

THESIS

COLORBLIND LOVE AND BLACK LOVE ON PURPOSE:
BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT, CASTING, AND THE INVISIBILITY/VISIBILITY OF
BLACK WOMANHOOD ON TELEVISION

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

COLORBLIND LOVE AND BLACK LOVE ON PURPOSE: BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT, CASTING, AND THE INVISIBILITY/VISIBILITY OF BLACK WOMANHOOD ON TELEVISION

This thesis interrogates the representations of Black womanhood on television by investigating the production context and text of two contemporary television shows. Both case studies reveal the importance of quality on screen representations and the relationship between production practices and understandings of intersectionality, stereotypes, and cultural specificity. I argue *Being Mary Jane*'s industrial discourse and text intentionally offer a complex image of a Black woman's life while the industrial context surrounding Rachel's journey on *The Bachelorette* undermines Black female visibility through a colorblind discourse that dismisses Rachel's position and experience as a Black woman. These case studies demonstrate how off screen discourses contribute to representation on screen and create narratives that can exclude or include cultural specificity and racial complexity. Such narratives resonate throughout popular and political discourses with the potential to empower marginalized voices or expose the mechanisms that strive to silence them and reify white supremacy.

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CHAPTER ONE: BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND TELEVISION CASTING PRACTICES

On the contemporary journey for love, many daters categorize Black women as “least desirable.”¹ As matchmaker Sofi Papamarko describes, men sit in her office and advise her they are “open to dating women of all backgrounds” but add a “no black women’ addendum” to their preference lists.² Ari Curtis, a Black woman who shares her experiences dating in New York on her blog *Least Desirable*, asserts that these preferences which exclude her from the dating pool make her love life difficult. She writes, “One of the hardest things about dating while black is juggling the desire to be seen as a three-dimensional human (rather than a checkbox on a census document) while having your experience as a black person acknowledged and respected.”³ Dating experts and matchmakers point to stereotypes, exacerbated by media representations, as a reason for the exclusion of Black women as a dating preference.⁴ The journey for love for Black women, in real life and on television, means combatting stereotypes, overcoming invisibility, and being acknowledged as a fully realized individual.

The two case studies for this thesis, ABC’s *The Bachelorette* (2003-) and BET’s *Being Mary Jane* (2013-), televise and include the experiences of two Black women finding love, which historically American discourse and popular culture has excluded. Both feature successful, beautiful thirty-something Black women looking for love in two different genres: reality and scripted television. The reality show *The Bachelorette*, a broadcast veteran that regularly tops ratings charts, cast Rachel Lindsay as its 2017 Bachelorette.⁵ Rachel’s casting caused a media blitz of critics and reporters covering the first Black lead and the “change” for the franchise. *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise targets a largely white audience, with white men running the show on and off screen: Chris Harrison as the host, showrunner Mike Fleiss, and executive

producer Elan Gale.⁶ The franchise's whiteness in the past has been highly visible, making this season's cast of men "the most diverse" with the show identifying nearly 50% of the men as people of color.⁷ In this context, Rachel struggles week after week to sift through the drama and the men to end up with one fiancé and love for eternity.

Mary Jane Paul, the fictional main character played by Gabrielle Union in *Being Mary Jane*, also allows the audience a glimpse into the struggles of a modern Black woman looking for love while balancing her complex family and work life. In the first episode, the series writes on screen "42% of black women have never been married. This is one black woman's story...not meant to represent all black women" immediately situating Mary Jane on the path to find love. However, in contrast to *The Bachelorette*, the world of Mary Jane both on screen and off screen features many Black voices, including showrunner Mara Brock Akil, her husband and director Salim Akil, and a slew of Black women writers. *Being Mary Jane* is on BET (Black Entertainment Television), the cable channel explicitly targeted toward a Black audience demographic.⁸ While the main characters in *The Bachelorette* and *Being Mary Jane* have much in common, the industrial context influences how each show portrays both women to their respective audiences. On one hand, *The Bachelorette's* industrial context of whiteness limits a cultural specific representation of a Black woman. On the other hand, *Being Mary Jane's* context intentionally creates an empowered and nuanced view of Black womanhood.

In both shows, Rachel and Mary Jane seek to define themselves in a world constantly trying to define their identities for them. Rachel repeatedly states on camera and in interviews that she is being "selfish" in this journey and uses selfishness to explain her romances and breakups. For Mary Jane, a television news personality, various members of the "public" continually challenge her on-air arguments, forcing her to defend her choices. Additionally,

Mary Jane's family challenges her relationship status at every turn, causing her to articulate her own goals and visions for her life to them. The struggle for self-empowerment and self-definition for both characters correlates to themes in Black Feminist Thought.

This project examines the intersection of ideas based in Black Feminist Thought with industrial casting practices and television portrayals of Black women. In particular, I highlight how contemporary colorblind production practices relate to the American lineage of making the experiences and needs of Black women invisible in popular culture. Through analyzing a broadcast prime time reality television show positioned towards a primarily white audience and a scripted television show on cable targeted towards a Black audience, I emphasize the relationship between each televisual text and its industrial discourse. This relationship for *The Bachelorette* presents tensions between text and industrial discourse, while *Being Mary Jane's* text and discourse seeks to highlight the experience of Black women from off screen to on screen. For this thesis, I ask the following research questions: What is the relationship between production practices and on screen representation of Black women? How does industrial discourse negate or promote the importance of acknowledging the intersectionality of Black women? How do Black women critics react and relate to the texts?

While the industrial discourses surrounding *The Bachelorette* highlight a colorblind ideology that excludes cultural specificity through casting choices, *Being Mary Jane's* industrial context is the opposite: the executive producers and writers explain that the goal of their show is to showcase the cultural specificity and experience of a Black woman through their own perspectives as Black women. I argue *Being Mary Jane's* industrial discourse and text intentionally offer a complex image of a Black woman's life while the industrial context surrounding Rachel's journey on *The Bachelorette* undermines Black female visibility through a

colorblind discourse that dismisses Rachel's position and experience as a Black woman. These case studies demonstrate how off screen discourses contribute to representation on screen and create narratives that can exclude or include cultural specificity and racial complexity. Such narratives resonate throughout popular and political discourses with the potential to empower marginalized voices or expose the mechanisms that strive to silence them and reify white supremacy.

In this introduction, I review the primary features of Black Feminist Thought that will be important to these case studies and the ways these themes are present in contemporary media studies. Then, I describe the production practices of casting people of color, the concept of colorblind casting, and how diversity impacts the process of creating a television show. I conclude with an overview of my critical method and thesis chapters.

Black Feminist Thought: Intersections & Representations

Television shows featuring Black women often obscure or highlight the specific experiences Black women face during their everyday lives. The ideas embedded in Black Feminist Thought shed light on these unique experiences of U.S. Black women. The conception of "Black Feminist Thought" draws from a wide variety of literature from Black women who theorize and experience "intersecting oppressions" in the United States, notably catalogued and synthesized by Patricia Hill Collins.⁹ As a white woman, it is essential that I turn to and include the voices of Black women who can speak to their own experiences as a collective group. Black Feminist Thought highlights the voices of Black women both because only Black women have the unique perspective to speak to their experiences and because their status as Black women positions them to critique hegemonic society as "outsiders within."¹⁰ As Collins notes, "U.S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and

female.”¹¹ I purposefully use literature written by Black women to form a theoretical framework and to highlight the important work they have contributed to Black feminist intellectualism. White scholars, like myself, must recognize and acknowledge the experiences and voices of Black women who challenge and complicate the dominant representations of Black women on television. Since I do not have the position to fully understand the experience of a Black woman, it becomes more important for me to include their voices, interpretations, and experiences of their own representations in order to explore how media inscribes a narrative of race, and how scholars can shed light on how this teaches audiences to view race in their everyday lives. My interest and research into Black feminisms allows me to recognize the ways whiteness places Black women as an “Other” within multiple discourses and to share the insights these Black women have on American culture. Audre Lorde reminds scholars to recognize difference and to examine differences in our own lives.¹² In a popularly quoted phrase, she writes, “I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.”¹³ I actively investigate difference and seek the words of Black Feminist Thought to connect them to the history of Black women representation and to the production practices that continue to perpetuate the same themes that Black Feminist Thought exposes.

The key tenet of Black Feminist Thought rests in the recognition of the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality for individual Black women. These intersections must be considered in the context of historical treatments and representations of Black women. Throughout the history of the United States, Black women advocated for the visibility of their intersecting identities and the unique oppressions that come with both the sexism and racism they

face systematically and in their everyday lives. Black women intellectuals such as bell hooks trace many historical oppressions of Black women from slavery, noting how the Black female slave experience was unique when compared to Black male slaves. While “sexist historians,” as hooks describes, focus on the brutality Black male slaves faced as the “real victims of slavery,” hooks highlights that slave owners brutalized enslaved Black females through rape and the expectations that they perform the duties of both male slaves and female slaves on the field and in the house.¹⁴ Sojourner Truth speaks to this experience in her “A’n’t I a Woman” speech, where she declares, “I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And a’n’t I a woman?”¹⁵ These experiences of the Black female slaves as sexualized and forced to fulfill the male and female roles relate to the ways Black women face sexism and racism in tandem. This historical lens reflects the depth of Black women intellectualism overtime and builds connections between these intersecting identities.

The “intersectionality,” a term attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw, of Black women also means understanding how individual Black women have a collective experience.¹⁶ Collins argues that while every Black woman has a unique set of intersectional oppressions depending on their socio-economic or sexual identity, above all the systematic domination of Black women unites them as a group.¹⁷ She writes, “It may be more accurate to say that Black women’s collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges.”¹⁸ Thus, Black women are individuals within a wider collective group that face intersecting challenges that straddle race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. The marginalization of Black women, particularly in academic settings, does not prevent Black women from articulating their perspectives in academic discourse and operating as “outsiders-

within.”¹⁹ Lorde points to difference and this “outsider” status as a place of strength for Black women in order to empower themselves. She writes, “The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.”²⁰ Black women possess “difference as a crucial strength” to define, empower, and promote change.

While the ideas within Black Feminist Thought are dynamic and continue to evolve, for this particular project, I focus on the tensions between invisibility/visibility and Black female sexuality as described by Black women intellectuals who form the core of Black Feminist Thought as we know it today.²¹ These themes connect to the ways television shows portray Black women and the underlying tensions and stereotypes of Black women. Importantly, invisibility/visibility as themes connect to the ways the two case studies from this project compare and contrast to each other. While both shows have a visible Black female star, *Being Mary Jane*’s creators and writers make clear their goal is to explicitly highlight the experience of a Black woman. In contrast, while *The Bachelorette* marks Rachel visibly as a Black woman, the casting and production discourse dismisses her race and labels her as an “every woman” just looking for love, making her specific experience as a Black woman virtually invisible.

Black women as both invisible and visible relates to the ways society silences Black women in the context of their intersectionality and through stereotypical “controlling images” of Black women. Black women are often in “limbo” and straddle between their commitments to anti-racist and feminist efforts.²² These two efforts often limit their agendas by negating the “validity of the other,” forcing many Black women to choose a cause or have the cause exclude them entirely.²³ Lorde describes the tensions of being in “limbo” and seeking visibility: “Even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which

also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness.”²⁴ Moreover, within everyday discourse, hooks writes, “When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women.”²⁵ Within women’s movements, Black women bring their racial experience with them, which marks them as “different.” Similarly, in the anti-racist movement, Black women bring their experiences as women to differentiate them. This differentiation and specificity of their intersectionality causes them to move often invisibly in both contexts.

While Black women experience silence and invisibility within efforts to fight against their intersecting oppressions, “controlling images” silence their voices but make their bodies visible. Since the slave era, controlling images of Black women have created an ideology of Black women’s oppression, in particular the sexualization of Black women.²⁶ hooks historicizes the image of the sexualized Black woman through the experience of slavery. The sexual assault and rape of enslaved Black women contributes to a culture that dehumanizes and devalues the sexuality of Black women.²⁷ Furthermore, Black women lack power in social institutions which “suppress Black women’s collective voice” and construct Black women as sexual and unseen, preventing them from expressing their own views about their sexuality.²⁸

Media representations of Black women reflect stereotypes as the controlling images that limit Black women’s sexuality and reduce them to sexual tropes. hooks writes, “One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society—the predominant image is that of the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute.”²⁹ hooks’s description of the Black woman as “fallen” reflects one of many prevailing stereotypes of Black women seen in media and on television in particular: the Jezebel. Numerous stereotypes on and off screen contribute to long lasting images

of Black women, but the image of the Jezebel and the Sapphire have particular salience to this project because of their connection to sexualization and independence.³⁰ These stereotypes also highlight the ways Black women are hypervisible in the media through damaging controlling images. The Jezebel is typically hyper-sexualized, promiscuous, young, and focused on material goods, attention, and love.³¹ Moreover, the Jezebel stereotype focuses on her immoral and freakish nature which helps justify the sexual atrocities committed against Black women historically.³² As an historical stereotype, the image prevails today through the “video vixen” in hip-hop and rap music videos as a newer and updated version of the Jezebel.³³ Likewise, the Sapphire, the sharp-tongued, independent, matriarch holds fast today in the image of a “sistah with an attitude” or, more commonly, the “angry Black woman.”³⁴ The Sapphire historically resulted from the expectation that Black female slaves perform the same tasks as men, meaning they turned into “masculinized workhorses” that drove men away with their nagging attitude and independent streak.³⁵ While some see the Sapphire as a form of empowerment, this stereotype often others Black women and focuses attention on blaming Black women for dominating spaces and demasculinizing Black men.³⁶ The hypervisibility of both the Jezebel and the Sapphire focuses on perceived deviance in Black women’s actions and bodies. Black women’s bodies become spectacles and presented as abnormal, deviant, and hypersexual.³⁷ The notion of hypervisibility, which relegates images of Black women to deviance and commodification, limits space for Black women themselves to make their voices heard and assert their own identities.³⁸

Many Black women’s reactions and responses to the Jezebel stereotype over time led to the enactment of the “politics of respectability.” Black women leaders, wanting to engage in public life, called for a respectable status that rejects hypersexuality and adheres to “a rigidly controlled public performance of themselves.”³⁹ As Evelyn Higginbotham explains, Black

women beginning in the nineteenth century “felt certain that ‘respectable’ behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, the politics of respectability becomes a discursive way to police Black women’s bodies and prevent conversations about Black women’s pleasure and sex.⁴¹ Importantly, by prohibiting discussions of sex and sexuality, discourse surrounding Black women lacks flexibility and the ability to respond to these issues in contemporary moments.⁴² For example, Collins reflects on the senate confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill’s testimony regarding Thomas’s sexual harassment of Hill while they both worked at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The desire to repress the myth of hypersexuality meant “no place appeared to exist for Anita Hill’s story, because long-standing silences on Black women’s sexuality had failed to provide one.”⁴³ Because of the perpetuation of the myth of hypersexuality through the Jezebel image, and the effort to contain it through the politics of respectability, Black women’s own experiences with sex and sexuality became nearly invisible.

