives Matter began as a hashtag on social media following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of 17-year old Trayvon Martin (Black Lives Matter, 2016). The acquittal of George Zimmerman in July 2013 was a devastating blow to Black folks and reproduced historical traumas of injustice within our judicial system that year. The writer’s failure to address police brutality until 2017 in a show that primarily takes place in prison is a resounding statement that distances the series politically aligning with Black social movements to appease its audience of predominantly White cisgender women.

The separation of racial and political injustices experienced by the Black cis women from transgender political injustices suffered by Sophia frames these oppressions as mutually exclusive, rather than intertwined. Throughout the series, the Black women experience several injustices that Sophia disregards. For example, Sophia is apathetic after Poussey Washington’s murder during Season 4, while participating in a peaceful protest. The violent death of Poussey at the hands of police officials illustrates a historical and contemporary reality for Black and transgender folks. As a community, the Black cisgender women gather the support and resources to lead a prison riot to demand better conditions. Led by Taystee, the women’s demands include better healthcare, the

end of solitary confinement, and adequately trained correctional officers; the exact changes Sophia advocates for during her campaign in season one. However, Sophia does not participate in the riot to avenge Poussey's death, even though she is no longer in solitary confinement and has returned to the general population of Litchfield. This choice implies that Sophia does not care about brutality against Black cisgender women by white officers and only cares about her transgender civil rights. However, the same structures that contributed to Sophia losing her hormones are the same structures that contributed to the death of Poussey. The intersection of anti-Black racism and anti-trans violence highlights the power of the matrix of domination within the prison industrial complex.

The prison industrial complex disposes of unwanted citizens in distinct ways; thus, communities of support are essential to the survival of incarcerated Black trans and cis women. The Black cisgender women work together, led by their representative Taystee, to avenge Poussey's violent death and make substantial changes to prison conditions through hostage negotiations. The kinship that the Black cisgender women share is so integral to their survival that Taystee returns to the prison during the first season. The Black cisgender women's sisterhood is a community that creates spaces for them to thrive collectively. As a result, Taystee deliberately violates her parole to remain physically and emotionally connected with the kinship she formed at Litchfield. Taystee's return to prison is met with sadness but also care from the other Black cisgender women. Building community was and still is a tactic of resistance and power *because* of the forced separation and historical dismantling of Black nuclear and extended biological kin. These distinctions between Sophia and Black cisgender women devalue experiences of kinship created within the Black community and uplift dominant ideologies of hegemonic womanhood.

Although the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution provides equal protection under the law for all citizens, there is no federal law designating transgender as a protected class under U.S. law that requires equal treatment for transgender people in society (Transgender Law Center, 2016). Sophia's separation and disassociation with Black cisgender women provide the audience with a reprieve from current racial tensions and primes them to recognize transgender civil rights as less threatening and more progressive to the status quo than Black civil rights movements. Capitalizing on this cultural momentum of the "Transgender Tipping Point," *Orange Is the New Black* utilizes the character of Sophia to humanize transgender individuals through colorblind neoliberal discourse that represents trans womanhood as hyperfeminine and unthreatening. Black transgender womanhood and Black cisgender womanhood are represented in a binary opposition through economic labor, motherhood, sexuality, and political ideologies. Sophia Burset's character moves beyond dehumanizing media tropes of transgender women to construct a character that is complex, intriguing, but ultimately an outsider in her racial community. *Black* is still the new *Black*, the indispensable marker of "otherness."

Situating Black sisterhood trans politics within an intersectional framework is essential to unpacking media representations and lived experiences of Black trans and cisgender women. This epistemological position highlights how institutions simultaneously construct individual and group identities through moral evaluation of those identities. The intersectionality of a Black trans woman character is overlooked and understated by the writers of *Orange Is the New Black*. Sophia is Black and a woman; however, she is excluded from creating and forming bonds via sisterhood with Black cis women, even as the series concludes. Sophia does not interact with any Black cis women during the final season. However, Sophia does briefly appear, offering Piper encouragement and advice while styling Piper's hair in her salon, "Vanity Hair by Sophia" ("God

Bless America”, Season 7). The exclusion of Sophia from Black sisterhood reveals that media framing under a White cisgender gaze regards her experiences of Black womanhood as inauthentic and dissimilar to Black cis women. Ultimately, *Orange is the New Black* glosses over the complexity of interlocking oppressions of gender, race, and class experienced by both cisgender and transgender Black women.

Collective action between Black cis and trans women is integral to dismantling systems of oppression. As a result, I theorize the necessity and importance of an inclusive Black sisterhood that interrupts transphobia and leverages our cisgender privilege to provide spaces for Black trans women to live their lives authentically. In the next chapter, I further elucidate the hostility Black trans women face from their cis families and implicate the role Black cisgender women play in upholding or dismantling anti-trans ideologies of Black womanhood. Chapter three further unpacks how cis notions of Black womanhood reduce the livelihood of Black trans women.

Chapter 3: “Don’t Come Back Until You Become a Man!”: Lateral Violence and Gender Socialization in the Black Family

Star, a musical drama on Fox Network, features a cast of predominantly Black cisgender women and provides evidence of what Herman Gray (1991) categorizes as a television program with multicultural discourses of representations of Blackness; these television shows “represent questions of diversity within Blackness more directly, explicitly, and frequently, and as central features of the programs” (p. 91). The predominantly Black world of *Star* (2016) is situated in Atlanta, GA, and focuses on themes of Black music, homophobia, and transphobia in Black churches, police brutality, Black Lives Matter, gang violence, poverty, drug addiction and the #Metoo Movement in real-time. Lee Daniels, the creator of *Star* (2016), provides varied representations of Black cisgender womanhood and evidence of diverse interpersonal relationships among Black cis women and the sole Black trans woman, Cotton. This representation moves away from isolating Black trans women symbolically and physically from sisterhood with Black cis women like Shea Diamond and Sophia Buset. Cotton is both rejected and accepted by Black cis women, illustrating the consequences of exclusion from Black sisterhood *and* the benefits of inclusion. Cotton experiences physical and psychological violence from her Black cis mother, but protection with her maternal Black cis grandmother (Christine) and Aunt. Christine provides a safe space for Cotton to find her voice as a Black trans woman, and Cotton’s admiration of her Grandmother and Aunt Cassie are her models of Black womanhood. Cotton’s maternal grandmother and Aunt embody an inclusive Black sisterhood that embrace Black trans women.

Star premiered on Fox network approximately one month after the results of the 2016 Presidential election named Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States. In a January 2017 interview with *Ebony Magazine*, Daniels explains his motivation for casting a White

cisgender woman as the lead character in his predominantly Black television show *Star* (2016). Daniels states, “We are in a very dangerous state right now in our country, and I wanted white people to feel good about being white because right now, there’s a lot of hatred going on” (Cross, 2017). For Lee Daniels, the television show *Star* (2016) is a vision of unity between Black folks and white folks that begins with Star saving her biracial half-sister Simone (her father is Black), from being raped by her Black cisgender foster father. Within the first ten minutes of the pilot episode of *Star* (2016), we watch Star, a young White cis woman with curly blonde hair, stab a Black cisgender man while he is in bed. Blood splatters across Star’s face, as she forcefully draws the knife up and then down twice, before reaching under him to grab the hand of the young Black teenaged girl he is raping (Daniels, 2016). Watching a White cisgender woman stab a Black cisgender man for raping a biracial Black teenage girl highlights the power that Star holds to change the circumstances of a Black cisgender woman’s life. As the white savior of Simone and Alex, Lee Daniels sets the stage for Star to consistently save the lives of Black cis and trans women throughout the series. Star and Simone flee from Simone’s foster family and head to New York to rescue Alex, a dark skin Black woman, from her mundane life of luxury. As the daughter of a music legend and international model, Alex is often ignored or patronized by her wealthy and famous parents. Together, the trio heads to Atlanta and seeks support from Carlotta Brown (Queen Latifah), a close friend of Star and Simone’s deceased mother (Mary). Carlotta, a Black cis woman, owns a hair salon that she runs out of her home in Atlanta; she agrees to let Star, Simone, and Alex live with her and her trans daughter Cotton (Amiyah Scott).

Supporting Lee Daniels by tuning into *Star* (2016) weekly felt like a betrayal not only to me but to all my Black cis and trans sisters. Regardless of what Lee Daniel’s mistakenly believes, the Trump administration poses the greatest threat to the most marginalized individuals, not white

people. However, the limited representations of Black trans identities on television portrayed by Black trans actresses compelled me to watch *Star* (2016). The casting of Amiyah Scott as Cotton in *Star* (2016) made Scott only the third openly trans woman to portray a trans character on scripted television and the first trans woman to play a series regular on commercial network television (Daniels, 2016). Unlike Laverne Cox's representation of Sophia Buset in Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black* (2013), audiences can view Scott on FOX network, a nonpremium channel that does not require a monthly subscription. At the beginning of the series, Cotton is working at her mother's salon answering phones and engaging in sex work to fund her sexual reassignment surgery; Cotton has diverse interpersonal relationships with numerous Black cis women in her biological and surrogate kinships. Cotton and Sophia's representations of Black trans womanhood are vastly different, but they both have a white best friend. The deliberate casting of a White cisgender woman as the lead character and best friend to Cotton positions White cis women as the catalyst for bridging racial, gender, sexuality, and class differences in the era of the Trump Administration.

The dangerous state of our country plays out in real-time orientation and provides audiences with a parallel view of our lived experiences. The plotlines of *Star* (2016) align with contemporary cultural issues such as human trafficking, the "Me Too" movement, police brutality, the Black Lives Matter Movement, trans civil rights, and xenophobia of Latinx individuals. The entertainment and cultural value of viewing *Star* (2016) coincides with the need to make sense of current social struggles faced by Black individuals. Cinema scholars have foregrounded the notion that cinema mimics our unconscious desires to have agency within particular social situations (Hayward, 2000; Lapsley & Westlake, 2006; Mulvey, 1975). As we consume fictionalized narratives such as *Star* (2016), we begin to connect with the characters and imagine ourselves

supporting or condemning their decisions. Laura Mulvey (1975) asserts that “the character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator” (p. 12). For instance, as Star is stabbing the Black cis man who is raping her teenage little sister (Simone), I imagine myself stabbing the Black cis man who raped my sister. The pleasure I get from identifying with Star’s choice to attack a rapist physically produces relief that others share my unspoken thoughts. I feel no compassion for the Black cis man Star is stabbing and wholeheartedly believe he got what he deserved. I support the decision Star made to protect Simone and am even envious that she has the guts—and the privilege to have no consequences for her actions, a privilege that Black cis and trans women do not have on the television show or in real life.

Television melodramas are family stories that predominantly feature and center the lives of women through narratives of family and moral conflict (Hayward, 2000). Melodrama, as a genre, has been highly theorized in Cinema Studies by scholars such as feminist cinema scholar Mary Ann Doane (1982) and Laura Mulvey (1987) who assert that the feminized space of the melodrama provides ideological insights into the role of gender in society. Stylistically, the contemporary melodrama takes the television form of daily daytime or weekly prime time soap operas that feature melodramatic storylines, with the additional focus on the home and family, and appeal primarily to female viewers. (Snauffer et al., 2009). The first season focuses on Star, Simone, and Alex forming their pop group; Cotton trying to fund her sexual reassignment surgery; Carlotta having a secret affair with the Pastor of her church; Simone and Cotton struggling with drug addiction and the murder investigation of Simone’s rapist. Scholars who have previously examined melodramas contend that audiences “acknowledge and revel in the absurdities of many soap opera plots” (Wittebols, 2004). Similarly, in his study on Lee Daniel’s *Empire* (2015), Wright (2018) asserts that a soap opera is a “serial melodrama that revolves around strong emotional

relationships and sensational, if not stereotypical, narratives and characters. Soaps, with their emphasis on fictional wealthy families, are drenched in fantasy and escapism” (p. 18). This acknowledgment of the absurdities of the plot suggests that audiences are active in interrupting the storylines as nonsense; as a result, audiences should interpret Cotton’s life as unrealistic and not representative of the lives of Black trans women. However, Cotton’s representation as the sole trans woman in a predominantly Black cis world obscures this fragile line between *absurd* and *plausible*. Through the casting of Scott, the show blurs identity and representation to create a performance of a trans identity that is fraught with struggles that are equally absurd and plausible.

Star’s (2016) narrative on family conflict heavily focuses on its character’s upward socioeconomic mobility through either underground economies or via legally sanctioned employment. The development of the genre of melodrama coincides with the rise of capitalism, connecting the internal conflict of families to issues of class (Hayward, 2000). Melodramas predominantly focus on “making sense of the family” in relation to social class intersects with gender, race, and sexuality. The consumption of Amiyah Scott’s body with Cotton’s narrative contributes to what Snorton (2017) defines as “making the racial real,” a process that conflates identity with representation (p. 108). Audiences who consume texts on racial differences are more likely to see these texts as authentic because they view the author as a native informant of that racial group. As a result, audiences that consume these texts, subconsciously perceive these narratives as the actual lived experiences of the person writing or performing the plot. The racial becomes real via a cognitive process that structures difference into embodiments of specific characteristics based on these minimal representations. In the case of Cotton, the racial real aligns with her transgender identity to construct Amiyah Scott as a native informant who has lived the same circumstances as her character.

Cotton experiences transphobia and transmisogynoir, begins and ends a romantic relationship with a cisgender man, is sent to conversion therapy for her trans identity by her mother, tries to commit suicide, becomes addicted to drugs, commits check fraud, has a sexual reassignment surgery, and is arrested (Tobin, 2017). Cotton's everyday experiences truncated into an hourly program highlight the culmination of structural and lateral violence Black trans women experience. Lateral violence or horizontal violence is defined as peer-to-peer violence communicated through "psychological harassment, which creates hostility, as opposed to physical aggression" (McKenna et al., 2003). The psychological harassment involves verbal abuse, humiliation, excessive criticism, disinterest, and discouragement (Cho et al., 2018). Black kinship formations on *Star* (2016) illustrate how Black families socially construct acceptable norms for biological and surrogate kin that contribute to lateral violence. Lateral violence that features transphobic aggression against Black trans women is rooted in a reproduction of ideologies of authenticity with formations of Black womanhood and sisterhood. I begin my analysis by focusing on the sisterhood or lack thereof that Cotton has with her cis surrogate sisters Star, Alex, and Simone. Next, I focus my analysis on the lateral violence Cotton experiences from her mother and the matriarch of the community, Carlotta Brown, to highlight how performances of respectability politics construct trans womanhood as inauthentic. Lastly, I highlight Cotton's kinship in which Cotton's maternal Aunt and Grandmother protect Cotton from lateral violence in Black cis woman networks. Similar to Shea Diamond and Sophia Buset, Cotton faces psychological harm from Black cis women. This chapter highlights the psychological harm Black trans women face within hostile Black communities and implicates the influential role Black cisgender women play in upholding or dismantling anti-trans ideologies of Black womanhood.

The Darker the Girl, The Crueler the Words: The Strong Black Woman Syndrome

Alex: “That drag queen can sew her little ass off!”
Simone: “She ain’t a drag queen, stupid. She’s trans.”
(Pilot, Season 1)

Cotton has medium brown skin, picture-perfect teeth, and a feminine swag that accentuates her curvy body. Cotton frequently wears make-up that accentuates her delicate bone structure, and she wears her Black hair long and super-straight. Cotton’s beautiful face and feminine figure provide her with the ability to pass for a cisgender woman in many situations. Cotton is a surrogate older sister to Star, Simone, and Alex; the sisterhood that Cotton establishes with the cis girls includes designing their clothes for performances, introducing them to the nightlife of Atlanta, and keeping secrets from Carlotta. Like the character of Sophia Burset in *Orange Is the New Black* (2013), Cotton’s best friend, Star, is a white cis woman. Cotton and Star get tattoos together, confide in each other, and fight for each other. Similar to Star’s treatment of Cotton, Simone, who is a mixed-race Black teen, defends and accepts Cotton’s identity as a woman. Star and Simone protect Cotton from transphobic violence that she experiences from Black cisgender women and the general public. However, as the epigraph at the beginning of this section illustrates, Alex, portrayed by dark skinned actress, Ryan Destiny, is transphobic and demeans Cotton’s womanhood (Daniels, 2016). It would seem plausible that Alex and Cotton would establish a close sisterhood bond as they both have been neglected by their parents and ostracized by society as Black women; however, their relationship is contentious. Alex’s initial rejection of Cotton highlights the ways Black cisgender women’s embodiment of the strong Black women and respectability politics contribute to their policing of Black womanhood.

During the pilot episode, Alex convinces Simone and Star to perform at a local dive bar in Atlanta in an attempt to be discovered by a manager with musical connections in the Atlanta hip-

hop scene. Their performance venue has a scarce crowd, and they are unsuccessful in meeting anyone connected to the music industry (Daniels, 2016). Unbeknownst to Alex, Simone, and Star, Cotton attends their performance and surprises them as they are walking back to Carlotta's house. Cotton walks towards them confidently as she states, "I know y'all didn't think y'all was about to win at the dump!" Cotton's comment implies that Alex made a poor choice in choosing their performance venue and that the girls need her help. The camera angle pans the scene as they stop walking to respond to Cotton's statement and zooms in further to an upper-body shot. The focus on an upper-body shot provides the audience with an intimate view of their conversation through moving back and forth between each woman as they speak.

Star: Wait, you saw?

Cotton: Yeah, I saw y'all. I mean, y'all are okay. But are you really looking for a manager?

Star and Simone: Yes!

Cotton: They at the strip club. I know one. I work there. And it's full of industry people.

Star: How you know that?

Cotton: Baby, cause I'm connected. Well, in certain ways.

Star: Well, connect me!

Alex: No. No strip club. No way!

(*Pilot*, Season 1)

At this point in the conversation, the camera pans to show Star and Alex's reaction to Cotton's statement. The audience's gaze is positioned directly behind each person as they speak, and we can readily read each character's nonverbals. Alex is frowning in disgust at Cotton, and Star is smiling with excitement (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Alex (Ryan Destiny), Star (Jude Demorest), and Cotton (Amiyah Scott) in the television show *Star*.

Cotton glares at Alex before using her to shove Alex forcefully out of the conversation, as she moves closer to Simone and Star. Cotton is now standing next to Star, blocking Alex from their inner circle as she tells Star: “I can get you in the champagne room. And that way, you can set your own limits. But don’t tell my mama. That bitch is crazy!” Alex angrily pushes Cotton back as she looks at Star and proclaims: “Well, actually *we* have to think of our future. What if someone photographs you? Then what?” Alex’s disgust at going to a strip club to be discovered insults and demeans Cotton’s profession and calls her morality into question. Alex’s controlling nature and malicious tongue as she states, “We have to think about our future!” implies that Cotton no longer has a future because of her occupation at a strip club (Daniels, 2016). Alex puts down Cotton’s suggestion, directly after Cotton shows up to support their performance and offers them help when their original plan does not pan out. The privileging of racist, sexist, and classist values and standards of behavior by Alex prevents her from fully engaging in sisterhood with Cotton. The representation of Alex, the darkest actress and the only one within the pop group with two Black biological parents, portrays her character as a modern-day Sapphire who embodies the myth of the

Strong Black Woman (SBW). The Sapphire trope represents Black cisgender women as rude, malicious, angry, and desire to dominate (West, 2008; Windsor et al., 2012). Alex represents the maliciousness of Black cis women as authentic, strong Black womanhood, and posits that Black cisgender women are transphobic have little respect for Black trans women.

Alex's rejection of Cotton's help hinders their Black sisterhood and, at the same time, maintains the façade that Alex can handle all of her problems on her own, the quintessential SBW. The controlling image of Black cis women as the Sapphire often embodies performances of the strong Black woman (West, 2008). Furthermore, as a characteristic of Black womanhood, the strong Black woman is utilized as a measure of *authenticity* for both Black cis and Black trans women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). In *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Michelle Wallace (1979) describes the SBW as:

A woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. (p. 107)

The SBW trope or myth posits that Black cisgender women, in its original conception, can overcome any odds because we are naturally stronger than other races of women. The result of this myth is that Black cis women are socialized to deny our vulnerability, to not ask for help, and be resilient, weary warriors (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Springer, 2005). Alex's embodiment of the strong Black woman leads her to not only reject Cotton's help but to frequently push others away throughout the series. Alex has the nickname of "Ice Queen," and her hateful language leads her to make statements such as: "I'm sick of rolling your ass around in that wheelchair anyway" to her boyfriend who uses a wheelchair; telling her mother she might as well be dead because she is

an alcoholic; and frequently demeaning people in public places (“May the Best Manager Win,” Season 2; “The Devil You Know”, Season 1). In a society that continually devalues Black cis women, Cotton becomes the scapegoat for Alex’s anger, pain, and frustration.

The strong Black woman, as embodied by Alex, not only inhibits Black sisterhood between her and Cotton but inauthenticates Cotton’s experiences of Black womanhood. Alex frequently calls Cotton a drag queen and refers to her as RuPaul, an iconic Black drag queen. Alex’s language not only misgender Cotton but also relegates her Black trans woman identity to a performance. Simmonds (1997) contends that “as Black women, our sisterhood must rest on our ability to speak about our difference and our different experiences of this constructed category of ‘Black’ and the consequences of living in a white society” (p. 25). As a Black trans woman born to an incarcerated mother, Cotton’s life is vastly different from Alex, born to a father who is an internationally known musician (“May the Best Manager Win,” Season 2). The disparities in Cotton and Alex’s class statuses produce vastly different experiences of Black womanhood. Living with Carlotta exposes Alex to extreme poverty, police brutality, and grassroots political activism, rather than the neglect and abuse from her alcoholic mother, her father’s infidelity with groupies, and the ability to use her parent’s money and influence to get what she wants. Their experiences as Black women both speak to what it means to be living under White supremacy, and their access to systems of power predicates their response to living in these conditions. Cotton spent her earliest years being raised by Carlotta’s best friend, Mary (Star and Simone’s mother), and her maternal grandmother. Cotton does not meet her mother until Carlotta is released from prison when Cotton is around five years old, while Alex is from a wealthy family, and her upbringing included private tutors, personal drivers, exotic vacations, and a trust fund (Daniels, 2017). At this moment, Alex effectively states she is “too respectable” to further her career via stripping. As a result, Alex returns to Carlotta’s

home with Simone, and Star and Cotton go to the strip club together. Cotton's suggestion to attend the strip club pans out, and Star meets someone to manage their music career.

As the epigraph at the beginning of this section shows, Simone has no problem calling Alex out for her transphobic language and ignorance. Although Alex has made these comments in the presence of Carlotta, Miss Bruce (a gay cis Black man), and other patrons at the salon, Simone is the only one to correct Alex's language. In addition, Simone only finds out that Cotton is trans through an incident at the salon when Carlotta and Miss Bruce, Carlotta's best friend, misgender Cotton, to humiliate her and denounce her womanhood. As Cotton's mother, Carlotta is the first Black cisgender woman who unauthenticated Cotton's womanhood through negative criticism, put-downs, and marginalization. Families provide beliefs and values to live by; adhering to those beliefs and values that determine who belongs and who does not belong. In the next section, I explore the role the Black cis mother plays in discourses of authentic womanhood. Alex's and Carlotta's treatment of Cotton is similar; Carlotta disapproves of Cotton's gender identity and occupation and uses demeaning language to inauthentic Cotton's womanhood. Carlotta's hostile behavior and constant criticism psychologically harms Cotton and demonstrates how daily interactions with Black cis women construct cultural knowledge on authentic or inauthentic Black womanhood for both cis and trans women.