In both *The Bachelorette* and *Being Mary Jane*, Rachel and Mary Jane deal with sexuality and the politics of respectability in different ways. The colorblind discourse surrounding Rachel maintains her respectability and controls her performance as a colorblind Bachelorette, but embraces Rachel openly expressing her desire for each man and celebrates her kissing nearly every man on the show as a sign that the journey for love is “working.” The character of Mary Jane struggles to perform respectability on her talk show as she feels pressure from the network executives to be less Black. In private, the show includes multiple scenes of Mary Jane’s healthy sex life with multiple different partners. Both portrayals of Rachel and Mary Jane across genres implicitly or explicitly call attention to the tension between hypersexuality, the politics of respectability, and the reality of Black women who have sexual desires.

Both television shows in this case study complicate the topics of hypersexuality and politics of respectability, and more broadly the invisibility/visibility of Black women. While many analyses of Black women representation in television focus on negative controlling images that limit Black women in terms of stereotypes and ability to foster their own agency, I want to refocus attention towards televisual portrayals that offer complex notions of Black women, rather than just seeing Black women representation as “positive” or “negative.”⁴⁴ In fact, many scholars pivot their scholarship away from the positive/negative binary in favor of complex understandings of Black female television representation.⁴⁵ This project will grant Black women the same complex readings that scholars and critics grant white, especially male, characters. The performativity of the “ratchet” Black woman on reality television provides an example into complex notions of Black female representation that dismiss the “bad” versus “good” representational binary. Both Kristen Warner and Theri Pickens argue in separate articles that the ratchet performance of Black women in various reality shows rejects the politics of respectability of the dominant culture and is a form of individuality.⁴⁶ Warner points out that this becomes a “liberatory act for black female audiences” to not label the performances as “bad” or “taboo,” and thus form their own “affective community” to enjoy reality television and experience pleasure from watching.⁴⁷ Pickens asserts that “the ratchet thrusts us out of looking to singular cultural representations as thermometers for the temperature of race relations.”⁴⁸ As Pickens notes here, one kind of representation does not tell us much, just as acknowledging the historical negative controlling images does not mean that current representations of Black women are wholly negative.

Another example of complexity in television representations is James Scott’s idea of “hidden transcripts.” Scott defines hidden transcripts as the “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’

beyond direct observation of powerholders...produced for a different audience.”⁴⁹ These hidden transcripts are a way for oppressed groups to resist and assert power through everyday communications and in media.⁵⁰ Christine Acham notes that in television hidden transcripts became a way for Black people to use mainstream media to converse as a community. She writes, “The black audience garners a different meaning from the television text because of its members’ understanding of the conversations and cultural forms that are created within the black community.”⁵¹ In a similar way, Racquel Gates argues that comedy “historically functioned as a tool for African Americans to criticize mainstream institutions and practices while operating *within* mainstream institutions and practices, a way of pointing out issues and problems while avoiding detection.”⁵² While Gates does not use the term “hidden transcripts,” her analysis of Eddie Murphy and his “skillful integration of African American humor and mainstream appeal” which “allowed him to critique the media’s treatment of African Americans even as he simultaneously rose to media stardom” operates like a hidden transcript.⁵³ Gates’s analysis reveals that Murphy was able to appeal to a mainstream audience while speaking in a coded manner to the Black community. Hidden transcripts are a way for Black community members to speak to each other within the mainstream. The world of *The Bachelorette* as a mainstream media venue steeped in whiteness means that when Rachel does hint at racial topics, it happens in coded language. Occasionally Rachel speaks subversively in a “hidden transcripts” manner to Black community members through her on screen interviews, referencing contexts “offstage” from the main *Bachelorette* drama.

Production Practices: Casting & Writing

Portrayals of Black women provide one way to examine the complexity of televisual representations and how Black women are both visible/invisible in television discourse.

Examining production practices and industrial discourse offers additional insight into the way Black women arrive on screen in the first place. Jon Kraszewski argues that scholars must consider “larger institutional operatives” of a television network because social trends influence institutional “struggles and strategies” to represent people of color.⁵⁴ In a similar way, the production practices and behind-the-scene contexts of a television show influence representations and the visibility of people of color. The roles of Black women behind-the-scenes in this project, especially for *Being Mary Jane*, are important factors that influence how each show sheds light onto the love lives of each Black woman. Furthermore, the strategies used to cast and write these shows provides insight into the visibility of Black women’s specific cultural experiences rather than just the quantity of Black women on screen, devoid of cultural specificity.

The televisual representation of Black people incorporates the visibility/invisibility paradigm that Black Feminist Thought points out. Herman Gray analyzes seasons of television in the 1990s and points to places where television relegated Black people to certain networks (Fox, UPN, WB) and certain genres (situational comedy). This was television’s limited commitment to have Black people culturally represented.⁵⁵ Thus, Black people become more visible on television, while at the same time their culture, concerns, and ideas were invisible in the overall television landscape that catered to whiteness and cared about white viewers.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Gray argues that television plays a crucial role in shaping a national identity in the United States based on its exclusion of people of color on screen.⁵⁷ Demands for racial representation on screen disrupted the homogenous white national identity historically portrayed on most television screens. To accommodate both a universal national identity and broader racial representation, networks turned to the “logic of assimilation” and the “social project of color

blindness.” This contributed to the visibility of people of color, yet the invisibility of their wider cultural contexts.⁵⁸

Colorblind rhetoric connects to production practices most directly through modern casting practices. Casting for television, at its heart, is about finding the “right” person for the role. Warner explains that television casting connects to the ways we judge others visually in our everyday experiences.⁵⁹ She writes, “The notion of desiring someone to be identifiable, relatable, and familiar— regardless of background, experience, or racial identity— is crucial to casting a successful television program.”⁶⁰ Casting directors and their staff look for people that appear “credible” to the audience in the roles that they are cast to fulfill.⁶¹ Casting practices for both reality and scripted television often rely on clichés and stereotypes, which are particularly problematic for people of color.⁶² When casting staff look for (stereo)“types” across a broad range of people, people of color are tokenized and often one person represents their entire culture in order to check the “diversity” box.⁶³ This also leads to the proliferation of the same stereotypes across our screens and contributes to maintaining, for example, the image of the Jezebel and the Sapphire.

When casting directors are not looking for specific people based on their race or ethnicity for a certain role, they practice “blindcasting.” The television industry views blindcasting, the industry term for colorblind casting, as finding the best person for the role, regardless of their race or ethnicity, and ultimately, the fairest way to cast.⁶⁴ To Kraszewski’s point, as the television industry notices the “social trend” of diversity, industry professionals rely on blindcasting. Warner writes that the logic of colorblind casting often operates invisibly, but ideally produces visible results: “Put simply, like the supposedly invisible hand guiding the economic structure in a free market, blindcasting serves as an invisible guide to selecting the best

actors who will naturally reflect the diversity of the United States in terms of racial difference.”⁶⁵ Through colorblind casting, race becomes a visual marker of difference and not a cultural one, focusing on quantity over quality in terms of racial representation.⁶⁶ While Warner focuses on scripted television programs for her work, the strategy of blindcasting crosses over into reality television. The casting choice for Rachel, according to the Chris Harrison and casting director Lacey Pemberton, was about finding “the best lead” who just “happens to be African-American.”⁶⁷ Throughout interviews and promotional materials, the show and its executives framed Rachel’s “historic” season through numbers (the most diverse cast) and referenced Rachel’s race briefly before following the same familiar beats of every season. *The Bachelorette* cast for visual quantity and edited the show and their promotional material in a way that dismissed the cultural specificity of having a Black female lead in their franchise.

Furthermore, diversity watch groups that report on diversity on the screen often focus on quantity as well, reporting percentages and numbers and not delving into the types of roles people of color have. For example, the USC Annenberg School of Communication 2016 Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment (CARD) focuses on percentages, as does the 2017 Hollywood Diversity Report from the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA.⁶⁸ Also of note, reports often separate the underrepresentation of women and people of color into different statistics, so figures on Black women specifically are nearly non-existent.⁶⁹ For this project, rather than focus on statistical quantifications of representation, I want to focus attention on the “quality” aspect of performances and their relationship to decisions made off screen, such as colorblind casting.

A prominent example of the circulation of colorblind casting in the twenty-first century is showrunner Shonda Rhimes, creator of *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-) and *Scandal* (2012-). Warner

turns to her as an example because Rhimes casts people of color, but explains the universality of their roles as devoid of color consideration. Rhimes, a Black woman, often displaces her own race and the race of those on her show to present a “post-racial” society. Warner explains, “in the same manner that Rhimes disavows any racially specific politics, her cast of characters practices a similar strategy that results in difference that is only skin-deep.”⁷⁰ However, Warner points out that not writing race into a script often leads to characters stepping into unintentional stereotypes and results in the “signal of diversity” without the context of cultural difference.⁷¹ For example, in *Grey’s Anatomy* the character of Miranda Bailey, played by Chandra Wilson, was initially cast as a tall blonde woman. Bailey received a “mammy makeover” and became the “caretaker of her (mostly) white residents,” falling into an historic racial stereotype.⁷²

Colorblind casting strips away cultural identity and difference, but continues to be a “useful tool” for people of color to gain visibility on screen and for producers and networks to avoid the “burden of positive and negative stereotypes.”⁷³ The main concern for actors of color is employment, and colorblind casting today is a useful vehicle for making a living.⁷⁴ Yet, Warner reminds us that colorblind casting ultimately secures white dominance in television: “Limiting the viewpoints to acceptable, dominant white experiences obscures the potential for genuine multiculturalism. To be clear: the notion of colorblind casting is a myth perpetuated to uphold and maintain white supremacy.”⁷⁵ *The Bachelorette*’s casting choice for Rachel as “the right woman” despite her Blackness and its large dismissal of cultural specificity helped to maintain the show’s whiteness for its largely white audience. Thus, her journey and time in the spotlight as a Black woman, and specific experiences she had, remained nearly invisible on screen.

Representation of people of color and the ways Black women are invisible extend to behind-the-scene production spaces, demonstrating that representation is not simply about what

is on screen. The CARD report from the Annenberg School found that having a female director significantly impacted the number of females on screen, and concluded that women behind the camera could increase gender representation on screen.⁷⁶ They had similar findings when looking at underrepresented directors and underrepresented characters.⁷⁷ These statistics point to the importance of having diverse voices in above-the-line production spaces. For scripted television, writers work together to create a script and map out the trajectory of the show. For example, Herman Gray spoke with executives from *A Different World* (1987-1993), a spin-off from *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), about how their choice to have diverse writers and directors shaped the stories they told on screen. The writers and directors, many with specific experiences at historically Black colleges like the setting for *A Different World*, brought in their own specific experiences to make “explicit turns towards blackness” for a show that was “firmly rooted in African American social experiences and cultural sensibilities.”⁷⁸ The show was an example of the importance of a diverse crew working to imbue “subtle nuances” of their experience to bring the show to life.⁷⁹ *A Different World*’s behind-the-scenes environment from the producers to the writers created a space to highlight the complexities of Blackness on the mainstream screen. In this project, *Being Mary Jane*’s crew seeks to highlight the complexities of being a Black woman, but instead on a niche cable environment rather than a mainstream broadcast network. BET’s production environment for this project adds an additional layer of context and emphasizes the evolution of television since the days of *A Different World*.

The writers’ room, specifically, is a space where “ideas are negotiated, consensus is formed, and issues of gender, race, and class identities play out and complicate the on-screen narratives that eventually air on network and cable television.”⁸⁰ Felicia Henderson, a Black woman television writer and scholar, describes the culture of “trash talk” that includes and

excludes, as well as “Others” underrepresented groups, ultimately creating a homogenized environment that lacks diverse opinions.⁸¹ Henderson’s exposure of the culture of the writers’ room remains unique, and she calls for analyzing how shows are written in order to better understand “how the process of creating such images can lead to exclusion of gender, race, class, and cultural difference in favor of a hegemonic, uni-cultural perspective.”⁸² Like Warner’s analysis of portrayals of people of color through blindcasting, Henderson notes that a “uni-cultural” atmosphere limits writers of color to visual difference, rather than cultural differences.⁸³ While the scope of this project does not include going into writers’ room, I will examine the way editors and writers discuss their shows in interviews with trade publications and newspapers to understand the “process” and its inclusion and exclusion practices.

Critical Method

For this thesis, I follow a cultural studies approach and analyze the industry, text, and a specific critical audience for my analysis. Specifically, I use Julie D’Acci’s circuit model approach, which interconnects the cultural artifact, socio historical context, production, and reception as multiple sites of study for cultural studies scholars.⁸⁴ This project lies at the intersection of production and cultural artifact, with some socio-historical context and specific sites of reception embedded within the project, notably the context of Black Feminist Thought and Black women television and cultural critics. Each chapter covers the history of each channel, ABC and BET. I use discursive analysis to unpack the industrial context surrounding *The Bachelorette* and *Being Mary Jane*, textual analysis of episodes, and audience analysis of Black women bloggers, critics, and writers responding to the shows. The discourses I analyze include interviews with the showrunners, executive producers, casting directors, and cast members of each show found in trade publications, newspapers, and news shows. As John Thornton Caldwell

notes, practitioner interviews are often “coded,” and thus they must be considered alongside the “contexts in which embedded industrial sense-making and trade theorizing occurs,” including “deep texts.”⁸⁵ The deep texts that I use for this project include semi-embedded deep texts that are professional exchanges (trade publications, upfronts, press kits) as well as publically disclosed deep texts that are explicitly for public viewing (make of documentaries, “extras,” fan conventions).⁸⁶

For textual analysis, I analyze season 13 of *The Bachelorette* (2017) and seasons 1-3 of *Being Mary Jane* (2013-2015). I exclude season four of *Being Mary Jane* from textual analysis because the original showrunners leave the show after season three. Since Black Feminist Thought is the foundation for this project, I focus my analysis on the main characters, Rachel and Mary Jane, and their interactions with other characters throughout the texts. The textual analysis demonstrates the differences in the portrayals of Rachel and Mary Jane within the context of their industrial backgrounds.