Next of Kin: Mama's Baby, Daughter Maybe?

In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Black Feminist theorist Hortense J. Spiller (2000) asserts that, "at a time when current critical discourses appear to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender's undecidability,' it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender" (p. 66). The ideology of the undecidability

of gender essentially asserts that the dominant White patriarchal notion of gender as definitive is absurd. However, contemporary popular discourses insist on the naturalization of women and men, and even more recently, the dichotomy of cisgender and transgender conceptions of men and women, adhering to essentialism and a worldview of domination. Utilizing the events of our “violent formation of a modern African consciousness” via the Atlantic Slave Trade and enslavement in the United States, Spillers (1987) demonstrates how the ungendering of enslaved Blacks exposes the shortcomings of binary ideologies of gender, race, and kin (p. 63). To adopt a worldview that moves beyond dichotomies of gender as natural and integral to social organization entails confronting our *reactionary* and *dumb* discourses in our communities. For Spillers (1987), this confrontation occurs via unpacking the alignment of “motherhood and female gendering/ungendering” as they “seem to speak the same language” (p. 78). The position of motherhood during enslavement for Black women positioned them and their offspring as “ungendered” as they were, in essence, both property; however, the kinship formations during enslavement positioned women as surrogate mothers to all Black children.

Black motherhood for Carlotta includes biological and surrogate daughters, cis and trans daughters, White and Black daughters, and mourning the loss of a son who is now her trans daughter. As Cotton’s biological mother and the surrogate mother to Star, Alex, and Simone, Carlotta is the matriarch of the family. Carlotta is the choir director at their local church, owns a beauty salon, and manages the musical careers of Star, Alex, and Simone. Carlotta’s moral values align with Christianity, participating in legally sanctioned work only, and nurturing Black cis members in her communities. Carlotta’s performance of Black middle-class womanhood, in the words of Lisa B. Thompson (2012), “is tied to impossible standards of respectability” (p. 3). Carlotta’s standards of acceptable behaviors include attending church weekly, volunteering in the

community, and maintaining poise and dignity in the face of many of her life's struggles such as childhood sexual abuse, incarceration, becoming a single mother in her teens, and rebuilding her salon after it burns down. It is the task of Carlotta to make space for her trans daughter to celebrate her womanhood; however, she fails to do this throughout the television series. Instead, Carlotta uses her power to be a gatekeeper of Cotton's Black womanhood. To combat the dominant worldview of Black cis womanhood, Carlotta adheres to performances of respectability politics that embrace conservative and binary ideologies of gender and sexuality. The Black cis mother's power to love and protect her Black cis children, while reducing her Black trans children to bare life is a reproduction of the dominant worldview that has positioned Black cis womanhood as inadequate.

During the third episode, Cotton confronts Carlotta about rejecting Cotton as her daughter (McCrane, 2017). Ironically this conversation takes place in a hospital following a traumatic incident in which Simone nearly overdoses and goes into cardiac arrest. "Why'd you say that you were her mother?" Cotton asks Carlotta as they are walking through the hospital corridor. Cotton looks Carlotta in her face confronting her directly about lying to the nurse about Simone's parentage. Carlotta replies, "She in the system. If they find out I'm not her mother, they gonna call Social Services." Carlotta states this as she continues to scroll through her phone, barely looking at Cotton during their conversation. Cotton attempts to gain her mother's full attention, stopping in the middle of the corridor while Carlotta continues walking and retorts, "Or maybe you wish Simone was your *real* daughter." Cotton's emphasis on real daughter highlights Carlotta's adherence to biology as determining gender, but not biology as determining kinship relationships. Although Cotton is biologically Carlotta's trans daughter, she rejects Cotton to support her cis non-biological daughters. The camera lens pans to Cotton, de-centering the composite image of

both Black women walking in unison to focus on Cotton standing firm as she declares, “I’m YOUR daughter” (McCrane, 2017). Cotton’s insistence that her mother acknowledges her gender identity is a desperate plea to be seen as a woman and cared for by her Black cis mother. Previous research has shown that the emotional intensity of the mother-daughter bond is more profound and has substantial effects on the daughter’s self-concept and identification (Everett et al., 2016; Rastogi & Wampler, 1999). The rejection that trans individuals experience from their parents classifies their trans identity as “sickness, immoral, or perverted” (Krieger, 2018). In particular, the rejection that trans women experience from their cis mothers means that trans women’s interpellation into womanhood is lonely, stigmatized, and self-sustaining.

Within Black communities, motherhood is of central importance (Collins, 1991). Black cis women as mothers within our communities have maintained families as a resistance to the cultural domination of White patriarchy (Collins, 1991; Dill, 1988; Hartman, 1997). Mothering and caring for Black children has created a political subjectivity for Black cis women. For instance, after the kidnapping and brutal lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmet Till in 1955, his mother, Mamie Till, decided to allow the public to view and photograph his body (Anderson & Bond, 2015). The condition of Emmet Till’s body, “badly beaten and partially decomposed,” resulted in many of the 10,000 visitors fainting or becoming ill (Anderson & Bond, 2015, p. 56). Mamie Till’s decision to expose the horrors of racial violence towards Black children galvanized political activism within Black communities and organizations to advocate for racial equality. In particular, the confession of Emmet Till’s murders who admitted to killing Till after they were acquitted caused prominent civil rights leaders to advocate for the federal government to intervene in racial unjust local law enforcement operations (Anderson & Bond, 2015). The love of a Black mother in this instance led Mamie Till to use her personal nightmare as a catalyst for political activism to mother and protect

future Black children who are always marked as *homo sacers* and reduced to *bare life* in dominant society. Italian philosopher Giorgio (Agamben, 1998) argues that the figure of the *homo sacer* is simultaneously excluded and included in the formations of humanity. This exclusion reduces *homo sacers* to a “bare life” in which they are subject to structural violence and direct violence that seeks to eradicate their personhood.

Carlotta’s need to protect Simone, her surrogate cis biracial daughter, from further trauma in the foster care system leads her to lie about being Simone’s biological mother. This lie of claiming responsibility for Simone, while denying Cotton as her trans daughter illustrates the psychological harm Cotton experiences at the hands of her mother. Carlotta finally looks at Cotton and says forcefully and indignantly, “I named you Arnold, after my father.” Cotton fires back just as forcefully, using her hands and body to solidify her point of view: “Arnold is dead, and I am not talking about granddaddy. I am talking about this, Arnold. *Arnold is dead*. GONE. I’m getting bottom surgery.” Carlotta’s facial expression varies between shock to disgust as she hesitantly states, “It ain’t enough with the boobs, and the hair, and the make-up?” The use of Cotton’s dead name (Arnold) by her cis biological mother and misgendering her is another method that rejects the authenticity of her trans womanhood (Figure 8). Gender socialization begins with assigning children names that are either masculine or feminine. Also, the dominance of patriarchy as a socialization system means that cisgender male children are often named after their fathers and grandfathers to convey lineage; as a result, there are less cis born female children named after their mothers. The loss of Carlotta’s father and the prospect of letting go of her cis son to embrace her trans daughter is a struggle that remains tied to preventing Cotton’s medical transition.



Figure 8: Cotton (Amiyah Scott) and Carlotta (Queen Latifah) in the television show *Star*.

The pitch of Cotton's voice grows higher as she replies, "No, Mama. I need my outsides to match my insides." Cotton's stare intensifies as she moves closer to her Carlotta to emphasize the pride she carries in her identity as a Black trans woman. Transgender individuals usually pursue the finality of sexual reassignment surgery because they are "extremely uncomfortable about having genitals that are not in accord with their gender identity" (Krieger, 2018, p. 79). Cotton's rhetoric of her outsides matching her insides points to the necessity of her bottom-surgery. So much so, that Cotton hustles for the \$20,000 surgery via working multiple jobs, including sex work, to fund her surgery. Carlotta sighs and gently asks, "Why, would you pay someone to mutilate what God gave you? "God gave me, *ME*, Mama!" Cotton informs Carlotta, "and it is not mutilation" (McCrane, 2017). In referencing God, Carlotta's attempt to shame Cotton occurs via the ideology that God created her body (i.e., genitals) which, as such, does not fully belong to Cotton. Carlotta's religious beliefs interpret Cotton's transition as unholy and an attack against God. Cotton does not reject or denounce her mother's ideologies of religion as transphobic but

restructures Carlotta's interpretation of God's purpose for her life as a trans woman—not a cis man. Cotton reminds her mother that ultimately what God gave her was her trans identity, her personhood, and the right to live her life authentically.

Pickens (2015) asserts that “the politics of respectability and the desire for upward mobility animates discussions about proper behavior, interracial interaction, and the parameters of blackness itself” (p. 42). Carlotta's attempt to discourage Cotton's sexual reassignment surgery reinforces Carlotta's desire to have a cis son and cis surrogate daughters (“Next of Kin,” Season 1). Cotton, assigned a cis male at birth and the only biological child of Carlotta, experiences immense gender policing, rejection, physical violence, and emotional abuse. Carlotta's initial reaction to learning about Cotton's trans identity is to kick Cotton out of her home during her early teen years, telling her, “Don't come back until you become a man!” (“Take It or Leave It,” Season 2). Cotton's trans identity positions her wants, needs, and desires as irrelevant to Carlotta and going against biology and gender binaries. Alexander G. Weheliye (2014) asserts that “bare life is affixed to the bodies of specific *Homo sapiens* so that their expulsion from humanity appears to spring from their biological inferiority and appears, therefore, warranted” (p. 69). As a result, those who are determined to be biologically inferior are disciplined as “non-humans” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 4). The bare life affixed to Blackness and transness, spring from ideologies of biological determinism. Biological determinism attributes the behavior of humans to their genetics and is often used in scientific studies and in legal statutes to classify differences and reduce the political rights of unwanted citizens (Fernandes, 2018; Peña, 2005). Cotton, as a *homo sacer*, is the black sheep of the family and is marginalized due to her trans womanhood. This marginalization leads to Cotton receiving less support and respect from her Carlotta than her cis surrogate sisters.

Pitcan, Marwick, and Boyd (2018) explain that respectability politics “both facilitate social mobility and limit the ability to challenge oppressive systems” (p. 165). Carlotta’s adherence to morality and legal standards of behavior help to maintain her image as a respectable Black lady but fail to challenge systems or her behaviors that contribute to the need to model *proper* behavior. In this instance of lateral violence, respectability politics necessitates exclusion of trans women from being centered and respected to uphold an image of respectable Black folks. Ejecting Black trans women from their childhood homes is a form of lateral violence that marginalizes Black trans women from safe spaces and puts them at risk for poverty, homelessness, police brutality, and direct violence (Campaign, n.d.). After Cotton leaves home, she is coerced into the sex trade, and her occupation is another point of contention between her and her mother. Carlotta’s performance of respectability politics ignores the structural and lateral violence that leads individuals to engage in non-legal occupations. Carlotta puts Cotton down numerous times because she does illegal sex work. The global capitalist job market has never been kind to Black folks and systemically produces social conditions such as racial discrimination in public education, lack of access to finances for higher education, and the inability to accumulate generational wealth due to the racial gender-pay gap and mass incarceration (Alexander & West, 2012; Hegewisch & Hartmann, 2019). Capitalism intersects with racism to profit off of Black bodies, beginning with enslavement during the early years of the US to relegating Black individuals to low paying jobs and the underground economy (Collins, 1991). Carlotta’s condemnation and rejection of Black individuals who participate in underground economies such as sex work, Black market medical procedures, money laundering, and fraud is a form of lateral violence that ignores historical and structural racism.

The focus on biological and surrogate kinships in *Star* (2016), along with the predominantly Black cisgender woman cast, creates a feminine space in which ideologies of Black

womanhood are produced and reproduced. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) asserts that “because women are so often associated with family, home space becomes seen as a private, feminized space that is distinct from the public, masculinized space that lies outside its borders” (p. 37). This privatized feminized space of home life provides insights into lateral violence within ideologies of Black womanhood. Cotton’s strained relationship with her mother and Alex highlights moments in which Black cisgender women reject a Black trans woman. In the final segment of this chapter, I consider the relationship Cotton has with her Grandmother (Christine) and with her Aunt Cassie (Carlotta’s younger sister) to provide evidence of Black cis women nurturing a Black trans woman. Cotton’s relationship and her maternal Grandmother highlights moments in which Black cisgender women embrace a Black trans woman into their kinship formations.

The Intergenerational Black Cis Woman Network as a Safe Space

Carlotta’s failure to provide nurturing and comfort to her trans daughter means that Cotton has to seek that support elsewhere. Cotton’s maternal grandmother, Christine, picks up Carlotta’s slack when she fails to nurture Cotton. Within contemporary Black family kinships, Black grandmothers “remain the foundation for the extended family, reflecting its traditional value system and African heritage” (Ruiz & Zhu, 2004). Christine Brown, portrayed by the iconic singer Patti LaBelle, uses her positionality as Cotton’s grandmother to usurp Carlotta’s control and use of respectability politics as a measure of authentic Black womanhood.

Christine’s protection of Cotton started earlier; she helped Mary raise Cotton while Carlotta was incarcerated and provided affirmation for Cotton’s womanhood when no one else would. Christine embodies an inclusive Black sisterhood that rejects respectability politics and recognizes that limited agency for Black cis and trans women is a product of the matrix of domination (Collins, 1991). Christine dismantles Carlotta’s hierarchy of cis womanhood that deems Cotton’s trans

womanhood as inauthentic to Black womanhood. Christine's acceptance of Cotton as her granddaughter rather than her grandson validates Cotton's gender and, as a result, mentors Cotton into Black womanhood (Woodruff, 2017). Cotton's Grandmother, Christine, witnesses many of the atrocities that Cotton experiences at the hands of her mother, such as being subjected to trans conversion therapy in Carlotta's home and being demeaned continuously ("Mama's Boy," Season 1). As a result, Cotton reaches out to her Grandmother and Aunt Cassie (Brandy Norwood) for care and protection when she has a problem during the second season of the series. The second season of *Star* (2016) deals with the aftermath of Cotton's arrest for check fraud and her incarceration. While incarcerated in the general population, Cotton becomes involved in an abusive relationship with her Black cis male cellmate, Omari. Their relationship is emotionally, physically, and sexually violent and continues beyond their incarceration. When Cotton tries to leave the relationship and move on with someone else, Omari murders her new boyfriend. After Omari murders Elliot, he attempts to kill Cotton by drowning her and then setting Carlotta's salon and house on fire ("Climax," Season 2). No longer feeling confident about being able to protect herself from Omari, Cotton reaches out to her Grandmother and Aunt Cassie for help. When Christine and Cassie arrive to help Cotton, they immediately spring into action and insist they can handle the situation without the police.

Cotton's choice to seek support from other Black cis women, rather than ask her mother for support, indicates Carlotta's inability to provide care and protection to her trans daughter. Christine's love, support, and connection to Cotton are undeniable; she not only provides Cotton emotional support, but she also calls out Carlotta for the psychological harm she has caused Cotton (Tancharoen, 2018). Christine corners Carlotta while she is cleaning up the salon and says, "When was the last time you talked to your daughter?" Carlotta stops wiping the soot from a salon chair

and looks her mother in the eye and says, “Actually, we talk a lot more now. We good!” Christine instantly responds, “You sure?” questioning Carlotta’s confidence that she and Cotton have a healthy and enjoyable relationship (“Rise from the Ashes,” Season 2). Christine instinctually knows that Cotton is struggling with a problem and is unable to discuss it with Carlotta. Patricia Collins (1991) asserts that “safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance” (p. 95). Cotton does not confide in her mother as Carlotta’s maliciousness and transphobia create a disconfirming space, rather than a space for safe discourse and self-discovery.

The camera pans back and forth between Carlotta and Christine as they talk in the salon, dimly lit by a single light fixture that provides a backlight image of them facing one another (“Rise from the Ashes,” Season 2). The backlighting of the scene accentuates the silence of a once busy salon that emphasizes each word spoken. The close upper body shot highlights the differences in Carlotta and her mother’s height; Carlotta appears to be looking down on her mother as she forcefully replies: “Ma, don’t come up in here, starting no mess. And stop acting like you know Cotton better than I do” (Figure 9). With pride in her voice, Christine states, “Well, I sure knew her better when you didn’t know if she was a boy or a girl, didn’t I?” The camera lens zeros in on Carlotta’s face, and we see the look of defiance on her face as she tells her mother, “And you ain’t never gonna let me forget it!” Christine moves closer to Carlotta as she says, “You got that right!” Christine’s contempt of Carlotta’s treatment of Cotton indicates that she believes that Carlotta lacks maternal instincts, is not a good mother, and does not deserve forgiveness for her transphobia. Carlotta straightens up to her full height to tower further over her mother, and she arrogantly declares: “All you need to know about my daughter is that I got her. Carlotta nonverbally

emphasizes every word by pointing her finger at her chest, “And I’m a better mother to her than you ever were to me” (“Rise from the Ashes,” Season 2).



Figure 9: Carlotta (Queen Latifah) and Christine (Gladys Knight) in the television show Star.

Carlotta mistakenly believes that her mother is creating problems when there are none; however, Carlotta’s constant disapproval of Cotton and failure to prioritize Cotton over her cis surrogate daughters creates a disconnect between her and her daughter. Cotton’s empowerment as a Black trans woman is a direct result of her resistance to transphobia, gender policing, violence, and exploitations not only outside Black communities but within Black communities. Her trans embodiment of Black womanhood centers around a performance of internal and external political negotiation to survive toxic spaces. These glimpses of Cotton’s rejection illustrate moments in which a Black cis woman disciplines a Black trans woman out of community with Black women. Cotton’s basic needs of homeostasis and safety are unstable, creating a ripple effect that diminishes her capacity to flourish into Black womanhood. Carlotta’s inability to understand the psychological impact her actions have on Cotton suggests she is clueless about the effects of

incidents of lateral violence, such as misgendering, put-downs, and being ejected from their childhood homes have on Black trans women. For instance, in Cotton's absence from her home, she is depressed, physically, and violently abused, and forced into sex work by a local pimp at the age of twelve ("Alibi," Season 1). Carlotta's hubris and lack of vulnerability with both Cotton and Christine prevent her from learning from her mistakes (Shelton, 2017). The reproduction of oppressive tools of domination rupture the bond Black cis women have with each other and their Black trans sisters. Carlotta's Black middle-class performance regulates the types of conversations that are appropriate between her and Cotton preventing open communication from occurring. As a result, Cotton has few options of support and understanding other than her Grandmother, Aunt Cassie, Star, and Simone.

The relationships between Black cis and trans women on *Star* (2016) exposes the possibilities for Black sisterhood as a means of resistance and liberation. Cotton's relationship with her Grandmother and Aunt Cassie highlight the power of the extended Black cis women's network to care for Black children when parents fail. It is within these networks that Black children, such as Cotton, find affirmation and learn tools to survive their current and future oppression. The examination of kinships in *Star* (2016) highlights the physical, emotional, and financial labor among Black cis and trans women. Forgiveness and understanding must be at the center of our kinship for relationships to heal from the generational trauma of being Black cis and trans women in the United States. Black women kinship networks offer social belonging that provide temporary relief from life circumstances and provides a profound connection via shared experiences of Black womanhood. These shared experiences yield a bond that is fluid and always in motion, one that bears witness to each other's joy, accomplishments, suffering, discomfort, fear,

and grief. As a result, separation from Black women kinship networks for Black trans women is detrimental.

The exclusion of Black trans women from Black sisterhood is a form of lateral violence that limits our collective resource, severely diminishing our chances of liberation from the matrix of domination. Sustained collective action between Black cis and trans women is integral to dismantling systems of oppression within Black communities and society in general. Emancipatory spaces for Black cis and trans women contribute to our collective survival. Griffin (2012) delineates parameters that are essential for Black women to thrive: “In essence, Black women need to flood the airways with our pride, pain, and anger, and to do so we need unconditional love and support from those who look like us and those who do not” (p. 149). The next chapter explores the emancipatory spaces that nurture and support Janet Mock, a Black trans woman. Distinct from Shea Diamond, Sophia Buset, and Cotton Brown, Mock’s case study provides insight into how Black trans women navigate anti-Black and anti-trans discrimination with community support.

Chapter 4: “Being Exceptional Isn’t Revolutionary”: Reclaiming Representations of Transgender Exceptionalism

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us.

(Audré Lorde, *Sister Outsider*)

On May 12, 2011, Janet Mock released a video for the “It Gets Better” campaign, in which she discusses her lived experience as a trans woman (Tredwell, 2011). In that same month, *Marie Claire* (2011) released an article about Janet Mock with the following headline and blurb: I WAS BORN A BOY” – Janet Mock has an enviable career, a supportive man, and a fabulous head of hair. But she’s also got a remarkable secret that she’s kept from almost everyone she knows. Now, she breaks her silence (Mayo, 2011). The “It Gets Better” video and the *Marie Claire* article were a global “outing” of Janet Mock’s transness that implicated her complicated relationship to ideologies of gender and passing for trans people. *Marie Claire* employs “the deceptive trans trope” to position Mock as deliberately hiding her identity to pass as a cisgender woman. In addition, the tone of the article is uplifting and inspiring, celebrating Janet Mock’s exceptionalism as a transgender woman who passes for cisgender. The article printed in *Marie Claire* and the “It Gets Better” the video represent Janet Mock’s “unbelievable adventure” as the inspiration for all trans girls and women (Mayo, 2011; Tredwell, 2011). “Fabulous” and “enviable,” are adjectives that describe Janet Mock and position her life as aspirational and inspiring. The brief mention of Mock’s successful career and romantic life position her story as remarkable for two reasons: (1) transgender people live among us in secret, and (2) they are capable of being model citizens. A successful career, Mock’s relationship with a cisgender male, her physical beauty, and her ability to pass as cisgender validate her womanhood. Mock’s life experiences in community with cis women provide a template for Black cisgender women to leverage their privilege and care for our

Black trans sisters. Unlike Shea Diamond, Sophia Buset, and Cotton Brown, Janet Mock's lived experiences are representative of the benefits of a Black trans woman receiving support from Black cis women.

Narratives of exceptionalism have framed the United States as unique compared to other nations since the founding of the country. According to Pease (2009), in his historical research on the rhetoric of exceptionalism, this belief of superiority as fundamental to the United States' national identity, is a fantasy with real-world consequences. The nation-state "needed the fantasy to solicit its citizenry's assent to its monopoly over the legitimate use of violence" (Pease, 2009, p. 12). The concept of "Manifest Destiny" utilized by many European Americans during the early 1800s embraced a belief of American superiority and exceptionalism in which God destined them to colonize many nations (Takaki, 2008). Colonization is inherently violent; however, fantasy narratives of U.S. exceptionalism seek to conceal the violence of colonization. The invisibility of violence within the nation-state presents "a predominantly middle class, tolerance for diversity, upward mobility, hospitality toward immigrants, a shared constitutional faith, and liberal individualism as elements that putatively set America apart from other national cultures" (Pease, 2009, p. 9). For example, often overshadowed by the many narratives of Hawaii, tourism and opportunities for capitalist expansion are the colonization of Hawaii (Takaki, 2008). As a Native Hawaiian, Mock's embodiment of this U.S. exceptionalism serves as evidence of the successful expansion of Manifest Destiny. Janet Mock's narrative of exceptionalism is utilized in the *Marie Claire* article to accentuate her as a remarkable citizen of the United States.