For audience analysis, I analyze Black women critics and reviewers responding to the two shows online through recaps, reviews, and reflections. I focus on Black women writers who explicitly mention their role as Black women in their writing throughout various publications, including Kendra James in *Elle*, Roxane Gay in *Marie Claire*, Zeba Blay in *Huffington Post*, Doreen St. Félix in *The New Yorker*, and Jouelzy at *The Root*. In their various analysis and reviews of *The Bachelorette* or *Being Mary Jane* these women often relate their own experiences as Black women to what they see on screen. I am looking at Black women critics as a specific type of viewer because of the importance of Black women speaking for themselves within Black Feminist Thought. Much like “Black Twitter” functions as a specific black cultural space within the mainstream platform Twitter, these women have carved out spaces in mainstream and niche

spheres to discuss their experiences as they relate to what they see on screen.⁸⁷ In addition, their television criticism online creates spaces for audiences to react in an environment that Myles McNutt describes as an “ongoing, concurrent dialogue.”⁸⁸ I want to integrate these women’s perspectives to the analysis to highlight their voices and their function as critics who are not only audience members, but are also producers that create criticism that continues the conversations about each show beyond the text itself.

Overview of Chapters

This thesis project connects ideas of Black Feminist Thought and understandings of the ways production practices and industrial contexts shape television racial representation through their themes of invisibility and visibility. In particular, I contribute to television studies’ understandings of colorblind casting and its influence on racial representation and intersectional identities on screen. Comparing *The Bachelorette*, a show that follows colorblind ideology, and *Being Mary Jane*, a show set out intentionally to delve into the life of a Black woman, allows me to tease out these complexities. The visibility of Blackness and its cultural experience off screen for *Being Mary Jane* allows the text to showcase the specific struggles of a Black woman. In contrast, *The Bachelorette*’s discourse emphasizes the ways Rachel is a “normal” woman, despite her racial background. This ultimately places her identity as a Black woman as insignificant to her journey for love.

Chapter Two and Three respectively dive into my two case studies: *The Bachelorette* Season 13, airing in the spring/summer of 2017, and *Being Mary Jane* Seasons 1-3, which aired between 2013-2015. I investigate the industrial context surrounding both shows, specifically highlighting the ways the network, showrunners, and stars discuss the show’s purpose through existing interviews with news sources and official press releases. Then, I review the various

ways each show represents Black womanhood and how these industrial discourses shape the text and the show's message. Within each analyses, I analyze Black women critics who write recaps, reviews, and respond to each show to insert their voices and unpack a specific audience perspective in line with Black Feminist Thought's tenet to highlight Black women's voices. Chapter Four concludes by comparing and contrasting both case studies and offering further areas for research, with particular attention to the intersections of Black Feminist Thought and production practices.

CHAPTER TWO: ABC'S COLORBLIND *BACHELORETTE*

After the season finale of the popular reality show *Dancing with the Stars*, Rachel Lindsay's season of *The Bachelorette* premiered on May 22, 2017 with a photoshoot. The first shot is a close up of a makeup artist touching up Rachel's red lipstick, piano music swelling, and then a photographer clicking the shutter as Rachel smiles up at the camera while holding a bouquet of a dozen red roses. Shining in a swirling red evening gown now familiar because she wore it in every *Bachelorette* commercial, she tosses rose petals in the air, then looks over a shoulder coyishly as a producer looks on exclaiming, "Oooo I love that!" Rachel looks at the photos, declaring "You guys are miracle workers!" Then, a quick fade into an overhead shot of the enormous "Bachelor" Mansion, zooming into a medium shot of Chris Harrison stepping out, wearing his trademark Hugo Boss suit, and announcing this will be a new exciting season. "Never have we seen anything like the outpouring of love and support for our new Bachelorette!" Harrison proclaims.⁸⁹

Rachel's announcement as the next Bachelorette diversified the pool of *Bachelor/Bachelorette* eponymous stars in more ways than one; not only is Rachel the first Black lead of the series, but she is also the oldest. As a 31-year-old attorney, Rachel exudes confidence and energy as she dances through the street, takes care of her dog Copper, and litigates in the courtroom. Rachel's portrayal as a mature career woman looking for the one missing piece in her life, love, makes her an easy Bachelorette to root for, but her Blackness causes the franchise to discuss race explicitly in ways the *Bachelor/Bachelorette* has historically ignored over its 15 year run as a successful reality show on ABC. In this chapter, I argue that ABC producers, television hosts, creators, executives and Rachel herself discursively construct her role as the Bachelorette as a colorblind casting choice, therefore privileging and maintaining their white

hegemonic formula which caters to its white audience. While ABC promises the thirteenth season of *The Bachelorette* will discuss race, racial discussions and antagonisms center on the Black male contestants. The show distances Rachel from the racial drama, allowing her to step in during a few moments and dispel any notion that race played a role in picking her final winner. I assert that by positioning Rachel above the fray and as a post-racial Bachelorette just like any other previously (white) Bachelorette, ABC dismisses any tensions Rachel, as a Black woman, may have felt as the star of one of ABC's most watched series. With Rachel as a colorblind Bachelorette, *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise reinforces its traditional formula that caters to its white audience and treats whiteness as a norm.

First, I review the franchise's history with representation, the way *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* executives, showrunners, and directors discuss diversity as part of their casting process, and their core audience. Then, I analyze the ways ABC and Rachel build the notion of a colorblind Bachelorette through interviews and within the show itself. Finally, I discuss how the show racializes the Black male cast members, primarily framing villainy through a white Southern contestant. Rachel's distance from this narrative further silences Rachel's position as a Black woman and continues to craft the image that she is not affected by any racial tension.

ABC's *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* Franchise and Representation

ABC's *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise has a dubious past with representing people of color because of its reputation for "unbearable whiteness" throughout its casting strategy, production teams, and targeted audience.⁹⁰ Owned by major media conglomerate the Walt Disney Company, ABC is one of the four major broadcast networks on the air which targets mass audiences and profits through advertising revenue, particularly during prime time when *The*

Bachelorette airs.⁹¹ As a legacy “network era” channel that dominated the television screens of the masses, ABC has a position of historical power and access to synergistic opportunities through its status as a subsidiary of Disney. Disney as a corporate brand represents sanitized happiness and escapism, often embodying colorblind ideology to continue to appeal to a widening range of audiences.⁹² Disney historically constructs its animated film characters, who represent the brand across Disney’s various entities, for an imagined white audience. However, as Disney attempts to expand its audience without alienating its core white audience, they rely on colorblind discourse to incorporate diversity without disrupting their successful formula.⁹³ Furthermore, Janet Wasko posits that the Disney corporation’s association with “All-American traits such as conservatism, homophobia, Manifest Destiny, ethnocentricity, cultural insensitivity, superficiality, lack of culture, and so on” means that they perpetuate these traits in “appealing, seductive, and enjoyable ways.”⁹⁴ Currently, that appeal has been an incorporation of colorblind ideology into their varied media offerings. For example, in their 2009 movie *The Princess and the Frog*, which featured Disney’s first animated Black princess, the narrative continually emphasized Tiana’s qualities that transcended her Blackness, such as her work ethic, and represented Tiana in the form of a frog for the majority of the movie.⁹⁵

Within the sanitized white world of Disney, ABC has made efforts to diversify its televisual offerings through a host of various comedies and dramas. Yet, despite ABC’s recent track record of casting diverse characters in their scripted television shows, including comedies *black-ish* (2014-), *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-), *The Mayor* (2017) dramas *Quantico* (2015-) and Shonda Rhimes backed *Scandal* (2012-) and *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014-), the *Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise lacks a record of casting people of color and representing them as viable love interests for their stars. In terms of Black contestants, television critic Ali

Barthwell notes that the franchise is “like a relic from a less diverse era” where less than 5 percent of the contestants are Black and nearly 60 percent leave the show within the first two episodes.⁹⁶ Notably, Nick Viall’s season of *The Bachelor* featured the most diverse cast before Rachel’s season, with eight women of color, including Rachel, who became the first Black contestant to receive the “first impression rose” from the lead the first night.⁹⁷ The lack of diversity has not prevented the franchise from cementing a formula that, despite descending ratings for broadcast shows overall in the past few years, consistently captures the desirable 18-49 demographic.⁹⁸

The Bachelor premiered in 2002 as one of the first romance reality television shows.⁹⁹ In both *The Bachelor* and its spin-off *The Bachelorette*, over the course of eight weeks, the show presents 25-30 contestants to the star, who eliminates contestants and gives out roses to those who remain. Each week, the Bachelor or Bachelorette goes on numerous dates either one-on-one with contestants or on group dates where the contestants participate in activities that range from ridiculous (an obstacle course that tests if the men are “husband material” by making them do dishes and change a diaper) to objectifying (mud wrestling with screaming women asking them to take their shirts off and show some skin). Typically, the show changes locations nearly every week, traveling around the United States then abroad to various tourist destinations. After several weeks, the star whittles down their contestant pool to four, each of whom takes the Bachelor or Bachelorette home to meet their friends and family. When there are three contestants remaining, the star offers to take each one individually to the “Fantasy Suite” where they can be together privately, without cameras present, for one night. Finally, the Bachelor or Bachelorette typically becomes engaged to their chosen contestant from the two remaining cast members. This formula has stuck around for 15 years, producing a series with consistently high ratings and advertising

revenue. In fact, while other broadcast series struggled in ratings over the past few years, industry trade press characterizes *The Bachelor* as one of ABC's "most reliable weapons" in their "programming arsenal" and "indestructible."¹⁰⁰ Despite *The Bachelorette* not pulling in the same audience numbers as its counterpart, it still typically leads prime time broadcasting the night it airs and often comes close to *The Bachelor* ratings.¹⁰¹

While *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* has garnered a "cult" following after a combined 34 seasons, many point out that the show privileges whiteness and obscures or erases people of color. Commentators for many years have argued that *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise is "embarrassingly white."¹⁰² Before Rachel, only one lead for *The Bachelor* was portrayed as nonwhite, Juan Pablo Galavis, a Venezuelan-American.¹⁰³ *The Bachelorette* featured JoJo Fletcher, who is half-Persian, as its lead in season 12, yet downplayed her mixed race heritage by positioning her as a "Southern sweetheart" from Texas and never mentioned her mother's heritage on the show itself. Significantly, JoJo was chosen as the next Bachelorette over frontrunner Caila Quinn, a half Filipino woman who openly discussed her mixed race heritage and was seen as the next installment of much needed diversity for the franchise as the new "diverse Bachelorette."¹⁰⁴ JoJo's casting, and dominant portrayal as a white Southern woman, further perpetuates the whiteness of the show's image of romance and its avoidance of complex racial casting. Even industry insiders have questioned the show's willingness to cast for diversity. For example, *The Shield* (2002-2008) producer Shawn Ryan accused the franchise of "straight up racism" and tweeted "They just don't think America will watch black [sic] bachelor or root for mixed-race marriage."¹⁰⁵ The franchise cannot hide the lack of diversity both in its previous casting choices and from other industry professionals.

The lack of casting a diverse lead led to a 2012 discrimination lawsuit, where two Black men sued ABC and *The Bachelor* production company Warner Horizon for denying minorities equal casting chances for being the star of the series. Christopher Johnson and Nathaniel Claybrooks claimed that their interviews as potential Bachelors were cut short and their materials were not passed along, while white candidates had significantly longer interviews and had their audition materials cycled through the audition process.¹⁰⁶ However, a Tennessee federal district court judge, while “sympathetic” to the case for equal representation, ruled in favor of ABC and its argument that the First Amendment protects casting choices.¹⁰⁷ ABC argued that casting decisions shape television content and that a ruling in favor of Johnson and Claybrooks could threaten niche programming targeting a specific demographic.¹⁰⁸ While they never claimed to be “niche,” this line of argument reveals ABC thinks of casting as looking for a specific demographic, which for the franchise appears to be young, beautiful, and white.

The lack of diverse casting on the show, particularly in its star position, often boils down to the producers’ reluctance to switch their formula, which has proven to be successful for 15 years. When *Bachelor/Bachelorette* producers do discuss casting representation, they displace blame from themselves to people of color or the audience. Only a few years ago, *Bachelor* creator Mike Fleiss discussed his take on diversity and representation on his series, saying in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*:

Will we ever see a bachelor or a bachelorette who is not white? I think Ashley [*The Bachelorette* season 7] is 1/16th Cherokee Indian, but I cannot confirm. But that is my suspicion! We really tried, but sometimes we feel guilty of tokenism. Oh, we have to wedge African-American chicks in there! We always want to cast for ethnic diversity, it’s just that for whatever reason, they don’t come forward. I wish they would.¹⁰⁹

Fleiss’s comments, stating they “tried,” had a lead who is “1/16th Cherokee Indian,” and that diverse contestants just “don’t come forward,” places the blame for the franchise’s lack of

diversity on people of color and on individuals, rather than on their casting team. Rather than recognize the broader problems of racial inequality within the structure of *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, the franchise localizes the reason for a majority white cast on individual people of color who do not attempt to assimilate into their reality television world. And, while ABC executives reportedly claimed they were “exploring” casting more diversity, they internally communicated “little interest” in casting more diversity because they were “unwilling to vary the chemistry of a hugely popular series and are wary of a potential controversy stemming from an interracial romance.”¹¹⁰ Their desire to maintain their core white audience, which attracts advertisers and revenue, means the franchise producers and creators hesitate to change a formula by casting a different type of star. Fleiss also revealed the franchise’s worries over “tokenism,” implying that even if they did cast a diverse star, they would receive criticism about how they portrayed that star in the wider context of a white cast. The “rhetoric of tokenism,” as rhetorician Dana Cloud argues, is when a person represents a marginalized group as a “cultural hero” while simultaneously serving a hegemonic liberal individualist agenda.¹¹¹ Cloud elaborates, “Tokenism glorifies the exception in order to obscure the rules of the game of success in capitalist society.”¹¹² Fleiss’s comments in 2011 foreshadow the way the franchise treats non-white cast members today. In the case of Rachel, the emphasis on her as an exceptional individual representing the Black community, and the colorblind discourse that ABC representatives and she herself use to explain her casting, places her as a “token” within the franchise. Rachel becomes the exception that obscures *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*’s continued use of the exact same formula that makes them successful and cements the norm of whiteness.