"The Transgender Tipping Point," as posited by *Time Magazine* (2014), is a prime example of a narrative of exceptionalism; the May 2014 cover featured Laverne Cox as an example of the progress our country has made when it comes to gender diversity. However, Puar (2007) and

Aizura (2016) both argue that these narratives conceal the reality of the majority of queer and trans people living in the United States. The ideology of exceptionalism functions to silence the matrix of domination that creates the oppression that Black trans women face daily. The additional challenges that trans women of color face are often overlooked and ignored in popular media accounts of transgender women. For instance, 69% percent of the transgender women killed in the United States are Black trans women (Lee, 2018). To reclaim narratives of exceptionalism, Mock leverages her celebrity status, socioeconomic status, and passing privilege to advocate for her transgender siblings. Unsatisfied and detached from *Marie Claire*'s representation of her identity, Janet Mock (2014) published *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More* because "it [*Marie Claire* article] wasn't *really* my story" (p. xiv). In writing this, Mock critiques media representations of trans exceptionalism and utilizes her voice to enact agency in representing her story as a Black trans woman.

Queer theorists, Jasbir K. Puar (2007) and Aren Z. Aizura (2016), denote the trend of personal narratives that highlight U.S. societal acceptance of neoliberal ideologies of queer individuals in the U.S. military, documentary films, and popular media. Coining the terms "U.S. sexual exceptionalism" and "transgender exceptionalism," Puar (2007) and Aizura (2016) argue that narratives of exceptionalism are employed to reinforce the moral superiority of the United States and further neoliberal ideologies. Theorized in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Puar (2007) asserts that narratives of U.S. sexual exceptionalism are a tool to mask everyday atrocities performed by the state. Puar (2007) argues that "as the U.S. nation-state produces narratives of exception, it must temporarily suspend its heteronormative imagined community to consolidate national sentiment and consensus through the recognition and incorporation of some, though not all or most, homosexual subjects" (pp. 3 – 4). Likewise, Aizura

(2016) asserts that the U.S. government is assisting some trans subjects, while it renders other trans and nonbinary people as disposable. Narratives of U.S. exceptionalism construct binaries of acceptable and unacceptable citizens through uplifting narratives that conform or mirror dominant ideologies; this rhetorical move reproduces the ideology that the United States government and citizens are an exemplar of the equality, acceptance, and freedom of our nation.

In this chapter, I analyze Janet Mock's public discourse, specifically her memoir *Redefining Realness My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More*; her speech at the *2017 National Women's March on Washington*; and her role as a director, producer, and writer for the FX television show *POSE* (Murphy, 2018). First, I unpack Mock's intersectional identity that is often erased to forefront her trans identity. Analyzing Janet Mock's public discourse of her self-identifying as a mixed-race Black trans woman provides evidence of a Black trans woman who received acceptance with Black cis women, mainstream feminist movements, and her career, which illustrates how a Black trans woman with community support thrives. Secondly, I explicate how Janet Mock's use of "strategic ambiguity," a survival strategy of passing and living stealth, isolates her interpersonally from communities but simultaneously provides her power and affluence to eventually make systemic changes (Joseph, 2018). Janet Mock's socioeconomic class, mixed-race Blackness, and transnormativity provide her a public platform, but her commitment to sisterhood guides how she utilizes that platform. Lastly, I analyze how Janet Mock has leveraged her privilege for her trans sisters through analyzing her activism at the *2017 National Women's March on Washington* and individual actions of accountability to trans women. This final chapter provides evidence of how those who have access to privileged spaces should use those spaces to include Black transgender women providing a template for anti-trans Black sisterhood. Through resisting and dismantling ideologies of transphobia, transmisogyny, and transnormativity Black

cis women acknowledge that liberation is grounded in the collective survival of both Black trans and cis women.

“Redefining Realness”: Identity and the Power of Self- Definition

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) asserts that self-definition “has been essential to Black women’s survival” (p. 93). Black cisgender women and her trans sisters instilled a critical consciousness in Janet through teaching her how to resist normative ideas of gender and about the power of self-definition. Mock (2014) discusses their impact on her identity, asserting:

My grandmother and my two aunts were an exhibition in resilience and resourcefulness and black womanhood. They rarely talked about the unfairness of the world with the word that I use now with my social justice friends, words like intersectionality and equality, oppression, and discrimination. They didn’t discuss those things because they were too busy living it, navigating it, surviving it. (p. 65)

Mock’s model of womanhood provided by her paternal family ideologically represents Black feminist theorizing in action (Smith, 1998). Black feminist theorizing, as explicated by Smith (1988) asserts that identities are discursively produced and never fixed, always involving negotiations of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Mock’s navigation of her gender, mixed-race Blackness, sexuality, and socioeconomic identity models the ingenuity of the survival of Black cisgender women and her trans sisters in Hawaii.

Janet Mock’s perceived successful transition in gender located her humanity in transcending gender obstacles and genuinely living out neo-liberal ideologies of cisgender assimilation. The 2011 *Maire Claire* article emphasized Mock’s physical appearance, monogamous relationship with a cis male, and employment at *People* magazine to represent her

as exceptional. The expectation that trans women should conform to hegemonic standards of physical appearance and behaviors re-inscribes hierarchies of womanhood. To combat controlling images, Black cis and trans women utilize self-definition to denounce ideologies that devalue their personhood (Collins 1991; Scott, 2019). Janet Mock is aware of the politics of *her* representation and actively engages in reclaiming her physical body and narrative. In the introduction to, Mock (2014) writes:

Being exceptional isn't revolutionary; it's lonely. It separates you from your community. Who are you, really, without community? I have been held up consistently as a token, as the "right" kind of trans woman (educated, able-bodied, attractive, articulate, heteronormative). It promotes the delusion that because "I made it," that level of success is easily accessible to all young trans women. Let's be clear: It is not. (xvii)

Trans folks feel ramifications of anti-trans ideologies across myriad U.S. institutions. Trans women are disproportionately incarcerated; trans people cannot serve in the military; and the unemployment rate for transgender people is three times higher than the general U.S. population (Lee, 2018). Due to job discrimination and no legal avenues for trans people to advocate for their civil rights, many occupational choices for many trans women are limited. Situating her identity proudly within difference, Mock's representation of her "girlhood" and "womanhood" produces resistance discourse to transnormativity.

Janet Mock formulated her racialized trans womanhood within various communities throughout her childhood and teenage years. Janet Mock grew up in a dysfunctional family, where violence and drug abuse regularly occurred. She was born in Hawaii to Elizabeth and Charles Mock, III; her mother is Native Hawaiian, and her father is African American. The fear and insecurity Mock felt seeing her parents' drug addiction and the hardships of her childhood left her

neglected and starving for survival, community, and love (Mock, 2014). Janet Mock's mother, Elizabeth, was primarily absent during adolescence due to prioritizing drugs and romantic relationships with abusive men. Elizabeth Mock's decade-long drug addiction left her children in extreme poverty and without a consistent place to live. Similarly, Mock's father, Charles, was addicted to crack at the height of the epidemic and unable to hold down a steady job (Mock, 2014). Home for Mock was not one specific house or location; home was the people who provided love and affirmation as Mock came into her womanhood. For example, while living with her father in Oakland, CA and Dallas, TX, during the early 1990s, Janet spent a lot of her time in the care of her father's sisters and mother. Mock (2014) writes:

There were too many Mocks in Dallas for me to ever feel alone. Even when the sound of questions regarding my identity began ringing louder in my head, I rarely had room to reflect because the sound of family was overwhelming. (p. 63)

Mock's paternal Grandmother and her two Aunts protected her from her father's gender policing and allowed her to express her femininity without fear of rejection.

Specifically, trans sex workers in Hawaii and her Black cisgender family members in Oakland provided Mock a template for Black trans womanhood. However, the *Marie Clare* article published in 2011 made no mention of Mock's previous sex work or how Black cis women family members protected her from her father's misogyny and violence. Collectively, their acknowledgment and acceptance of Mock's trans identity allowed her to survive in oppressive circumstances. In particular, our time in communities with others provides us with examples of how to interact with others and helps to solidify our understanding of who we are and who we will become. Stuart Hall (1996) theorized identities as a complex process by which the subject "assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent

‘self’” (p. 598). As a result, identities are subjective and are continuously changing, highlighting how identity formation is a transformative practice. In her memoir, Mock (2014) states, “When I think of identity, I think of our bodies and souls and the influences of family, culture, and community—the ingredients that make us” (p. 249). The *Maire Clare* article ignores the impact of communities and culture on Mock’s journey to womanhood to emphasize her uniqueness as a trans individual; Mock loses her power to self-define her personhood. As a result, Mock strategically uses her transgender exceptionalism to negotiate spaces for a comprehensive narrative of her personhood that moves beyond her trans identity.

The acceptance and mentorship Mock received from Black cisgender women illustrates how communities help to solidify our understanding of the many identities we carry in one body. For example, Mock recalls moments when her Aunt Joyce allowed her to dress feminine, grow her hair longer, and took care of her when her father was on a drug binge (Mock, 2014). Mock’s Black cisgender Aunt treated her with care and respect, unlike her father. Mock’s embodiment of femininity made her an easy target as a child for gender policing and violence in a society that devalues female bodies and behaviors. Mock’s father, in an attempt to police her embodiment of femininity, publicly referred to her as a “sissy” and “faggot” (Mock, 2014). These words sought to prevent Mock from exploring her gender identity and conforming to normative masculine standards. This community of support taught Mock how to embody womanhood, protect her communities, and overcome obstacles such as poverty, racism, and the policing of her gender identity. Without the support and love from her Black cis women family members, Mock’s life as a Black trans woman could have been much more difficult. Black cisgender women taught Mock how to survive and navigate an unjust world via utilizing her resourcefulness as a Black trans

woman. When she was in need, Black cis women saw her for who she truly was and loved her unconditionally.

For many marginalized individuals, communities provide much-needed resources that aid in their continued survival (Eng, 2010). The daily stigmatization that Mock and other trans women faced lead them to create safe spaces for them to be authentic in their gender identity. For example, an essential community of support for Janet Mock while she was a teenager were trans women who gathered on Merchant street, located in downtown Honolulu to earn a living. Mock's best friend Wendi provided Janet with hormones to further her gender transition when she was unable to afford them. Shayna, one of the O.G.'s (older girls), made sure that Janet made it home in time to attend her college classes at the University of Hawaii. There were no cisgender male pimps on Merchant street; the trans women made sure to take care of each other's safety so they would not face further exploitation. Mock (2014) writes,

They came to Merchant Street and took control of their bodies—bodies that were radical in their mere existence in this misogynistic, transphobic, elitist world—because their bodies, their wits, their collective legacy of survival, were tools to care for themselves when their families, our government, and our medical establishment turned their backs.

The varied, often conflicting portraits these women presented shaped my developing composition of womanhood. (p. 171)

Their safety depended on each woman choosing to protect their sisters from various systems of violence and oppression. The practice of sisterhood for the trans women on Merchant Street provides a template of kinship outside of biological kin, outlining the benefits of collective action among cis and trans women through sisterhood.

The stigmatization and discrimination of trans individuals in our society create a behavioral pattern that contributes to many marginalized folks utilizing survival strategies such as living stealth. In the next section, I consider how Mock situates her identity proudly within difference and represents her “girlhood” and “womanhood” to show how transnormativity intersect with ideologies of racial and gender passing. Ralina L. Joseph (2017) asserts that “when difference is interpreted as neither neutral nor objective, it becomes oppositional.” (p. 3315). Through unpacking Mock’s strategy of living stealth, I illustrate how she strategically uses her difference as oppositional to transnormativity and representational violence of trans women. Mock’s lived experiences of passing are conditionally and culturally bound by anti-Black racism, Black misogyny, indigenous Hawaiian ancestry, puberty suppression hormones prescribed by a medical doctor, and extreme poverty. I explore how Mock’s outing herself as a trans woman and a former sex worker in her *New York Times Bestselling* memoir allows her to stand in solidarity with her trans women of color communities through her individual actions.

Transgender Exceptionalism & The Politics of Passing

In *Redefining Realness*, Mock (2014) navigates her complicated relationship to passing as cisgender and not being *visually read* as trans. The terms *passing*, *realness*, and *stealth* comprise Mock’s theorizing of her experiences of womanhood. The ability to *have* and *use* passing as a survival strategy is contingent upon Mock’s physical attractiveness and people reading her performances of femininity as *real* or *authentic*. Realness, as a standard for transgender women, is historically tied to New York City’s ballroom community and “enables trans women to enter spaces with a lower risk of being rebutted or questions, policed, or attacked,” (Mock, 2014, p. 116). For Mock, being read or “passing” as cisgender and racially ambiguous is a complicated process of reading and interpreting her embodiment of racialized gender via her physical features and

performances of gender. As a predominantly visual culture, our template for difference is the body. Mock's physical appearance aids her ability to pass for a cisgender woman, and her mixed-race identity, and upward mobility and educational attainment allow her access to the use of transgender exceptionalism. Passing, as a result, is only available to individuals who can readily fit our normalized understanding of race and gender. Janet Mock has flawless light caramel brown skin, shoulder-length Black curly hair, dark brown eyes, and full lips. On the cover of *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More*, she stands tall and proud, wearing a light pink dress that hugs her slim figure and accentuates her cleavage.

To be read physically as a cisgender woman, rather than a transgender woman, is to pass or assimilate. Mock's ability to pass as a cisgender woman while living in New York City, emphasizes how being perceived as cis, rather than trans afforded her more privileges. Transnormativity or cisgender assimilation is a

hegemonic ideology that structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy that is dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards, regardless of individual transgender people's interest in or intention to undertake medical pathways to transition. (Johnson, 2016, p. 466)

Janet Mock's access to hormones at an early age contributed to her ability to pass visibly as a cisgender woman. Medical science offers trans individuals the opportunity to change their embodiment of gender via hormone and surgical interventions. With the support of her mother, Janet Mock received weekly hormone shots of estrogen and vitamin B12 to suspend the physical effects of male puberty. Janet's mother attended her first doctor's visit to give her consent for Mock's hormone therapy. To ease her mother's fears, Mock's doctor assures her that Janet's body would be healthy and beautiful: "She will also be able to live in the world as a young woman, an

attractive one at that, something that isn't easily achieved or possible for most of my patients.” (Mock, 2014, p. 154). The statement about Mock's beauty is indicative of a culture preoccupied with Western beauty norms. For trans women, the medicalization of their gender constructs attractiveness as the goal of transitioning genders (Spade, 2015). This ideology further limits the choices Black trans women have when it comes to their gender presentation. The transgender body must pass as their chosen gender to access privileges that cisgender people receive as natural rights; as such, passing functions simultaneously as privilege and oppression.

Cultural notions of passing are historically bound to U.S. ideologies of whiteness as pure and superior (Daniel, 1992). Lighter skinned Blacks who can pass for White have historically obtained a higher racial and class privilege (Smith, 1988). Performances of racial and gender passing highlight the inherent ambiguity in reading visual difference. Although Janet Mock is mixed-race, with Native Hawaiian and African American, media accounts often overlook her Native Hawaiian ancestry; Janet Mock's physical body passes for a lighter-skin cisgender Black woman. Discourses of passing, much like narratives of exceptionalism, seek to further neoliberal ideologies of upward mobility, while simultaneously masking the violence of U.S. institutions and laws. Squires and Brouwer (2002) theorize the complexity of passing within state formations of identities: “Passing and catching someone in a pass make clearly visible the web of individual, state, society, and culture involved in maintaining identities. Passing is a transgression that inspires fear in the state and dominant social groups” (p. 287). Ideologies of equality, liberty, and laissez-faire economics are central to the national identity of the United States; however, passing exposes these ideologies as a myth. To transgress social boundaries of gender, and for lack of a better word, “deceive” others into believing the transgression exposes the social constructions that underline values attached to people depending on the identities they hold. As a result, passing functions

ideologically to classify, categorize, and evaluate identities along a visual hierarchy of difference (Joseph, 2013). If trans people have access to cisgender privilege, much in the same ways that some mixed-race Black individuals' ability to pass gave them access to White privilege, then social discrimination is exposed, and the resources reserved for the dominant group are available to the marginalized. Through outing herself as trans, Mock exposes racist and gender ideologies that gave her access by denying access to her sisters that are read as trans and not cis.

Passing provides a way to survive oppression, but it does not provide a relaxed and comfortable life. Living stealth is a process that involves immense paranoia of being found out, leading to anxiety, isolation, and depression (Lee, 2018). Besides, the intersectional nature of identities means that passing as cisgender provides privilege and access to opportunities in one identity category. Janet Mock's mixed-race Blackness and low socioeconomic status contribute to other oppressions that do not disappear because she can pass for cisgender. For example, Mock's educational attainment and ability to attend college was due to her receiving academic scholarships, utilizing educational loans, *and* working as a sex worker. Critiques of cisgender passing, often overlook intersectionality and ignore trans women of color. Julian Kevon Glover (2016) situates Mock's gender embodiment in her "grooming practices, physical appearance, sexual practices, and sexuality (heterosexual preferably) alongside heteronormative standards and respectable behaviors" (p. 344). However, Glover's (2016) reading of Mock's self-representation does not account for how passing is a survival choice. Mock (2014) asserts that "the misconception of equating ease of life with 'passing' must be dismantled in our culture" (p. 237). Mock states:

At twenty-two, I would choose to leave family and friends behind to live my life openly as a young woman in New York City. But as a teenager on a small island where it seemed I

couldn't escape my past, I banked on my looks, which allowed me to live visibly without people harassing me or gawking at me" (p. 158).

Bodies that do not conform experience more instances of ridicule and violence (Mock, 2014). This privilege provides safety from the stigma, discrimination, and disproportionate rates of violence experienced by Black transgender women. However, the choice to utilize the survival strategy of living stealth involves leaving your communities and your past experiences behind.

Redefining Realness My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More represents Mock's strategic use of discourses of U.S. transgender exceptionalism to make them work *for* and *not* against the everyday lived experiences of oppression faced by Black transgender women. Mock (2014) reclaims "the often-erased legacy of trans women's survival that enabled her to thrive as a young, poverty-raised trans woman of color" (p. xvi) when she outed herself as a trans woman. Janet Mock's access to the strategies of transnormativity and exceptionalism are not available to many trans women of color. Janet Mock's resistance to systems of oppression is an embodiment of strategic ambiguity in a post-race era. Ralina L. Joseph (2018) defines strategic ambiguity as a resistance strategy utilized by "individuals who are disempowered by their minoritized identity status, and yet often privileged by class, garner strength by individual action" (location 437). Mock's individual act to out herself as a trans woman disrupts the invisibility of the lived conditions of Black trans women who do not pass. In *Surpassing Certainty*, Mock (2017) asserts:

For years, I got *mine* by remaining silent and blending in. Now I've finally reached a place where silence is no longer an option for me. My survival depends on my ability to speak truth to power, not just for myself, but for *us*. I'm committed to getting *ours*. (p. xx)

Through naming systems of oppression, such as transphobia cisgender privilege, Mock honors her trans siblings and makes explicit ideologies that devalue of trans women of color. Mock's use of strategic ambiguity denounces narratives of trans exceptionalism and utilizes her public platform and transnormative privilege to forefront the most marginalized trans women in her politics. In the next section, I highlight how she uses her platform at the *2017 National Women's March on Washington* to speak truth to power through her individual actions. Mock provides a template for Black cis women to model an inclusive Black sisterhood.

My Sister's Keeper: The 2017 National Women's March on Washington

“Our approach to freedom need not be identical, but it must be intersectional and inclusive. It must extend beyond ourselves.”

Janet Mock, 2017

“My Sister's Keeper,” spoken to the crowd at the *National Women's March on Washington*, January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th president of the United States highlights Mock's commitment to standing alongside both cis and trans women in the face of oppression. At the beginning of her speech, she proudly proclaims: “I stand here today as the daughter of a native Hawaiian woman and a black veteran from Texas. I stand here as the first person in my family to go to college” (2017a). Janet Mock's ability to stand on the stage, as a representative of trans women of color, is tied to her identity as a mixed-race Black woman. In her critical analysis of narratives of passing for mixed-race Black women, Smith (1988) asserts that “people pass primarily in order to partake of the wider opportunities available to those in power” (p. 36). Mock's access to a platform such as the *National Women's March on Washington* highlights the privilege of passing for transgender women, who often face disproportionate discrimination and violence in society. As a mixed-race woman, Mock's lighter skin tone presents

her as less of a threat to the status quo than darker skin trans women such as Laverne Cox and Shea Diamond. Mock (2017a) utilizes her new-found class privilege and narrative of exceptionalism to work in the service of critiquing the myriad ways societal institutions of education, law, health, capitalism, and gentrification have worked together to disadvantage all people. As her sister's keeper, Mock illustrates what it means to show up and show out for both your cis and trans sisters.

In her speech, Mock is explicit about her political commitments that move beyond her mediated narrative of exceptionalism: "I stand here today most of all because I am my sister's keeper. My sisters and siblings are being beaten and brutalized, neglected, and invisibilized, extinguished, and exiled" (2017a). Black cisgender and transgender women face a disproportionate amount of violence and discrimination due to our racialized gender under the Trump administration; this oppression is experienced differently by white cis and trans women (Lee, 2018). Mock's speech highlights the material conditions of hegemonic ideologies that specifically oppress the most marginalized folks. In a world in which Black trans women live in extreme poverty with incomes of less than \$10,000, and are discriminated from obtaining adequate housing, health care, and legal employment, their voices should center our collaborative efforts. Outlining her vision for a sisterhood that acknowledges the difficulty of moving forward during the Trump Era in "My Sister's Keeper," Mock (2017a) declares,

And our movements, our movements require us to do more than just show up and say the right words. It requires us to break out of our comfort zones and be confrontational. It requires us to defend one another when it is difficult and dangerous. It requires us to truly see ourselves and one another.

“It” in this interaction, references the idealized performances of sisterhood that trans women desperately need from their cisgender sisters. Mock’s rhetoric is direct and challenging, forcing her and her audience to grapple with how we remain comfortable in our silence and safety.

Confronting oppression is not comfortable, but it is a necessary step for the collective liberation of Black cis and trans women. Mock’s comfort ended when she publically identified as a Black trans woman, rather than passing as a Black cisgender woman. Mock’s access to cisgender privilege while living stealth allowed her to “wear the cloak of normality” and hide her authentic self (Mock, 2017b). Living stealth or passing is a term for blending in as cisgender and purposefully not being open about their transgender identity (Beauchamp, 2019). Janet Mock’s ability to pass as a cisgender woman provided her comfort from ignorance, judgment, and exclusion; however, it does not confront the oppression that trans women face daily. As a result, Janet’s access to a more privileged life is at the expense of being distinct physically and remaining separate from trans women. In outing herself as a trans woman, Mock not only reclaims her roots to stand in solidarity with her communities but works to dismantle the systems that privilege her. As her sister’s keeper, Janet Mock performs kinship outside of biology and *keeps* her sisters that are disadvantaged at the forefront of her performances for liberation. Mock’s performance of solidarity at the *National Women’s March on Washington* is a model kinship through showing up and using your platform to advocate for the most marginalized folks in your communities.