Furthermore, the next star for either *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette* is chosen from the top contestants on the previous season, often the top three. This means, as Linda Holmes

observes, “If you're a black candidate, you can be chosen, but first, you have to impress a white Bachelor and convince that person to, for many weeks in a row, pick you. You cannot go forward without their say-so, because of longstanding structural rules about allocating power that they themselves have followed successfully in order to become powerful in the first place.”¹¹³

Bachelor/Bachelorette director Kevin Fuchs confirmed that this was the formula, explaining that it is “out of our control” who the star picks to continue on in the show and that the next star comes from the previous star’s top picks.¹¹⁴ ABC executives pinpoint their diversity issues with casting decisions, but place control with the audience. Less than a year before Rachel’s casting, at the summer 2016 Television Critics Association press tour, ABC entertainment president Channing Dungey explained that the first step in bringing in more diversity for the

Bachelor/Bachelorette is via casting. She told *Deadline Hollywood*:

We have really upped our quotient in terms of diversity of bachelorette candidates which is wonderful, it’s a third more than we’ve ever had...because what is working so well in that fandom — which is rabid — it is so much the audience helping us choose the next person in the franchise. So the first step for me was trying to change the population to try to get to that place, and I feel this year we have a couple of potentially really good candidates. I’m feeling optimistic.¹¹⁵

Unlike Fleiss and Fuchs, Dungey does not displace the casting team’s role in choosing more diverse contestants, yet follows their discourse in that the audience picks the next lead, not the franchise or ABC. Thus, the franchise and network casts more diversity, but both the (white) lead of the show and the audience must approve of a particular cast member before they can become the next star. In the first five minutes of Rachel’s premiere, Harrison reinforces this method of approval by reminding the audience that they overwhelmingly loved her as a fan-favorite. Harrison’s introduction fades into a recap of Rachel’s time as a contestant on Nick’s season. The package ends with Nick crying as he eliminates her in Finland. Rachel blames herself for messing up that journey by stating in a voice over during the segment, “I knew how I

felt, but I waited too long to express that to Nick.” Yet, Nick approved of Rachel long enough to have her in his top three, allowing the audience to see Rachel on screen and get to know her as a character within *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* universe. Thus, the franchise’s top decision makers position diversity casting as something that must continue to follow the foundational formula of *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* and the final decision to choose a next star is ultimately the responsibility of the audience. Those that have the power to change the structure of the show, and intentionally cast more people of color, place the responsibility on the audience, rather than on themselves.

The audience that must approve the next star for the *Bachelor/Bachelorette* skews white, affluent, and young. As Rob Mills, the senior vice president of alternative series, specials, and late-night programming at ABC explained, ABC “coined” the phrase “Bachelor Nation” for their devoted audience because everyone is a “family,” from the cast to the audience. He states, “It’s this bonding thing. It’s very similar to any other property with a big fandom like ‘Star Wars’ or ‘Star Trek,’ and those things never die. They live on in different forms and iterations. ‘The Bachelor’ is very much like that.”¹¹⁶ Bachelor Nation, which includes the show’s extended cast members and the die-hard fandom, thrives on social media, where Twitter reactions spike on *Bachelor/Bachelorette* nights as fans react and comment in real-time to what they are viewing on the air.¹¹⁷ The franchise’s strong social media presence also reveals how it brings in large millennial audiences in the coveted 18-49 demographic. In fact, *Deadline Hollywood* reported in 2014 that *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* for the “young and rich” (18-49, making \$150,000 or more a year) were in the top three most-watched broadcast shows and for the “young and highly educated” (18-49, 4+ years of college) *The Bachelor* was the seventh most watched, with *The Bachelorette* coming in at number 12.¹¹⁸ The majority of viewers for *The*

Bachelor/Bachelorette are white, with the audience for previous seasons being nearly 90% white. Rachel's season continued to have an audience that was 80% white.¹¹⁹ The franchise's continuation of "Bachelor Nation" rests in its ability to attract young white millennials with expendable incomes and a desire to watch a "true" love story.

Casting Rachel Colorblind

The Bachelor/Bachelorette's history of dismissing diversity seemed to end when they abruptly announced Rachel as the next star. The unusual choice to announce Rachel as the next Bachelorette before her elimination on the current season of *The Bachelor* itself was a casting decision. As Chris Harrison explained, the show wanted to cast for Rachel, but they began taping *The Bachelorette* only days after *The Bachelor* finale. Thus, they had to announce her position as the star of the next season in order to guarantee they would have contestants on the show that were there for her.¹²⁰ Rachel's announcement as the first Black star of the franchise ushers in colorblind discourses that further illuminate *The Bachelor/Bachelorette's* casting strategy.

ABC, the show, and Rachel herself present the thirteenth Bachelorette as a woman who "has it all," a post-feminist and post-racial darling with just one missing piece in her life: true love. These discourses reinforce Rachel as the colorblind Bachelorette by positioning Rachel as an individual that represents herself, dismissing her racial background, and presenting her as a perfect Bachelorette worthy of admiration, support, and true love, no different from any other Bachelorette before her. Therefore, by erasing her Blackness and shaping Rachel in the image of the other white Bachelorettes before her, the show reinforces its own whiteness. Furthermore, many of these arguments are punctuated by cultural critics, primarily Black women. These Black women respond to *The Bachelorette* in context, writing recaps and reviews the next day, and highlight their connection to Rachel's representation. Their unique perspectives from the

“outsider-within” position reminds others watching that ABC’s rhetoric is inconsistent at best. While on one hand, ABC and *The Bachelorette* producers and decision makers congratulate themselves for making an “historic” pick who demonstrates that the franchise is inclusive, on the other hand they dismiss the reason why Rachel is different and distance themselves from the racial casting practices of their past. These Black women use their professional status as television critics and prominent authors to speak to the ways in which *The Bachelorette* continues to make Black women’s experiences invisible despite having a Black star.

Rachel portrayed herself as an individual making decisions ultimately for her, and not the communities she represents. Reality television often frames race as insignificant to larger narratives, or takes complex problems like race and narrates them through an individual’s experience, further divorcing racial discussions from wider systematic and structural issues.¹²¹ Rachel’s own discourse follows this formula by displacing the significance of race to her journey and framing her journey as hers alone. In interviews prior to the premiere, Rachel asserted, “It’s my journey in finding love. And whether that person is black, white, red, whatever — it’s my journey. I’m not choosing a man for America, I’m choosing a man for me.”¹²² While Rachel acknowledged she is “proud to be a black woman” and represents herself as part of the African-American community as the first Black Bachelorette, she also distanced herself from race.¹²³ At times, Rachel explicitly stated she does not want to think about race during her “journey,” explaining, “Race didn’t play in as a factor when it came to choosing men along the way. In my final decision, I just went with my heart and the person I found my forever with”¹²⁴ or “I’m a black woman and I’m so happy to represent myself in that respect, but I don’t want it to be something that defines me and my journey for love.”¹²⁵ In addition, Rachel emphasized the other aspects of her identity, discussing how she hopes to relate to career women or older women

looking for love, beyond Black women.¹²⁶ After the show filmed, she told reporters that her “open approach” to race meant it did not become a “theme” throughout the season.¹²⁷ Rachel’s public statements on making the show about *her* journey, rather than the wider implications of what her journey represents, opens the door for ABC to shape the narrative that race only matters when people talk about it and can be dismissed when more important matters exist, such as finding love.

Rachel’s disavowal of race as a key feature of her Bachelorette persona also means negating the stereotypes associated with Black women, such as the Jezebel and the Sapphire. She discusses her need for love in a predictable “normal” fashion, expressing her desire to follow her heart instead of highlighting her sexuality. While she is independent, she is not an “angry Black woman” or dominating space with her explicit Blackness. Yet, the “positive” post-racial image she presents does not explicitly reject these stereotypes or call attention to them. Instead, Rachel’s public image ignores them and assumes she already has access to the “dignity, integrity, intelligence, respect, admiration, or compassion” that Black women never have full access to because of these controlling stereotypes.¹²⁸ Furthermore, labelling the dismissal of race as an “open approach” to race further stigmatizes Blackness. As Audre Lorde notes, silence does not prevent the “constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision” regarding racial difference.¹²⁹ Instead, silence perpetuates the continuation of the ridicule, contempt, and misrepresentation of Black women and maintains the status quo. By asking that race not “define” her journey, Rachel makes room for ABC to position her casting choice as colorblind, be silent about the implications of her race, and privilege whiteness as the standard.

Rachel’s discourse highlights her efforts to be like any other Bachelorette before her, who dazzled in couture dresses, flashed unnaturally pearly white smiles, and equipped with false

eyelashes and the perfect smoky eye, charmed dozens of men into saying “I’m falling in love with you” three weeks after meeting. ABC representatives echoed Rachel’s narrative regarding race, stating that they did not choose her because she was Black, but because she was the “right” pick. Chris Harrison asserted, “It is not lost on me that there is an importance to choosing a black Bachelorette, but it’s also about finding the right Bachelorette. We found this amazing woman who is powerful, smart, educated, sweet, beautiful, and has a smile that can light up a room...These guys are lucky they have a chance to date someone who is the entire package.”¹³⁰ In an interview with Lacey Pemberton, the casting director of *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise, Harrison again stated that choosing a lead is about “choosing the right girl,” with Pemberton following up: “Honestly, I think it’s wonderful that we have Rachel as our Bachelorette. She happens to be African-American, and that’s a great thing. We’ve always embraced that.”¹³¹ This “happens to be” discourse infiltrates other commentators’ reflections on the casting of Rachel, including Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a retired professional basketball player and cultural critic/activist, who has openly criticized the franchise and claims it has an “insidious darkness” and is “killing romance.”¹³² He writes after making a guest appearance on an early episode of *The Bachelorette*, “Rachel distinguished herself as intelligent, athletic, playful, witty and emotionally mature. She also happened to be black.”¹³³ While Abdul-Jabbar is certainly not dismissing her race, his way of introducing her race fits neatly into the discourse Rachel and ABC promote: that Rachel is perfection on the same terms as the previous white leads of the series.

Chris Harrison, Lacey Pemberton, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar are not the only ones to emphasize how Rachel fits the role of Bachelorette perfectly. Television and cultural critics

follow suit, acknowledging how well Rachel plays the part as a model Bachelorette. Ella Ceron in *Teen Vogue* comments:

It's frustrating that Rachel's casting is considered groundbreaking in 2017, not least of all because inclusion on TV should already be the norm. But her casting makes sense on every level: she has been a fan-favorite on this season of *The Bachelor*, and seems more grounded than the majority of the contestants throughout the franchise's history. She is seen as "genuine," someone with whom you could be friends in real life. The show, while of course heavily and deliberately edited, paints Rachel as a good listener, an optimistic presence, and a confident woman. There's no reason why she *shouldn't* be the season's star.¹³⁴

Others reiterate this by describing Rachel as "an archetype of beauty," "flawless," and fitting "the show's Platonic Ideal" with her "extreme perfection."¹³⁵ However, they also acknowledge how Rachel's perfection plays into the politics of respectability for the white audience of the show. Rachel is "palpable [sic] to a white audience," endorsed by the white Bachelor Nick Viall, and becomes a "good sport" because she must "go high when they go low."¹³⁶ All of these factors play into the historic emphasis that Black women, in order to be "positively" represented and accepted, must be twice as good as their white counterparts. This means, as Claire Fallon contends, Black women are responsible for proving that "they're soft and womanly enough to be worthy of love — all too often, instead, they're boxed into a stereotypical 'angry black woman' corner or ignored altogether."¹³⁷ Throughout the season, Rachel embodies this ideal, with flowing mermaid-like hair, exquisite designer clothing, and perfect makeup. Rachel speaks frankly with the men, but shows nearly no emotion other than the few times she cries when eliminating contestants. ABC presents Rachel as the ideal next pick for *The Bachelorette*, not because she is the first diverse top pick from the previous season, but because she proved that she could play the part despite her Blackness. By creating this image, Rachel's portrayal of the perfect Black woman who has everything except love played neatly into historic politics of respectability that expect women to overcome their race and succeed in a white

hegemonic world. Thus, just as Kristin Warner notes, colorblind casting marginalizes the experiences and minorities, and “uphold[s] and maintain[s] white supremacy.”¹³⁸ *The Bachelorette* upholds and maintains the foundation of their franchise, using Rachel to demonstrate that a Black woman can succeed at finding love within their world of whiteness.

The pressure to be a perfect representation of a Black woman does not go entirely unmentioned during episodes of *The Bachelorette*. Rachel mentions her status as a Black woman explicitly in only a few moments, dedicating roughly two minutes of screen time total. In episode four, as the racial tensions between the men escalate, Rachel put her head in her hands, exhausted as she wipes away her tears and looks into the camera:

The pressures that I feel about being a Black woman, and what that is and how...I get pressure from so many different ways being in this position, and I did not want to get in to all of this tonight, and I already know what people are gonna say about me and judge me for the decisions I'm making. I'm gonna be the one that has to deal with that and nobody else. And that's a lot. You have no idea what it's like to be in this position.¹³⁹

In a rare moment for *The Bachelorette*, we hear a producer respond, “I don't...I don't at all.” Rachel adds, with her head down, “I'm not talking anymore.” Beyond this moment, Rachel does speak candidly with a couple of white contestants briefly about their experience dating a Black woman. In these moments, they discuss interracial dating and how much their families will accept them as a couple, framing interracial dating as an easy hurdle to overcome. When she went to a hometown date with the last remaining Black contestant, Eric, she spoke with his Aunt Verna, who brings up her position as a Black woman right away in their conversation: “Let's bring up the R-A-C-E word: race...So how are you dealing with that? Are you prepared for that?” Rachel laughs and says, “No! It's a lot of pressure, you are being judged by two different groups. I'm getting judged by Black people and judged by everyone else.” As Aunt Verna nods, Rachel repeats her mantra from interviews, “I want love, love it...doesn't have a color, so my

journey for love shouldn't be any different than the other twelve Bachelorettes that were in front of me. I'm gonna make the best decision for me."¹⁴⁰ Reality television, as a manipulated version of reality, edits and directs moments like these to create a specific narrative about race and teach audiences how "real" people exist in the world.¹⁴¹ When the show edits in explicit talk about her position as a Black woman, such as the conversation with Aunt Verna, the show ends these moments with Rachel discussing the idea of colorblind love, and refocusing attention on Rachel as individual making the best decision for herself. Rather than confiding in Verna, or enacting a "hidden transcript" type of discourse where marginalized people converse within the mainstream, Rachel's position within the conversation is to speak directly to a mainstream audience and reassure them that colorblind love is the priority. Thus, *The Bachelorette* creates a version of reality where Rachel does not need to think about race, but simply focus on her journey for love.