Throughout her speech, Mock (2017a) utilizes rhetoric that emphasizes body movements such as “stand,” “march,” “hold,” and “push” to call our physical bodies into action. Mock proudly proclaims, “I stand here today because of the work of my forebears, from Sojourner to Sylvia, from Ella to Audre, from Harriet to Marsha. I stand here today, most of all, because I am my sister’s keeper.” (2017a). Mock repeats, “I stand here” a total of five times, as she emphasizes her

lineage, her political commitments, and mission for the forward progress of her sisters under the Trump administration. The repeated use of “I stand here” throughout her speech rhetorically references Mock’s embodiment of remaining stagnant or moving, and subsequently remaining stagnant in accepting narratives of exceptionalism or moving away from exceptionalism. Collective action, rather than exceptionalism, in the face of extreme oppression, is a formidable survivor strategy for marginalized people. Janet Mock evokes the name of her forbearers, her elder siblings, as a sign of reverence for the women who paved the way for her to speak at the *Women’s March on Washington*. Each woman’s name that she speaks: Sojourner, Sylvia, Ella, Audre, Harriet, and Marsha are evoked without last names, with the understanding that they all descend from the same family. Mock also pays homage to her Native Hawaiian roots as her practice of speaking each women’s name mirrors formal ceremonies and traditions (Mock, 2014). As a rhetorical device in her speech at the *2017 Women’s March on Washington*, the language of kinship honors her communities and generates performances that are not bound by biology or stagnant roles of a hegemonic family structure.

Historically kinship for Black and trans communities has moved beyond biological connections (Giddings, 1984; Handy & Pukui, 1950). Through deliberately using the language of *sisters* and *siblings* to denote *kinship* as a mode of collective survival, Mock (2017a) illustrates how siblings should perform solidarity through emotional, physical, and financial labor for each other. Mock’s ideology of sisterhood is a verb, rather than a noun, and supersedes normalized ideologies of kinship structures to dismantle oppressive systems. Much like voluntary kin systems utilized by Black individuals during enslavement and queer individuals, Black sisterhood as a support system includes deliberate and intentional acts of solidarity even in the face of difficult conversations. Her speech is a blueprint of her past, present, and future commitments to her

community, a script to perform until we are all free. She makes a stand to *gather* and to *move* transversely, evoking her ancestors to forge her ahead. To forge ahead, we must dismantle ideologies such as transphobia, patriarchy, respectability politics, and homophobia that separate us.

Transphobia, homophobia, and respectability politics in feminist movements and with Black communities are not a new phenomenon. In particular, Mock's reference to Audre Lorde links her intersectional identity and political commitments to those expressed in Lorde's speech "I Am Your Sister: Women Organizing Across Sexualities." Throughout her speech, Lorde (1988) provides evidence of homophobia and heterosexism within Black feminist organizations. Expressing her interest in being more than just tolerated by her Black sisters, Lorde (1998) declares:

I am not your enemy. We do not have to become each other's unique experiences and insights in order to share what we have learned through our particular battles for survival as Black women. I am a Black lesbian, and I *am* your sister.

Lorde's sexual identity as a lesbian exposes the limits of a sisterhood that prioritizes heterosexual practices and systems. Lorde is an example of how the inclusion of the voices of lesbians in Black feminist spaces provides a more comprehensive understanding of Black womanhood and the inner workings of the matrix of domination. As a result, dismantling the inherent power structures in our kinships, communities, and social movements are essential to our collective liberation. To get *us* free, Janet Mock evokes the language of kinship, mirroring Lorde's rhetorical choices, in her speech to delineate a practice that forges commitments of solidarity. To consider each woman she names as kin, rather than political advocates, Janet Mock's rhetoric takes accountability for all her

sisters, irrespective of their performances of womanhood, citizenship status, sexuality, or occupation.

As expressed in the epithet of this section, “intersectional” and “inclusive” as crucial components of Mock’s sisterhood “illuminate (instead of mute) the machinations of power” within our language use and social movements (Joseph, 2017, p. 3308). The use of intersectional and inclusive directly link Mock’s ideologies to theories and praxis of Black feminism. To extend freedom beyond ourselves, Mock advocates that our path to liberation must be intersectional and inclusive to dismantle the matrix of domination. Bearing witness to the struggles of her siblings, Janet Mock (2017a) pays homage to their lives, while upholding her commitment to collectively forging bonds across difference. As she emphasizes each word, Mock (2017a) confidently states: I know with surpassing certainty that my liberation is directly linked to the liberation of the undocumented trans-Latina yearning for refuge. The disabled student seeking unequivocal access. The sex worker fighting to make her living safely.” Mock deliberately confronts ideologies of exclusion and exceptionalism via referencing other women who are systemically oppressed by U.S. and state institutions. Undocumented women, women with disabilities, and women who engage in sex work are impacted disproportionately by U.S. legislation and policies. For example, during his 2016 campaign, Donald Trump advocated to build a wall along the Mexican border, and while in office, he has proposed a merit-based immigration selection criteria that favor applicants who earn higher wages, have a valuable skill and plan to create jobs for American citizens (Chishti & Bolter, 2019). The proposed policies disadvantage refugees, individuals from impoverished nations, and individuals without access to Western education. Mock’s use of theories of intersectionality as an ideal way to freedom and inclusive sisterhood moves closer to survival for all her cis and trans sisters. It is imperative that cisgender women learn from Janet Mock and

denounce narratives of “authentic womanhood” and confront transphobia in our social movements and communities.

Performances of kinship, as emphasized in Mock’s speech, are a prototype for flights of liberation via collective vigilance, emotional support, the practice of concern for the welfare of one another, and mutual risk-taking. Towards the end of her speech, Mock (2017a) states that:

Collective liberation and solidarity is difficult work. It is work that will find us struggling together and struggling with one another. Just because we are oppressed does not mean that we do not ourselves fall victim to enacting the same unconscious policing, shaming, and erasing. We must return to one another with greater accountability and commitment to the work today.

Work or labor is fundamental to sisterhood and social movements, and it will always be difficult. The circumstances that led people to gather at the *2017 Women’s March on Washington* compelled them into action, and for Mock, that action must include working within our movements and communities to eliminate oppressive systems.

Through standing and speaking on the stage at the *National Women’s March on Washington*, Mock uses her platform as a template for how to model kinship. Mock theorizes her sisterhood as an analytic, a vessel that nurtures, mentors, protects, and struggles for the continued physical and mental survival of her sisters. Kinship is about surviving and struggling together through the best and worst of times. Belonging to a community brings many benefits to one’s life, but it also brings many challenges and conflicts. Mock’s “My Sister’s Keeper” is a proclamation advocating for an “integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 116). For far too long, hierarchical ideologies of womanhood exclude rather than include the diversity of all women. A

homogenized movement or sisterhood that fails to perform labor for individuals that do not conform to dominant ideologies of family, gender, and sexuality directly contributes to violence and discrimination that trans women face. To resist enacting oppression, the Black cisgender women in Mock's life confronted their unconscious and conscious rejection of trans women from Black womanhood and Black cis sisterhood. The failure of Black cis women to see Shea Diamond, Sophia Burset, and Cotton Brown as Black women contributed to their disproportionate rates of physical and psychological violence. Black cisgender women must follow the lead of the Black cis women in Cotton and Mock's life and see Black trans women as we see Black cisgender women, like our sisters. In the final section of this chapter, I outline Mock's persistent solidarity with her trans communities of color.

Returning to Community: Sustaining Actions of Solidarity

Tony Blackshaw (2010) asserts that community offers us both the possibility of "personal transcendence" and a connection to "one another through the felt presence of their shared humanity" (p. 17). Community, in this iteration, encompasses more than biological kin; community expands to include individuals who perform tasks that are traditionally carried out by biological kin (Bailey, 2013). Our community not only helps to solidify our identity but helps to support and protect our present and future identities. The support of her communities is a primary reason Janet Mock is no longer living in poverty or engaging in sex work. Many transgender individuals are not accepted in their communities, leading them to believe that their own lives do not matter (Mock, 2014). An overwhelming number of trans individuals, 41% surveyed in the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey reported: "attempting suicide compared to 1.6% of the general population," (Grant et al., 2011). The community support and resources Janet

received from the Black cisgender women in her extended family and her trans sisters in Hawaii provided Mock a space to celebrate and grow into her Black trans womanhood.

Janet Mock's return to her communities with accountability has taken many different forms; as a journalist by training and a self-identified "trailblazing storyteller," Mock's activism for her trans sisters includes writing stories that center the lives trans women of color. Shortly, after the *2017 National Women's March on Washington*, Janet Mock was contacted by screenwriter and director Ryan Murphy to write for his new FX television show *POSE* (2018); the drama television series takes place in New York City during the late 1980s and focuses on Black and Latino Queer Ballroom Culture (Murphy, 2018). In an interview with *Variety Magazine* in June 2019, Mock detailed her motivation for working on the Emmy nominated show:

When I got the call for *Pose* to meet with Ryan, I was like, 'This is a different way to come in. I can learn on the job on a show that has the potential to be important to my community'...At that point, I think [the production team was] just about to start the casting process, so I didn't know who had been cast.

Mock's willingness to join *POSE* is tied directly to sustaining acts of solidarity with her trans communities while being openly trans. Narratives that Mock has written for *POSE* have focused on the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its impact on queer communities of color; the politics of passing for trans folks; transphobia in cisgender women; and the creation of queer families of color. Also, as one of the writers, producers, and directors of episodes of *POSE*, Mock is the first trans woman of color to write and direct for a television series in history. Mock's accomplishments make her exceptional, but her solidarity to her communities makes her admirable.

All women, cis and trans, deserve to be fully themselves within our movements and communities. Trans women are women, and without the support and acknowledgment of Black

cis women, our trans sisters have less of a chance of surviving the matrix of domination. Mock's performances of sisterhood speak truth to power and center the plights of her marginalized sisters at the forefront of her activism. The characters and stories that unfold on *POSE* (2018) highlight a multitude of atrocities that trans women experience daily; with the largest cast of trans women of color in television history, *POSE* (2018) moves beyond the single trans character of color in a predominantly cisgender world as represented in *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) and *Star* (2016) to highlight a community of trans women of color. As Barbara Christian (1987) states, "How else have we managed to survive with such *spiritedness* the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?" (p. 52). For example, one of the lead characters on the show, Blanca Rodriguez-Evangelista, played by a mixed-race Black and Puerto Rican trans woman's (MJ Rodriguez) storyline predominantly focuses on community building in the Ballroom scene and mothering the queer youth of color who have been abandoned by their cisgender families (Murphy, 2018). *POSE*'s (2018) focus on the Ballroom scene is a spotlight on queer family structures created to survive a world that seeks to dehumanize their identities. In working on the series *POSE* (2018), Mock can and does tell stories that diversify the experiences of trans womanhood and advocate for the lives of all trans women of color.

In moments of invisibility, Black cis and trans women must recognize that our struggle is not unique to us individually but that being a Black cis and trans woman comes with a legacy of surviving through the worst of times and celebrating our shared and individual victories. Situating cis and transgender politics within an intersectional framework is essential to understanding the representations and lived experiences of Black transgender and cisgender women in the United States. Black women's interpellation into womanhood mirrors a struggle of multiple identities, oppressions, and ideologies of being. Communication theorists Marsha Houston and Olga Davis

(2001) describe this state of Black womanhood as “being simultaneously like and different from other groups,” (p. 5.) and likewise, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) describes Black womanhood as “simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing outside it” (p. 207). Black womanhood and Black sisterhood are not about being static; they are about witnessing how our work will transform our lives collectively. The failed attempts of an all-inclusive Black sisterhood in the first three chapters emphasize the direct role Black cis women play in maintaining systems of oppression. However, Black sisterhood is fundamentally about loving the diversity of Black (cis, trans, queer, and nonbinary) women. Giving back to the communities that support you is paramount to the continued survival of present and future generations. Sustained solidarity is a commitment, an action of continuous movement, through everyday occurrences of cultural labor for the survival of a people, and way of life. Mock’s strategy of uplifting her communities has contributed to more opportunities for Black trans women, providing a model for how Black cis women can and should show up to support trans sisters.

Conclusion: Black Sisterhood Is Still Powerful

I watched *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* with my big sister when I was about 13. It was her turn to choose the television program on our 19-inch TV in our shared bedroom. We had only recently received our television, and we were still figuring out the schedule for who would control the remote. As the younger sister, I deferred to my big sister's judgment, and she had determined that this was a movie for us. The choreopoem Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* was first produced and performed in 1976. The American Playwright Theatre filmed a production of the play in 1982 starring popular Black actresses Alfre Woodard and Lynn Whitfield. I did not recognize any of the other actresses, and the film's low budget provided a less-than-stellar viewing experience. The images on the screen were dim, shadowy, and outdated. Watching the stage adaptation of *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* in my bedroom produced ambiguous feelings and self-reflective thoughts.

I was not a carefree Black girl; I was anxious, depressed, and critical. The images of these unnamed Black women dancing, speaking, laughing, and crying together were perplexing. I was both bored and interested, shocked and dismayed, uncomfortable, and vulnerable. I leaned in closer to our TV and squinted at the small screen to lip-read each word spoken. Nevertheless, the words were fast and fierce; you had to feel them--you could not just read them. I gave up on my attempt to understand every word and concentrated on the colors of the rainbow that filled the screen. Red, orange, blue, yellow, green, purple, and brown swirled around the screen as the women's bodies moved in harmony to their shared stories of being colored girls. Each woman was a spectacular entity alone, and together with their confident voices and poised Black bodies, they created a chorus of survival stories. Individually, they survived rape, domestic violence, illegal

abortions, suicide, police brutality, and street harassment. Collectively, they achieved joy, self-love, powered through depression, and created a celebration of their Black womanhood. *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* guides my search for Black sisterhood as I navigate my life and research as a Black cis woman.

As a Black cis woman, the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and gender allows me to have what bell hooks (2009) describes as an oppositional gaze. My oppositional gaze emerges as a site of resistance that interrogates classist, patriarchal, racist, and transphobic ideologies about Black transgender individuals. To expand the boundaries of cis notions of Black sisterhood as a cultural practice of solidarity I examined popular culture representations featuring Laverne Cox, Amiyah Scott, Janet Mock, and Shea Diamond demonstrating moments in which Black trans identities are devalued, commodified, or celebrated. Through an examination of the diversity of Black trans womanhood, I unpacked ideologies that contribute to and hinder the liberation of all Black women. In *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, & The Limits of the Law*. Dean Spade (2015) argues that to understand the intersection between power and transphobic harm properly, we need to shift our focus from an individual rights framework. He instead advocates that we think more broadly about how the enforcement of gender and racial categories on all people, have particularly dangerous outcomes for trans people. Spade's (2015) use of intersectionality builds on Black feminist theory from Kimberlé Crenshaw and Angela Davis. Situating gender politics within an intersectional framework is essential to understanding the representations and lived experiences of Black transgender and cisgender women in the United States.

Embodying Sisterhood contends with the ways race and gender organize our lives and posits that it is up to Black cis women to reorganize and resist dominant and binary understandings of

Black womanhood. How can we value our Black womanhood, if we do not value Black trans women? How can we value Black lives, if we do not value the Black lives of Black trans women? These questions were vital to unpacking ideologies of gender and race constructed via media representation and in interpersonal relationships with others. To embody a Black trans feminist politic is to forefront trans women in our scholarship and activism. An embodiment of a Black trans feminist politics means leveraging our cisgender privilege to kick down doors, have uncomfortable conversations, and demand a better world for our trans sisters. Black trans actress Dominique Jackson proclaims that:

To show up, you must own your part in contributing to our hardships—those moments you giggled along or participated in prejudice. Showing up means being the voice that teaches and disrupts the prejudiced conversations that help people feel empowered in their hatred for trans folx. (Preston, 2020)

In expanding our narrow definition of Black womanhood, we can begin to value and care for each other in more nuanced ways. Black women must recognize, once again, that our struggle is not unique to us individually, but that being a Black woman comes with a legacy of surviving through the worst of times and celebrating our shared and individual victories. I am a Black woman with cisgender privilege. The notion that my cisgender identity provided me with societal privileges was hard to come to terms with, especially as a Black woman. Having just found my voice while also working on learning the language to talk back against my oppression, I was not ready to grapple with my privilege. Self-awareness usually comes slowly and is often painful, especially when many of our biases are unconscious until someone confronts us with our privilege.

Embodying Sisterhood: Community Politics of Black Cisgender and Transgender Womanhood

analyzes the intersection of Blackness, transgender, cisgender, class, and sexuality to construct knowledge on the social diversity of Black womanhood.

A Black trans feminist politic intertwines Black feminist theory and transgender theory to move beyond a binary understanding of gender. I embody sisterhood through this dissertation via examining discourses of exclusion posited by Black cisgender in media representations. These discourses of exclusion deny the womanhood of Black trans women through deeming their physical appearance, gender performances, genitalia, and sexuality as fundamentally distinct from cisgender womanhood. However, these conversations do not bring us closer to a Black sisterhood that liberates all, nor do they provide an accurate understanding of experiences of Black trans women. Black trans women are women. As a Black cis woman, I do not know the experiences that Black trans women face unless I listen. I do not assume that trans women benefited from male privilege because I know that trans women, such as Janet Mock, are vulnerable to sexual abuse due to their feminine gender presentation (Mock, 2014). I know that some trans women like Shea Diamond, end up homeless as a youth because cis women do not acknowledge they are women and she refuses to be anything less than who they are (Diamond, 2016). Black trans women are my sisters, in the same ways that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is my sister.

To oppose the hierarchy of womanhood, we must remain diligent about dismantling transphobia and our cisgender privilege in Black communities and feminist spaces Adichie's transphobic comments deeply disturb me, and as her sister, it is my responsibility to care enough to teach Adichie and our other Black cis sisters to practice a Black trans feminist politic. As a result, future research derived from this project will focus on sisterhood and coalition building within Queer and Trans people of color organizations such as the *Trans Women of Color Collective*, *Trans People of Color Coalition*, and *Black Trans Media* to think through a next step

of inclusion that moves beyond media representations. This research will combine methods of critical participant observation, in-depth interviews, and audience receptions studies to explore how community is experienced within trans-affirming spaces Black spaces. As a Black cisgender woman, ethnographic immersion in my community is foundational to my intellectual activism in service of social justice. The praxis of critical participant observation in these spaces illuminates the everyday political and material conditions shaping contemporary discourses of Black solidarity in action. I hope to provide comparative case studies that examine lived experiences of sisterhood and sibblingship that contribute to the daily survival of Black trans women via keeping the following questions in mind: What resources are provided in trans-affirming support groups? How does sisterhood develop via shared experiences of oppression and activism? Insights from this future research will shift Black cis women towards “doing kinship” via a Black trans feminist politic, rather than symbolically “being in kinship.” The nomenclature of cis and trans should delineate our intersectional experiences of womanhood, rather than create ideologies of authenticity.

Solidarity among Black cisgender and transgender women is a vital praxis of a Black trans feminist politic. For example, in her acceptance speech for her 2002 Academy Award for Best Actress in the film *Monster's Ball*, Halle Berry clutches her first Oscar in her right hand, and she sobs in astonishment and happiness. Momentarily speechless, Berry takes several deep breaths as she faces the audience and speaks each word carefully and slowly:

This moment is so much bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll. It's for the women that stand beside me, Jada Pinkett, Angela Bassett, Vivica Fox. And it's for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened. (“Halle Berry Academy Awards Acceptance Speech,” 2002)

After speaking these words, Halle Berry sobs again with the realization of the monumental change that has occurred in a predominantly White space. As the first Black woman to win an Academy Award for Best Actress, Berry insulates that her achievement is the catalyst for more Black women to be recognized and acknowledged for their acting roles. Through saying the names of her sisters, Berry pays homage to Dorothy Dandridge, the first African-American woman to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress in 1959 and connects her sisters from the past to her sisters in the present (Lightning, 1997). Black sisterhood transverses temporal understandings of kinship; our sisters who have died remain alive in our present endeavors. The #SayHerName Project, created by Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw, honors both Black cis and trans women killed by police brutality. Both of these moments remind us that, Black sisterhood is fundamentally about protecting and loving Black women against patriarchy, racism, sexism, transphobia, and other systems of oppression. We say our sister's names, in remembrance of their contributions to our current and future successes; we honor their spirits in our sisterhood with other Black cis and trans women.

Intersectionality, as an analytic, highlights the importance of untangling our many identities to determine how gender is experienced differently by cis and trans women. The hypervisibility of trans women in media helped comprise most of my theorizing in this dissertation. The current media moment of Black trans visibility provides a space for Black people to negotiate our understanding of racialized gender performances to encompass gender as a fluid social construction. This dissertation research shows the consequences of excluding trans women from various feminist spaces and communities of kinship. In chapter one, I analyzed music videos from Shea Diamond to demonstrate how anti-trans ideologies and Black respectability politics intertwine to inauthentic Black trans womanhood. The second chapter on Black cis and trans

womanhood in *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) shows how a television series represents Black cis women as incapable of accepting a trans woman into their formations of Black sisterhood. Examining the narrative of Sophia Burset in the television show *Orange Is the New Black* highlighted how dominant narratives of trans individuals often focus on their gender presentation and negating race and other social identities. The disassociation between Black cisgender women and Sophia on *Orange Is the New Black* continues throughout five seasons; Sophia's Black sisters never care for her. This ostracization contributes significantly to the disproportionate rates of violence against Black trans women (Lee, 2018).

Throughout *Embodying Sisterhood*, I have explored how Black cisgender women have excluded Black trans women from community during incarceration, within biological family systems, and within various social movements. Black cisgender women cannot afford to lose any more of our sisters, trans or cis, to state-sanctioned violence or intra-racial violence. Loyalty, as a core value for kinship, is a combination of commitment and respect. Chapter three focused on the television show *Star* (2016) to provide evidence of a Black trans woman who receives support and rejection from Black cis women in the show. Representations in which Black trans women receive support from Black cis women provide evidence that Black cis women are capable of showing up and showing out for Black trans women. When Black trans women receive support from Black cis women, they have more of a chance to flourish, as I highlight in Chapter four. Similar to Janet Mock, I am also my sister's keeper, and my intellectual activism within this dissertation seeks justice for my Black trans sisters. Patricia Hill Collins (2013) asserts that intellectual activism in service of social justice "is not to explain social inequality or social injustice, but to foster social justice, to bring about some sort of change" (p. 42). As my sister's keeper, I refuse to allow transphobia to remain unchecked within Black sisterhood. The tenacity of Black women, such as Marsha P.

Johnson and Shea Diamond, inspires me to be more vocal about my resistance to transphobia. I am more than a fan of Shea Diamond; I ride for her, just like I ride for Keisha. Diamond is a Black woman. Diamond is my sister, and her life is just as important as mine.

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