ABC and Rachel continued to assert that her season will not be any different than previous seasons. Harrison explained, "While diversity is an issue, what we try to do is create a great television show. At the same time, yes, you're trying to make sure everybody's represented in that pool. But first and foremost, we're trying to create great television to watch."¹⁴² The "great television" of *The Bachelorette* means sticking with the formula maintained over the past 15 years, as director Fuchs remarked, "The show looks and is produced wonderfully and people really respond to it. And so it's just more of the same with Rachel. I don't think we have to change anything."¹⁴³ Rachel asserted, "I don't feel added pressure being the first black Bachelorette, because to me I'm just a black woman trying to find love."¹⁴⁴ These comments focus attention on the ways Rachel and her season of *The Bachelorette* continue the legacy of the

franchise's "journey for love" rather than the ways Rachel could be represented or seen by audience as a different kind of Bachelorette.

Yet to many, Rachel is not "just" a Black woman, but represents the promise of "progress" and her visual differences from other Bachelorettes are meaningful, even if not explicitly engaged within the season. Despite producers and Rachel claiming race does not play a factor, before and after the season premiere Black women cultural critics express their excitement to see a Black woman find love on screen. Television critic and reviewer Ali Barthwell noted she writes about people who "don't look like me" and to see a Black woman "try to find love and be celebrated as a paragon of beauty and womanhood...might be enough to make me believe in love stories and turn down the snark once and for all."¹⁴⁵ Roxane Gay, a prominent author who discusses feminism and body image discourses, echoed these sentiments after *The Bachelorette* premiere that Black women "at long last" get the opportunity that white women have gotten time and time again: to be worthy and "treated as marriage material."¹⁴⁶ Zeba Blay, Senior Culture Writer at *HuffPost*, asserted that the primarily white audience of *The Bachelorette*, which typically see only white women finding love across multiple genres of television and film, on Rachel's season saw a Black woman as a "fully realized individual" with agency, and "must empathize with, root for, and acknowledge the allure of a black woman."¹⁴⁷ These women speak to the previous representations of Black women on screens before Rachel, who were stereotyped, given little agency, or are relegated to the background while white characters receive attention and stardom. They also highlight that despite the insistence from ABC and Rachel that this season is not any different, the fact that a Black woman is the lead makes it different. These women point to the "historic" casting of Rachel not as a pat on the back moment for ABC, but a moment for them to celebrate the potential of having a complex Black

woman on screen looking for love, and the exposure of that experience to a large white audience. As scholar Donnetrice C. Allison writes, despite a long history of misrepresentation, stereotypes, and negative images of Black women on television, “We want to see ourselves on television even if the depictions are distorted and inaccurate.”¹⁴⁸ But, at the same time, Black women argue for quality representation that recognizes that their complex identities are worthy of exploration and attention.¹⁴⁹ Within the history of representation that either ignores Black women or misrepresents them, Black women rally behind the promise of a complex Black woman on prime time.

However, as the season continued, the optimism many of these Black women critics express at the beginning of the season fades as *The Bachelorette* followed up on its promise to discuss race. While *The Bachelorette* cast Rachel as an ideal and respectable woman, dismissing her Blackness as a differentiator, and did labor before, during, and after the airing of the television show to demonstrate her love is “post-racial,” the show did not give the same treatment to the Black men cast as her suitors. Significantly, *The Bachelorette* achieves its promise to make race a major topic of the show by stereotyping the Black men and using them as the representation of “race.” Black men, who bell hooks notes are the image that comes to mind when people think of Blackness, embody racial tension on the show through their physical presence and verbal disagreements.¹⁵⁰ The Black men on the show become the representation of race, rather than a Black woman, erasing Black women and making them invisible. Further, centering Black men as the ones who confront racism directly places them in an active role and further perpetuates Black women’s roles as passive. The show contains racial discussions to the Black men while at the same time containing Rachel in a colorblind bubble, distanced from any explicit racial tension. Thus, the show communicates that Black men, and not necessarily Black

women, face racism and must combat it, dislocating the place Black women have dealing with racism, further making their lived experience invisible.

Racializing Black Men

Chris Harrison promises early on in interviews that this season of *The Bachelorette* will discuss the “elephant in the room”: race.¹⁵¹ Rachel’s race, as the “elephant in the room,” while nearly unacknowledged in the show itself, becomes a premise to raise race as a topic of drama over multiple episodes. *The Bachelorette* tackles race by racializing the Black male contestants, editing the show to revolve around a white man metaphorically twirling his mustache as he torments the Black contestants in the South as the show is on location in Hilton Head, South Carolina. Notably, Rachel is nearly absent from all of these contentions and conversations, further distancing her from race and Blackness. This form of editing and distance leaves Rachel as a Black woman out of the conversation and unsullied by racism. It also paints the picture that Rachel herself does not have to deal with these issues and lives in a post-racial world where love is ultimately colorblind. *The Bachelorette*’s discussions of race attempt to place blame on one contestant without engaging in the ways they themselves have promoted racism and privileged whiteness in their 15 year history.

The Bachelorette racialized the Black male contestants before the season began and the tension between them and a white Southern contestant was on full display in prime time. During a Facebook Live less than a week before the premiere, Harrison did the first reveal of the contestants on the season, part of the “most successful, most diverse, and of course, most dramatic season we have ever had on the show.”¹⁵² Often mentioning the muscles of the Black men, Harrison also labels one contestant, DeMario, “too smooth.” As Jagger Blaec, a widely published freelance journalist writing about Black women, points out, the host is “playing into

the stereotype of the promiscuous black buck, a hypersexuality often associated with black men, as well as black women.”¹⁵³ In the first episode, *The Bachelorette* highlights eight men in one to two minutes packages to introduce them before Rachel meets them. Josiah, one of the two Black men the show spotlights, describes his childhood where his older brother committed suicide, then he “looked towards the streets for an older brother figure,” before being arrested and turning his life around when a judge told him he wasn’t a “thug.” Now working in the same courthouse where he was arrested, his story seems to follow the politics of respectability narratives that focus on how the individual overcomes their circumstances to be a better person, or in this case, a worthy candidate for Rachel’s heart. Shondaland.com Editor and freelance writer Kendra James asserts on *Elle.com*, “[I want to] point out how exploitative and manipulative it is that the producers found a Black man with the exact kind of story that evokes a dark and cruel part of the Black community’s history. I suppose this is a way of ‘subtly’ emphasizing to the audience that there are *Black people on this season*. ABC would hate for us to forget it, obviously.”¹⁵⁴ The show frames Josiah, much like Rachel, as an exceptional token from the Black community. Another Black man, DeMario, labelled “smooth” by Harrison, proudly boasts on the first night that he will be Rachel’s next husband. Then, in the second episode his alleged girlfriend shows up to his first date, outing him as a womanizer and cheater. As DeMario attempts to explain himself, Rachel angrily rejects him, saying, “I’m really gonna need you to get the f*** out.”¹⁵⁵ When DeMario returns to the mansion, Rachel disciplines him, explaining she is looking for a “man” and sends him home once again. DeMario’s storyline portrays him as a stereotyped unfaithful Black man, with loose morals and a sexual appetite. *The Bachelorette* frame Josiah and DeMario in different, yet stereotypical, ways.

In terms of the conventions of casting, Jon Kraszewski explains that reality television show producers carefully select each element of the show, including the cast, location, and physical setting. With these elements, the editing and narrative structure of the show shapes a version of reality that deals with topics such as race and imagines them from the perspective of whiteness as the normal reality, and people of color as anomalies for white casts to contend with and negotiate around.¹⁵⁶ *The Bachelorette* spends time prior to the show emphasizing how “diverse” this season will be, and from the start begins to emphasize the diversity of their cast through their stories, personal experiences, and by including a white Southern man. Lee, the villain of the season, as a character makes race the center of multiple episodes, shaping a reality where Black men must continually combat micro aggressions and lies. Furthermore, Lee portrays a “normal” reality of white supremacy which the other white men in the house tolerate and are not shown confronting Lee, meaning the Black cast members are the ones responsible for teaching Lee and the others about racism. While the show constructs Lee’s actions as “bad,” *The Bachelorette* frames the attempts from the Black men in the house to confront Lee as negative as well because they are not focusing on winning Rachel’s heart. Therefore, the “normal” reactions are those of the white men, who ignore Lee and focus on Rachel.

When Lee introduces himself to Rachel, he walks out of the limo strumming his guitar and singing a country song to her, placing himself as the sweet Southern songwriter. When Lee is with Rachel, he talks openly about his home life, presents her with gifts, and intently listens to her. However, by the third episode, Lee begins to antagonize the Black contestants, calling several of them “aggressive” and complaining to Rachel that he’s fearful for his safety when he’s around several Black contestants. Unlike casting in the past that often frames rural white conservatives as “innocent” regarding their racism and in need of educational enlightenment

which “fixes” their racism, Lee’s attacks seem deliberate and intentional.¹⁵⁷ In one scene, as the screen cuts away from a group of Black men discussing their frustration over Lee, Lee laughs manically and divulges, “I get tickled when I smile and an angry man gets angrier.”¹⁵⁸ During episode five, Will, another Black man in the house, pulls Lee aside and patiently attempts to explain to him why calling a Black man “aggressive” holds racial connotations, walking him through how the word has been used to commit violence against Black men. Lee shrugs and states Kenny, one of his targets, must be using the “race card” then.¹⁵⁹ As the show aired, ugly tweets from Lee came to the surface during these episode arcs, where he compares the NAACP to the KKK and asks, “What’s the difference between the NAACP and the KKK? Wait for it...One has the sense of shame to cover their racist ass faces.” ABC claimed they had no idea about the tweets, despite conducting thorough background checks.¹⁶⁰

These tweets and the show’s portrayal of Lee’s attacks call into question how and why *The Bachelorette* cast Lee. Jonathan Gray explains that “in truth reality television’s ‘villains’ are often our heroes, the reasons to watch, the catalysts of all activity, and hence much-loved.”¹⁶¹ *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* typically edits a contestant or two to be a foil to the other contestants for a couple of episodes before the star eliminates them, all the while causing mild mayhem and slogan worthy one-liners in interviews. But Lee’s villainy, as *The New Yorker* writer and former editor of the “Lenny Letter” Doreen Felix contends, “equates nasty gaslighting with garden-variety television villainy.”¹⁶² Jagger Blaec reminds her readers how dangerous this portrayal is, explaining, “This entire storyline is trash, and fuck ABC for thinking it was a good idea to exploit the ‘Angry Black Man’ trope for ratings. In real life, this stereotype literally gets people killed.”¹⁶³ Lee becomes the center of many of the Black contestant’s narratives, driving the show to spend a lot of their time focusing on Lee’s overt racism and the Black male contestants

spending more time defending themselves against Lee rather than getting to know Rachel. The show creates the narrative that Black men need to constantly defend themselves against racism which prevents them from participating in taken-for-granted activities, such as dating. Thus, the world of dating is only for those unburdened by racism, which in the case of the show, is white men.

Rachel's absence from these conflicts divorces her from racial tension and strife, further emphasizing her as a colorblind Bachelorette and diluting her Blackness. Rachel's reactions in these moments fall in line with the "rigidly controlled public performance" of the politics of respectability.¹⁶⁴ These public performances, as Melissa Harris-Perry reminds us, not only discipline Black women's bodies but also discipline Black women's ability to respond. Being "rigidly controlled" often translates to being silent or lacking the flexibility to respond within the strict boundaries of respectability. Rachel's position and reach to millions of viewers across the country normalizes and validates this performance of respectability and contained responses. She does, in a few moments, express frustration. As Lee antagonizes Eric at a rose ceremony, Rachel sighs in a camera interview, "I have no idea what's going on in the house, I just hear a bunch of drama tonight, and I'm ridiculously annoyed. Tonight was not a party, it was just a nightmare."¹⁶⁵ She also describes in the *Men Tell All* episode that she did not know what was going on during filming, but confronts Lee directly, stating, "I hope that in watching it back, you realize that you were a part of something so great. But in case you didn't, please know that you can exit stage left and meet me backstage and I will be more than happy to give you a Black history lesson, a lesson on women's rights."¹⁶⁶ In this moment, she does insert herself in the conversation, but Black women reviewing the show were frustrated they did not see her respond more assertively during the show. For example, Kendra James notes that when Kenny tries to

explain to Rachel how Lee is lying about his aggressiveness, Rachel questions Kenny's side of the story, "With that, plus the stereotype of the dangerous Black male, Lee is attempting to get Rachel to see [Kenny] as dangerous. Unfortunately, as far as the audience can tell, it seems to be working. Rachel asks Kenny why, if their conversation was as calm as Kenny claims it was, Lee would have told her that he found him to be aggressive. Girl. *Girl!* You grew up in this country. You *know* why!"¹⁶⁷ James expresses frustration that Rachel does not read in between the (racial) lines. As Rachel eventually eliminates Lee on a date with Kenny, before flying away on a helicopter, Kenny goes back to have the "last word" to Lee. Rachel, clearly annoyed, rolls her eyes and waits, telling Kenny that he is being unreasonable. Thus, Kenny misses his opportunity to rise above racism and to fall in line with colorblind ideology, further reinforcing that focusing on race negatively affects any opportunity for "true" love. Rachel's performance centers on the men's disrespectful behavior, but implicitly emphasizes her own behavior as respectable. Her frustration with racial tension and distance from racism in the show portrays Black women's role in anti-racist efforts as not only absent, but disapproving. Rachel's portrayal as the tokenized representation of Black womanhood on *The Bachelorette* demonstrates that in order to find love in a white world, Black women must distance themselves from racial discussion, tensions, and reinforce their "respectable" behavior in order to "earn their people a measure of esteem from white America."¹⁶⁸

The Bachelorette portrays Rachel as the perfect respectable Black woman who discusses race in only fleeting moments before refocusing her attention on her journey for love, devoid of color. Further, the racism of Lee fulfilled the need for "drama" in a reality show that promises every season will be the "most dramatic ever." In using this narrative, the show frames Black men continually as racialized tropes who need taming and disciplining from Rachel, suggesting

that the role of Black women is to shed their Blackness and embrace colorblind respectability to find love. *The Bachelorette* implies that by ignoring race and racism, anyone can find love regardless of skin color. In doing so, they reinforce whiteness as a norm that every star and cast members should aspire to find love.

Conclusion

Why should Rachel's season of *The Bachelorette* be any different? After all, she is one individual Black woman that does not represent the entirety of Black womanhood. The show works hard to portray this image, but a colorblind approach to casting does not mean that everyone watching is blind to the resulting portrayals. Robin M. Boylorn, an assistant professor at the University of Alabama, writing for *Slate* sums up her thoughts, arguing:

Over the course of the season, it became clearer and clearer that the decision to cast a black bachelorette was merely evidence of the network's interest in pushing faux-colorblind love stories as fairy-tale fantasies; the show failed to account for the ways that race would complicate the existing narrative, including the real challenges that interracial couples experience—especially black women who date nonblack men.¹⁶⁹

The “faux-colorblind love stories” reinforces the colorblind ideology that despite racial tension between multiple contestants, all ultimately eliminated implying they were unworthy or unprepared for the “journey” of love, love overcomes racism and interracial love is possible to achieve without significant discussions of race. ABC and *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise finally cast a Black lead, but was able to produce the same show by encouraging colorblind love and framing racial tensions as reality television drama to eventually be swept away and deemed insignificant to the lived experience of romance.

While *The Bachelorette* works hard to emphasize that love is colorblind, and racial tensions are problematic and prevent people from finding “real” love, *Being Mary Jane* paints a completely different picture about how race weaves through both Black love and interracial

dating. The title character, Mary Jane, on the outside portrays herself as a woman that “has it all” except love, with the confidence and beauty to move through white television spaces. Yet, the creator Mara Brock Akil describes her casting and writing process as “black on purpose,” has great distain for colorblind casting, and has catapulted *Being Mary Jane* and her other projects to huge commercial success on the BET channel that rivals other major projects across other cable channels. Brock Akil’s *Being Mary Jane* contrasts with *The Bachelorette* in intentions, purpose, and format.

CHAPTER THREE: BET'S "BLACK ON PURPOSE" *MARY JANE*

Being Mary Jane's ninth episode of season two features the title character Mary Jane Paul tackling a segment on her cable news show *Talk Back* that she had been pitching since the pilot: Black women's beauty and the "ugly Black woman" trope. Despite resistance from network executives and her producer that the story was "too Black" for their mainstream audience, Mary Jane forges ahead with her vision. She sets up the segment by stating that she "missed her window on the subject when *Psychology Today* published an article that brought into question Black women's beauty." Panelist Micheala Angela Davis interjects, "They didn't say we were not beautiful, they said that we were straight up ugly." Mary Jane smiles, responding with a curt, "They did." Mary Jane continues to describe that what shocked her was the response, or rather, *lack* of response to this scientific study that sought to prove that Black women were ugly. She describes how some Black women tweeted their objections, or wrote eloquent blogs about the study, but no one "rattled the cages for Black women except Black women." In this fictional universe, Mary Jane sits with a panel of cultural critics, portraying themselves, including Duke Professor Mark Anthony Neal, recording artist India Arie, and activist Michaela Angela Davis. These panelists continue to discuss the invisibility of Black women, lack of support from Black men, Black female empowerment, the burdens Black women carry by supporting others, and the magic of Black girls.¹⁷⁰

As Mary Jane works to establish a more Black centered focus on her cable program at the fictional SNC network in Atlanta, *Being Mary Jane*, BET's first original one-hour scripted drama, achieved major success on the real life BET channel.¹⁷¹ Through its first three seasons, *Being Mary Jane* had a "Top 5 status on cable," oftentimes beating cable favorites such as *Fargo* (FX, 2014-) in ratings, with its debut season scoring higher ratings than *True Detective* (HBO,

2014-) and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015).¹⁷² When the backdoor pilot premiered as a television movie in July 2013 to test if a full series might attract viewers, more than four million people tuned in, and only *America's Got Talent* (NBC, 2006-) beat the movie in the 18-49 demographic across all television.¹⁷³ In its second season, *Being Mary Jane* continued to be the highest rated show on BET and pulled in more viewers than other Tuesday dramas such as *The Have and the Have Nots* (OWN, 2013-) and *Justified* (FX, 2010-2015).¹⁷⁴

While the practice of colorblind casting means that roles for people of color dismiss racial tensions and stereotypes, often engaging in stereotypical narratives, Mary Jane's character engages headfirst with respectability politics, stereotypes of Black women, and what it means for Mary Jane to articulate herself as an individual. *Being Mary Jane* presents one image of a complex individual Black woman and centers that narrative, instead of sidelining the complex representation of Black womanhood. This contrasts with the practice of colorblind casting, which makes the experience of Black women invisible. *Being Mary Jane* does this not only in the text but importantly in the industrial discourse, where show creator Mara Brock Akil and her husband Salim Akil actively discuss their writing, casting, and directing style as "black on purpose."¹⁷⁵ The Akils describe this strategy as authentic and complex, and Black women writing and discussing *Being Mary Jane* on the Internet negotiate this complexity within their diverse responses to the show. Further, while BET has a complicated, and often contradictory, history with authenticity and the representation of Black women, BET channel executives also actively assert *Being Mary Jane* as an important place to investigate the intricacies of Black womanhood and inspire discussion. I argue that one way *Being Mary Jane* enacts the Akils "black on purpose" creative framework is through Mary Jane's relationships with other Black women, which explore the complexity of Black womanhood, and challenge stereotypes.

In this chapter, I describe the history of BET as a cable channel and its dual mission of making profit while attempting to be the brand for Black Americans. Next, I focus on the Akils, primarily Mara Brock Akil, and their brand of “black on purpose.” Then, I describe Mary Jane’s character and reactions to the main character from the actress Gabrielle Union and Black women writing in primarily Black online publications to demonstrate how casting, writing, and acting “black on purpose” has meaning across the entire production of *Being Mary Jane*. Finally, I detail how Mary Jane’s relationship with three Black women on the show challenges both the character and stereotypes about Black women’s bodies, self-esteem, sexuality, depression, vulnerability, and power.

Black Entertainment Television: Branding Blackness, Selling Blackness

Being Mary Jane’s position as a television show with complex portrayals of Black women and with an audience of primarily Black women relies on the narrowcasting efforts of its channel, BET, and the vision of its creator, Mara Brock Akil. After Robert Johnson founded Black Entertainment Television in 1980, the channel has asserted itself as the prime location to reach Black audiences, centered its branding on Black authenticity, and navigated industrial complexity by serving both the BET audience and capitalist interests.¹⁷⁶ The tension between consciously representing a marginalized audience and attending to economic interests complicate BET’s own version of “black on purpose.”

As a cable channel, BET practices narrowcasting to set itself apart from other television channels and define its mission. Narrowcasting is the practice of targeting specific audiences in the hopes of creating a space for people with similar racial or ethnic backgrounds, the same gender, or the same interests.¹⁷⁷ In comparison to broadcast networks, like ABC, that target broader audiences with a variety of interests, BET’s cable channel status responds to the needs of

a particular community neglected within the broader swath of mass (white) audiences. BET's focus on Black audiences privileges their identity, interests, and values. When Johnson created BET, he branded the channel as a space for Black people to watch content that connected to them that was controlled and owned by Black executives.¹⁷⁸ Beretta E. Smith-Shomade asserts that Johnson "aimed for BET to be black America's brand of choice" and to have name recognition as an all-encompassing televisual space for Black culture.¹⁷⁹

The impact of BET and its centering of Black views and interests reflects its mission to be an authentic reflection of Black experiences. In 1990, Felecia G. Jones published a study that showed Johnson's branding efforts had some effect on Black audience members and their connection to a television channel created for them. Jones found that Black viewers watched BET because it "fills a void," gives them an opportunity to view black-centered programming, and the black-owned company allows them to trust BET's portrayals of black subjects.¹⁸⁰ This is one study that reflects in the first decade, Black audiences responded positively to BET's vision to connect to Black audiences and assert authenticity. More recently, Jas Sullivan and Gheni Platenburg studied the impact of consuming Black information on Black identity. Published in 2017, they found that a higher consumption of Black information across all forms of media increases the identification of Blackness as a central piece of Black people's identity.¹⁸¹ Thus, not only did BET as a form of Black information connect with audiences since its formation, it also centers Black identity for its audiences.

Yet, as Smith-Shomade argues, BET's mission is not limited to producing and showcasing Black entertainment, thus attracting the "niche" audience of Black people, but also to become the premium site for advertisers wishing to reach Black viewers. She explains, as BET sought to build a brand around blackness in its first two decades, "black folks were both the

customer consuming and the *product* to be consumed.”¹⁸² Profit drives BET to consider their niche audience and advertiser interests, which means the need for higher ratings. The channel’s ability to connect with Black audiences and integrate themselves into the wider Black experience further draws more “products” in to offer to advertisers. BET’s audience becomes a commodity for BET to sell to advertisers, make money, and continue to grow as a television channel.

Much of BET’s programming also called into question their authenticity regarding the representation of Black people, specifically women. BET’s use of music videos, often centering hyper sexualized Black women, as a primary piece of programming for its first two decades caused some to critics to call BET “Black Embarrassing Television.”¹⁸³ As the music video programming continued into the late 1990s and early 2000s, an animated character named Cita hosted the BET music video show *Cita’s World* (1999-2003). Cita, as Melissa Harris-Lacewell describes, is a “neck-popping, eye-rolling animation who reinforces many negative stereotypes of black women...uses ebonics, wears short skirts, and is loud and annoying.”¹⁸⁴ Cita’s “ghetto fabulous” aesthetic highlights an “excess of authenticity” that Smith-Shomade argues privileges white consumer culture.¹⁸⁵ BET’s crude representation of Black women contradicts Johnson’s assertion that BET’s programming would be defined by quality and innovation.¹⁸⁶

Further complicating BET’s position as a channel for and by Black people, BET’s cable status and ownership for the last two decades commits BET to the whims of industrial logics and capitalism rather than to its audience. To begin with, BET as a cable channel requires its audiences to pay for access to the channel. Even though cable promotes itself as a way to deliver content to underserved audiences, the price marks it as a capitalistic venture more than a promise for social equity to marginalized communities.¹⁸⁷ In addition, while BET dominated the Black television landscape for decades as a flourishing Black-owned business, Johnson sold the

channel to media conglomerate Viacom in 2000.¹⁸⁸ Viacom's ownership of BET means that the once Black-owned channel is now part of a white-owned major media conglomerate, which also owns a wide-range of properties such as Logo TV, MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, CMT, and Comedy Central. Johnson framed the sale as a "positive development" and a way for "strong African-American brands with tremendous value" to be competitive with other brands and provide value to a more general market.¹⁸⁹ However, Smith-Shomade contends that Black audiences never benefitted from Johnson's argument that BET, and its sale to Viacom, represents a shift in the advancement of Black people in the media and in the wider economy. Smith-Shomade writes, "marginalized audience members have been duped, bamboozled if you will, with the idea of enhanced representation and voice."¹⁹⁰ BET's sale to Viacom highlighted the stark reality of BET: while the branding is based in authentic Blackness, the channel is ultimately a business.

While BET's history highlights the tension between a social vision to uplift a neglected television audience and the capitalistic ventures of a growing business, in the past few years BET's leader balances these tensions by positioning their audience as one of commodity value and importance. This position also aligns with *Being Mary Jane* as a show that both empowers its Black female audience to discuss and respond but also has high ratings, which translates to more advertising revenue. Despite changes in the landscape of BET in terms of ownership, one consistent force has guided the channel for nearly 25 years: Debra L. Lee. Lee emphasizes the primary features of BET that has set it apart from other television channels: that BET is the place for Black American audiences to discuss topics and issues that matter to their community. In a piece written for *The Washington Post* in 2012, Lee argued that BET "can't afford to just be an entertainment network," but must serve Black audiences by promoting values and representing

them through images they do not see on other channels.¹⁹¹ Lee described their new branding strategy to *Forbes* as “We respect, reflect, and elevate our audience.”¹⁹² While BET’s history highlights the tensions between uplifting marginalized audiences and subscribing to industrial capitalistic trends, Lee’s discourse centers BET’s ability to attend to both social uplift and money making. After being the Chief Operating Officer for a decade, Lee took over as chairwoman and CEO of BET in 2005, and began exploring original programming by enlisting the talent of Mara Brock Akil and Salim Akil.¹⁹³ The Akils’ programming on BET proved that television shows created for Black audiences were both economically viable and able to speak to and spark discussions within the Black community.

Mara Brock Akil’s “Black on Purpose”: Authenticity, Complexity and Success

The Akils’ creative values of creating material targeted towards Black audiences and emphasizing authenticity echo the brand image of the BET channel. The programming they created for BET over the past seven years provides evidence for BET reasserting its own “black on purpose” vision. Furthermore, the Akils distinguish themselves from other Black television producers as creators uniquely qualified and invested in creating Black characters that are authentic and complex.

Mara Brock Akil, with the support of her husband Salim, has been the creative force behind the Akils’ two biggest projects. Brock Akil centers her projects around “unapologetically black” characters, primarily focusing her creative brand on portrayals of Black women across the shows she has been a part of throughout her career. In a sense, Brock Akil spent her time before *Being Mary Jane* establishing herself as an *auteur*, consistently embedding complex Black women within her projects and emphasizing her individual tastes and personality within her characters.¹⁹⁴ She began her career writing on various shows such as *The Jamie Foxx Show* (The

WB, 1996-2001) and *Moesha* (UPN, 1996-2001) before creating her first show *Girlfriends* (UPN 2000-2006, The CW 2006-2008) and then its spin-off *The Game* (The CW 2006-2009, BET 2011-2015). Both *Girlfriends* and *The Game* were half-hour sitcoms with predominantly Black casts, but relegated to smaller channels and ultimately cancelled. Yet, notably, after *The Game* reruns were highly popular on BET, the channel and Brock Akil produced new episodes in 2011 and broke ratings records for the channel.¹⁹⁵ The first episode brought in 7.7 million viewers, making it one of the highest rated cable series premieres, bringing in more viewers than during its original run on The CW.¹⁹⁶ In addition, *The Game* relaunch promotion heavily targeted Black audiences that felt betrayed by The CW's cancellation of the show, tapping into existing fan Facebook groups that celebrated the show.¹⁹⁷ The “jaw-dropping” success of *The Game* hinged on reasserting BET's connection with their audiences, which resulted in emphasizing BET as a prime place for advertisers to seek out Black audiences.¹⁹⁸ Fueled by this success, Brock Akil established herself as a powerhouse showrunner, and BET signed her and husband into an exclusive contract and asked, “What's your passion project?” Salim Akil encouraged Brock Akil to pitch the idea that had been in her head since working on *Girlfriends*.¹⁹⁹

Originally titled *Single Black Female*, then renamed *Being Mary Jane*, Brock Akil never thought her idea would be on the air because it centered on a Black woman's experiences. She explained to *The New York Times*, “It may not appear so today, but back then [2010] it was very hard to sell a black woman as the central character.” Further, she described to *Vulture* that her practice of casting “black on purpose” also lessened the potential to get a program greenlit, so BET felt like the only place to produce *Being Mary Jane*.²⁰⁰ She argued, “People say, ‘*Being Mary Jane* can be on anything!’ Well, yeah, but when I went to pitch it, nobody wanted it.”²⁰¹ Thus, for some time the idea for *Being Mary Jane* felt like a show that never would be, so Brock

Akil just “kept little notes for myself, then started to write honestly and with abandon.”²⁰² These notes turned into her vision to create a show around a complex Black woman. BET, as the branded place to focus on Black stories and experiences, became the home for *Being Mary Jane*. As a creative force with *auteur* consistency and personality, *Being Mary Jane* is a textual example of the specific creative aspects that Brock Akil emphasizes, such as casting and writing “black on purpose,” becoming fully realized.

The Akils’ casting strategy to be “black on purpose” centers on their audience, reflecting authenticity, and portraying a complex representation of Black lives. With Brock Akil producing and writing *Being Mary Jane*, and Salim Akil directing the majority of the episodes, the Akils target their projects to speak to Black audiences. For them, authenticity means relating to their audiences and receiving feedback from their audience that they view their projects as authentic reflections of Blackness. Brock Akil explained in an interview, “I believe in approaching writing through the specific; the details of a particular culture. So, yes, black people are going to recognize themselves first, and they’re probably going to be the first ones to validate it. ‘Yep, you got that right.’ There’s an authenticity.”²⁰³ Their specific focus on Black audiences allows them to embed authenticity into their projects, and receive validation from that specific audience. As Stephen Hill, then president of programming at BET, described, “[Mara Brock Akil] has an authentic way of writing black voices. It sounds simple, but there just aren’t many African-American characters written on TV by African-American writers.”²⁰⁴ Hill acknowledged here what the Akils embrace: their ability to draw from their experiences and weave these experiences and ideas into the way they write their characters, leading to a more authentic telling of their story. In addition, as a BET representative, Hill endears the Brock Akil’s specific articulation of

“black on purpose” as authentic to BET’s promise to incorporate more original scripted Black programming that directly speaks to their primary audience.

Authenticity for the Akils also means intentionally including in their shows the ways race impacts their characters’ lives. In fact, both Brock Akil and her husband push back against colorblind discourse explicitly. Salim Akil stated, “It’s a popular thing now in TV to say, ‘This character happens to be black.’ But one thing I’ve always admired about our approach is that we actually do black on purpose. We’re not shy about saying that. We should all take pride in that.”²⁰⁵ Brock Akil, when asked about their approach and how they push back against colorblind casting, replied that people have rich histories and backgrounds that provide “roadmaps” for characters. She elaborated, “I don’t know why race and culture would not be important to a character.”²⁰⁶ Throughout the show, Brock Akil has her characters explicitly discussing the state of the Black community both on Mary Jane’s *Talk Back* and amongst family and friends. For example, at the beginning of season two Mary Jane hosts a dinner party with multiple friends and her little brother Paul in attendance. The scene meanders through the various active conversations of the evening, from dialoguing about the impact of the Reconstruction period, education, religion, sugar as a drug trade, and the economy on the Black community. Tensions abound as some argue for individualism, while some emphasize historical oppressions, as each continue to drink more and bask in the comfort of Mary Jane’s expensive home. When discussing the purpose behind the dinner party scene, Brock Akil noted how deliberate the scene was, stating:

I see the show as a dinner party, meaning it’s a conversation that I’d like to have with the public at large. I find, even personally, sometimes it’s hard to be successful when your community or your family is struggling. That’s what you’re seeing in that scene. Basically, a lot of successful black people trying to figure out how to help their own community. We often don’t see that. That’s what’s on our minds, trying to feel okay with your own success.²⁰⁷

Brock Akil injects conversations in *Being Mary Jane* that she views are a reflection of the larger conversation happening within the Black community. These types of scenes incorporate race and culture and demonstrate the diversity of views surrounding multiple topics that circulate in the wider public dialogue.

Brock Akil's incorporation of diverse viewpoints reflects her mission to write complex characters that combat traditional stereotypes. She articulates throughout multiple interviews that she does not believe in "positive" or "negative" Black imagery, but instead that the reality is that people are not positive or negative and are complex and both good and bad.²⁰⁸ She embeds this complexity into her characters, mentioning that "oftentimes you'll see Mary Jane doing a good deed but frustrated and agitated in the doing."²⁰⁹ Throughout *Being Mary Jane*, especially in the Mary Jane character, this focus on complicating "good" and "bad" binaries comes through characters' mistakes and questionable choices.

Brock Akil's success creating shows about Black communities, targeting Black audiences, and broadcasting over niche channels, connects her directly to BET's dual economic and social interests. And, just as industrial press sometimes relegates BET to the margins as a niche channel, Brock Akil's name often goes unnoticed. Journalists will comment that she is "about to become a household name" or "rarely mentioned" alongside other prominent Black television showrunners such as Shonda Rhimes or Lee Daniels.²¹⁰ However, Brock Akil's responses to these comments indicate that she defines success based on her conversations with the audience she targets, Black women. At the American Public Bureau's Chicago Ideas Week in 2015, Brock Akil noted that her definition of success used to be about getting onto prime time and filling the "negative space" to tell stories about Black women, who she viewed as nearly invisible on television. She quickly recognized that the stories she wanted to tell and the

“machine that creates success” were not compatible, so she found success on the “edge.” She stated, “Once I stopped chasing after what success was defined as, I became, I have a larger success than I imagined.”²¹¹ Brock Akil views her path in the television world as successful not only because she has broken cable records with her shows, but also because she is able to fulfill her vision of writing and bringing to the screen stories and characters that remain largely invisible across the television landscape. Importantly, her definition of success also means speaking to the audiences that are often ignored. Speaking with *HuffPost* Brock Akil asserted, “I can’t be this successful and nobody know who I am. I think the audience that I’ve had a conversation with over my 20-year writing career are primarily black women, and I think that statement is more about society than it is about me. And that is, there’s no value in the audience that I value. But now, the tide is turning; things are changing.”²¹² Her explicit and intentional desire to be “black on purpose” and hone in on a Black female audience, seeking to represent their complexity on screen, sets her apart from her industrial counterparts, in particular Shonda Rhimes. While Rhimes brought Olivia Pope from *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-), played by Kerry Washington to screens as a Black female lead character, Rhimes resists having her characters of color explicitly discuss race and in general ascribes to a colorblind casting strategy.²¹³ In the case of Olivia Pope, while Rhimes intentionally cast a woman of color, the character “transcends the fixed reality of her race” to embody post-racial and post-feminist politics.²¹⁴ Brock Akil does not simply cast women of color, but embeds their cultural experiences into her characters.

“Black on Purpose” Enacted: The Visibility and Vulnerability of Black Women

Brock Akil’s vision to be “black on purpose” and desire for her characters and stories to speak authentically to the complex and diverse Black community shows through the cast’s embrace of her vision and their portrayals throughout the first three seasons. The main character

Mary Jane and her relationships with other Black women on the show enact Brock Akil's strategy to be black on purpose, attack stereotypes, and embrace complex representations of Black women. The world of *Being Mary Jane* engages in complexity by allowing multiple Black women to interact and explicitly discuss their struggles, triumphs, and responsibilities. Rather than having one Black woman stand as "the" representation of Black womanhood, Brock Akil creates multiple Black female characters that contend with various stereotypes, issues, and vulnerabilities. This allows for multiple Black female actresses to be cast in roles that allow them to reflect on the storylines in the first three seasons and relate to the stories that Brock Akil writes. Unlike the colorblind casting strategy of ABC and *The Bachelorette*, where the strategy insists cast members ignore cultural specificity and privilege a post-racial ideology, Brock Akil's vision requires the actresses to reflect on how they relate to their role, and even think about how this impacts their careers as Black women in film and television. The character of Mary Jane, and her relationships with her niece, her best friend, and an extortionist revel in complexity and situate *Being Mary Jane* in a larger conversation about topics Brock Akil feels are timely in the Black community. Thus, while industrial logics envision Black audiences as products to sell to advertisers, Brock Akil envisions her audience, cast, and characters connecting together.

The character of Mary Jane, played by Gabrielle Union, is in nearly every scene of the first three seasons. As Mary Jane Paul to her cable news audience, and as Pauletta Patterson with her family, *Being Mary Jane* follows her as she straddles both her public and private personas. Because of her prominence in the series, audiences see the majority of Mary Jane's life and day-to-day activities, with multiple scenes simply following her around through her house as she bakes, showers, drinks, and arranges her Post-It notes with inspirational quotes strewn about her bedroom. She balances her career as a cable news host at a major news network in Atlanta, her

sprawling family and its financial troubles, and her love life. The series situates Mary Jane's story as one about struggling to find love, starting with the opening title stating only 42% of Black women marry, then discovering her lover was married himself and she was the other woman. As the series weaves through Mary Jane's numerous attempts at romance and dating, the audience views a multifaceted window into what it is like to be Mary Jane. Rather than try to present a perfect picture of Black womanhood that suits the politics of respectability, devoid of messiness and complications, *Being Mary Jane* engages with the many contradictory expectations Black women face and represents them through the point of view of one Black woman who sometimes, infuriatingly for the audience, inserts her unapologetic selfishness into every facet of her life.

Union, reportedly Brock Akil's "first choice" to play the title role, embraces Brock Akil's vision to represent complexity, and also discusses how she herself as an actress relates to Mary Jane.²¹⁵ The world of being Mary Jane reflects what Union describes is "an authentic life." She explained to *The Root*, "For women, you are either a victim or a hero. You're either the good girl or the bad girl, and very rarely do you get to see 360 degrees of a character...In *Being Mary Jane* you see her be all of that. She is a victim, she is a hero; she's a good girl, she's a bad girl, and she has those days when nothing is really happening. It reflects life—we aren't all one thing."²¹⁶ Union's description of Mary Jane fits neatly with Brock Akil's intent to transcend "good" or "bad" representations and embed authentic nuances into her characters for audiences, particularly Black women, to see a reflection of themselves. Union relates personally to Mary Jane's struggle to do everything and the need to keep striving for the next opportunity, as Mary Jane does in her television news career.²¹⁷ At times, Union admits that being Mary Jane can be "uncomfortable" because of her choices and insufferable attitude. She told *Buzzfeed*, "I'm like,

Ooh. I wouldn't like her! I wouldn't be friends with her! But ... if I can have compassion for myself and for my loved ones who haven't always made the best decisions, for sure I can have compassion and empathy for my character.”²¹⁸ Ultimately, Union sees Mary Jane with her flaws and questionable decisions as a character that is “FUBU” (for us, by us) for Black women.²¹⁹

The choice to follow Mary Jane throughout every facet of her life means audiences do indeed see “360 degrees” of Mary Jane, texturing the character as she moves through her day interacting with other people and being alone. While we view private everyday moments, such as Mary Jane kicking off her shoes and taking her bra off immediately when she gets home or scrolling through her Facebook feed in bed, we also witness embarrassing or dangerous behaviors. We see Mary Jane, in her desperation to have a child, save the sperm of her on-again-off-again boyfriend David in the freezer, stashed in a baking soda box. We follow Mary Jane as she struggles to control her growing tequila drinking habit, which she attempts to hide from family and friends. We are bystanders as Mary Jane breaks down after saying her “final” goodbye to David, violently chucking her goldfish’s bowl into the window of her house, then standing in the middle of a pile of glass. In mornings during the third season, Mary Jane’s stress manifests in her peeing in bed at night, and we observe as she methodically throws away her sheets when she wakes up, hiding this intimate issue from her housekeeper. These moments capture a wide range of insights into Mary Jane’s emotional and physical state, keeping us as audience members privy to Mary Jane’s every mistake and misstep. As the center piece of the show, Mary Jane does not hide anything from us, the audience. Instead, Mary Jane is wholly herself to the audience, authentically existing without any moments or places kept secret. Brock Akil’s writing style to showcase all of Mary Jane’s experiences and hide nothing from the audience brings visibility to life and identity as intersectional. Rather than hide or contain the

messy aspects of Mary Jane's life, Brock Akil embraces Mary Jane's messiness and rejects the notion that "having it all" means that her character has to be perfect.

Following Mary Jane everywhere also means seeing her at her most sexual, usually relegated to innuendos or naked exploitation in other television shows. The show celebrates Mary Jane's active sex life in various ways, from scenes of her masturbating, hooking up with her "booty call" whom she affectionately calls "Cutty Buddy," tangled up with David, and dipping into to her first sexual encounter with a white man. While a dominant storyline in the first season is her affair with a married man, Mary Jane's sex life resists the Jezebel stereotype because her sex life is only a piece of her life that we see. Instead of being a sex-crazed Jezebel, the show presents Mary Jane's sexuality as just one piece in her complex life where she also balances family, work, and friendship. Furthermore, these moments, while scripted, connect more meaningfully to reality than romance reality shows like *The Bachelorette* that portray sexual experiences as a "one night only" fantasy. In the context of other representations of Black female sexuality, Mary Jane's character embodies dimensionality that other representations lacked. For example, bell hooks, in her critique of the original *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) film by Spike Lee, argues that the main character of the film, Nola Darling, is a one-dimensional sexually liberated Black woman in a film where the Black men are multidimensional and patriarchal.²²⁰ While the character of Nola represents a seemingly independent and assertive Black female character who embraces her sexuality and rejects monogamy, hooks notes that throughout the movie the male characters strip away Nola's sexual agency. In contrast, *Mary Jane* embeds itself with the "mutual, sexually satisfying relationships between black women and men in a context of nondomination" that hooks sought in *She's Gotta Have It*.²²¹

The response from Black women critically reflecting on Mary Jane's character provides some insight into the complex ways Black women negotiate Black female representation on television. Some, like Janell Hazelwood writing in the Black business magazine *Black Enterprise*, say "enough is enough" with powerful women of color who struggle with their love lives. She asserts, "Stop it with the same ol' woe-is-me, I'm-about-my-business-but-I'm-a-hot-self-loathing-ball-breaking-mess-in-love depictions of black power women."²²² Yet, other Black women comment on how they relate to Mary Jane's success, flaws, and realism. Brande Victorian, writing on the online lifestyle magazine for Black women *Madamenoire*, reflects on how Mary Jane represents the mistakes all women make, and despite the desire to see only the "best" of Black women, she represents also the messiness of real life. She writes:

For some reason, we can so clearly see *and accept* white characters on television as just that, characters, but when it comes to black ones they always turn into the be-all end-all of the black experience... chances are you can relate to the messiness a little more than you're willing to let on. So why not turn down your nose just a bit and take the show for what it's worth to you as an individual instead of worrying about how it makes *us* look?²²³

Victorian centers her interpretation of Mary Jane on the vision Brock Akil and Union promote: that Mary Jane is one individual moving through her life making choices that sometimes turn into mistakes. Chevonne Harris editor of *Adore Colour* and writing in *HuffPost* agrees with Victorian, and sees Mary Jane as a study on the vulnerability of Black women, which makes her and the show "relatable, obsessively entertaining, and necessary for black women longing to unleash their vulnerability."²²⁴ Brock Akil's character, portrayed by Union, creates a conversation about the representation of Black women and its complexity.

Mary Jane is not the only Black woman in the show. She has an entire cast of Black men and women to engage with that further constructs how she, as one representation of Black womanhood, moves through the world. As television critic Shannon M. Houston comments that

while the show is “far from perfect,” *Being Mary Jane* portrays the “most important women characters —white, black and otherwise” on television.²²⁵ These characters, specifically Niecy Patterson, Lisa Hudson, and Cece Briggs, expand Brock Akil’s “black on purpose” mantra and become ways to tackle multiple stereotypes, engage them directly, and demonstrate how casting “on purpose” allows these actresses to bring in their own experiences and connect with the characters in meaningful ways. Mary Jane’s relationship with the other Black women on the show connect to broader public and private issues, such as sexuality, body image, and suicide. These relationships show various aspects of Black womanhood and challenge Mary Jane’s conceptions of perfection and her own self-image. Through weaving these topics throughout Mary Jane’s interactions with other Black women, Brock Akil highlights Black women’s roles in their family life, friendships, and social justice issues, making their positions visible and relatable. *Being Mary Jane*’s multifaceted characters and stories provides interpretive possibilities for BET’s Black audiences to watch, relate to, and discuss.

Niecy Patterson

The character of Niecy Patterson and her relationship with Mary Jane interrogates the tensions of “having it all,” the pressures of being society’s standard of “beautiful,” and complicates Black female sexuality. In terms of “black on purpose,” the scenes with Niecy serve to represent various topics in the Black community such as perceived sexual promiscuity and beauty. The show introduces Niecy in the first season as Mary Jane’s overweight 19-year-old pregnant niece. In the first episode, Mary Jane confronts Niecy about her irresponsibility for not protecting herself or providing for her children. Niecy, who already has one child from a different father, scoffs and continually tells Mary Jane she will get a job and figure it out. In the meantime, Niecy lives with the Pattersons in their opulent house in affluent Atlanta. Mary Jane is

hyper focused on getting Niecy's "life together," helping her lose weight, and ensuring she is independent. Niecy's relationship with Mary Jane represents Mary Jane's attempt to keep her family life together, despite resistance from her family members. Niecy resists Mary Jane's help, despite being one of the biggest beneficiaries of Mary Jane's financial assistance. At the same time, Mary Jane relies on Niecy to counter her own disappointment she feels for her own increasingly chaotic life.

Niecy's resistance begins when Mary Jane berates her over her sexual activity, second pregnancy, and unemployment. As Mary Jane tells her she cannot make a career out of having babies, and asks her to find something she's good at, Niecy retorts, "You know what I'm good at? Sex!"²²⁶ Niecy reveals to Mary Jane that her relationship to sex is based on her own insecurities; she confesses that the only way she can attract men is through sex. Despite Mary Jane insisting she finds Niecy beautiful, Niecy resists her aunt's compliments and asserts that she is happy her new baby is half-Filipino, because that means she will be light skinned, beautiful, have "good hair and an easier life."²²⁷ Niecy's insecurities about herself and her body image add a different layer to *Being Mary Jane's* portrayal of Black female sexuality. Instead of leading an active and fulfilling sex life like Mary Jane, Niecy's sex life is riddled with guilt and inadequacy. While Niecy's sex life is different, it does not necessarily fall into traditional stereotypes of Black women. Instead, what could on the surface be read as stereotypical (a teenaged Black girl with two children from two different fathers), Niecy and Mary Jane's discussions about sex and insecurities add contextual layers to Niecy's sexuality and character, thus adding complexity.

Taking advantage of the few moments Niecy opens up and is vulnerable to Mary Jane, Mary Jane attempts to discipline Niecy's body. She insists Niecy go on walks with her, teaching her how to cook vegetables, and gifts her a large water bottle. Yet, Niecy challenges Mary Jane

on her narrow conception on what “healthy” means. As Mary Jane confronts Niecy about the junk food she finds under her bed when Niecy is living with her, Niecy argues, “I’m not going to let you, or anybody else convince me that skinny is it when models are passing out on runways.”²²⁸ Niecy, while acknowledged she is “thick,” resists Mary Jane’s attempts to shape her in her image. Raven Goodwin, the actress that plays Niecy, commented on this aspect of Niecy’s personality to *Buzzfeed*, explaining, “Niecy is important because she has this aunt who’s fabulous and beautiful, and she realizes that she’s not her. But she’s on her own journey to loving herself. Every young girl could relate to that. I could relate to that.”²²⁹ Niecy’s resistance to her aunt’s help makes her an authentic teenager; while she relies on Mary Jane that does not prevent her from attempting to be her own independent woman.

While Niecy relies on Mary Jane financially, Mary Jane often relies on Niecy in her most vulnerable moments. When Mary Jane goes through hormone injections for a *Talk Back* segment on infertility issues, she needs Niecy to help with the injections once a day since she is scared of needles. In another moment, Mary Jane takes out her weave one night in preparation for a hair appointment the next morning, and her hairdresser cancels last minute. Mary Jane calls Niecy in a panic. Niecy arrives in the middle of the night and sews her weave back in her hair, while Mary Jane, relieved, explains her fear of wearing her natural hair on television. Mary Jane refuses to go on air to a mass, often white, audience with her natural hair because she wants to project the image of perfection through a weave that fits in with a dominant idea of beauty. Niecy coming to help Mary Jane signals the community of Black women responding to this standard. Thus, Niecy and Mary Jane’s relationship enacts “black on purpose” by embedding real and authentic vulnerabilities Black women face together when thinking about their image.

Niecy flips her flaws and insecurities on Mary Jane, demanding Mary Jane confront her own life choices as she berates Niecy for hers. After catching Niecy having sex with her first child's father in Mary Jane's bed, the next morning Mary Jane asks Niecy, "Are you tired of being sorry and making promises you aren't able to keep?" As they argue, Niecy confronts Mary Jane about her drinking, pointing out that she has nothing going on her life except drinking alone.²³⁰ Mary Jane and Niecy's relationship is a constant tug-of-war for power and agency. Their relationship also embraces confrontation and exploring how Black women consider sexuality and body image. However, Mary Jane confronts and argues with other Black women on the show, particularly her best friend, Lisa.

Lisa Hudson

Often, Mary Jane's interactions with other characters reveals her unlikability and carelessness with other people. In particular, her arguments with childhood friend Lisa Hudson reveal Mary Jane's selfishness. As Mary Jane's best friend, Lisa sees the best and worst in Mary Jane; Mary Jane also sees the best and worst in Lisa. Lisa is an obstetrician, and we meet her first when she provides care for Niecy during her second pregnancy. However, the image of Lisa in her doctor's uniform, put together, intelligent, and confident, is not the dominant picture of Lisa in *Being Mary Jane*. Lisa's primary storyline is her struggle with depression, her attempts at committing suicide, her unspoken feelings for David, and Mary Jane's reactions to her mental illness. Lisa's storyline highlights the stigma of mental illness and directly confronts the ideal of a "strong Black woman."

Lisa is a constant support for Mary Jane. Mary Jane confides in Lisa, working through her issues with Niecy, David, and work related strife. Mary Jane rests on Lisa's support as she undergoes fertility treatment, stresses over her affair, and questions whether she should truly be

with David or not. In these moments, Mary Jane focuses conversations on herself, and Lisa rarely interjects with stories of her own life. The only insight the audience gets of Lisa's personal life is the tension between Lisa, David, and Mary Jane. While Lisa secretly pines for David, she becomes the sounding board for Mary Jane's desire to be with David despite their estrangement.

Mary Jane supports Lisa by attending to her during her attempts to commit suicide. We see Mary Jane breaking into Lisa's house one evening, rushing up the stairs, and forcing Lisa to puke out the pills she had swallowed. Mary Jane manages Lisa's depression privately, but in season two their friend Valerie, a psychiatrist, tries to intervene. When Lisa has another episode, Valerie asks Mary Jane if they should consider a "5150," or involuntary psychiatric hold. Mary Jane immediately responds, "No! Her career would never survive a psychiatric hold." Valerie presses, "Don't you think being alive is a little more important than her career." Mary Jane responds, "Not to Lisa it isn't." Mary Jane continually denies that Lisa overdoses on pills intentionally, framing Lisa's mental state as "just a little depressed."²³¹ Mary Jane's support for her friend begins and ends with maintaining Lisa's privacy as she manages her depression, rather than opening opportunities for Lisa to explore additional options to receive help.

Lisa and Mary Jane's friendship falls apart when they accuse each other of being selfish. In one of their final arguments, Lisa tells Mary Jane she is self-centered, and Mary Jane questions the reality of her depression. Mary Jane walks away from this argument stating she is going to focus on herself, while Lisa glowers. At the end of season two, David accidentally calls Mary Jane while he and Lisa are having their own argument. Mary Jane is driving in her car and overhears through her Bluetooth connection that David and Lisa had sex and never told Mary Jane. The season ends with Mary Jane crashing into another car, suffering multiple injuries including significant scarring to her face that requires extensive plastic surgery. The last time

Lisa and Mary Jane see each other, Lisa attempts to talk with Mary Jane after her car crash. Mary Jane won't let her talk, and gives a devastating monologue tearing Lisa apart:

I'm sorry...for all the guys that don't return your calls and the ones that never noticed you...I'm sorry that you couldn't find a man to love you. I'm sorry about your step dad and that you haven't spoken to your mother in years, and I'm sorry that my life is somehow an insult to yours... And I'm sorry that I spent the last year saving Black men from suicide when you were sitting right there in front of me. I'm sorry that I selfishly couldn't see you because I would have to look at myself, and then I would have to consider the possibility that I too am unhappy, and then worry that my unhappiness is really another word for depressed, and if I'm depressed then could I also kill myself. I'm sorry I was so afraid of my own fragility that I couldn't see yours...you betrayed me...and I'm going to need a little time...I believe I've earned the luxury of thinking about me for once.²³²

In this monologue, Mary Jane airs her own grievances with Lisa, but reveals her own tendencies to center conversations on herself. She's apologizing for her life choices that affected Lisa in hindsight, but ends with separating herself from Lisa rather than trying to make up for past mistakes. In addition, she frames Lisa's pain as a representation of her own pain, rather than taking Lisa's depression in the context of Lisa's own life. Latarsha Rose, the actress who plays Lisa, in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, commented that Lisa, "as a character, as with all the women on the show, feels that it's important for them to protect their image and not seem like they're a burden to anyone. I think it was the way her friendship progressed with Mary Jane that made her get to that point."²³³ In this scene, we see Lisa protect herself, not responding to Mary Jane's comments directly, silently accepting Mary Jane's demand for more space.

The last time we see Lisa is episode three of season three. The show opens with a fade in of Lisa eating a large meal at her dining room table. With no background music playing, it cuts to Lisa looking at herself in the mirror naked, then taking a shower. She dresses in a flowy pink dress, then lies in bed with a glass of red wine. The show cuts to Mary Jane attending to her facial scars, then back to Lisa as she pours three bottles of pills in a bowl before methodically swallowing each pill with red wine, as solo violin music rises in the background. Back to Mary

Jane going to the bathroom, then back to a pan of Lisa lying in bed, as the glass of wine drops to the floor, and her mouth foams as she overdoses and dies. Brock Akil's incorporation of graphic details centers suicide as an important and real topic that cannot be edited "nicely," but filmed purposefully.

Lisa's suicide impacts the people within the fictional world of *Being Mary Jane* and those watching. Mary Jane and her friends reflect on her suicide, with her friend Nichelle commenting, "Black people don't kill themselves...granted we might have been suffering from a lot of things but we took pride in the fact that no matter how hard things got, we didn't do that." She continues that strong Black women are "strong no more because we are dying off in plain sight." This scene causes multiple conversations across multiple online writers. Writers from *The Root* respond to Nichelle's comments, writing, "M.J. and another black friend suggest that black women are too strong to commit suicide. That's the problem. Trying to be the strong black woman is literally killing us. Black women are never allowed to be weak because we're too busy holding it together for everybody else."²³⁴ *Clutch* writers echo these sentiments, commenting that "so many Black women try to smile, or be strong, through their pain—but it just doesn't work."²³⁵ Lisa's story hit home for freelance writer Tahirah Hairston, who admits in *Splinter News* that she attempted to talk with a friend about her mental illness, a conversation that did not end well. She reflects that when her family discusses mental illness, instead of seeking professional help, they suggest "prayer or a good church."²³⁶ These observations point to the ways *Being Mary Jane*, through the character of Lisa in this case, starts conversations on the vulnerability of Black women, mental illness, and the oppressiveness of the "strong Black woman" image. Instead of a triumphant story where Lisa prevails, we witness her supporters push her away (including Mary Jane), and the show brutally visualizes the horrific moment of her death.

At Lisa's funeral, Mary Jane gives a speech and reveals more details about Lisa's life in front of her friends and family. She states that Lisa was sexually abused as a girl by her step father, who is in the audience with Lisa's mother against Mary Jane's wishes. Mary Jane cries, "She carried that pain with her every day for the duration of her life...I must have asked her a thousand times 'How are you? How ARE you?' But I don't know if I ever actually wanted to hear her truth. And now she's gone...Make sure that you tell everyone that you love that you will love them no matter how ugly their truth is. You'll still love 'em."²³⁷ In this moment Mary Jane opens up and admits to the entire funeral audience that she, and they, played a part in Lisa's death. Mary Jane, too, dismantles the image of a strong Black woman as she admits her mistakes, expresses vulnerability, and cries into the casket of her best friend. Mary Jane's journey of vulnerability continues as she becomes vulnerable to Cece Briggs, an extortionist who threatens her career and challenges her place in the Black community.

Cece Briggs

In the opener of season three, we meet Cece, the driver of the other car in Mary Jane's car crash. Mary Jane expresses her guilt for hurting Cece, who left the car crash with a broken arm and an expensive hospital bill. After giving Cece a check for \$3,000, Cece surprises Mary Jane at her house a few weeks later. Cece, with Mary Jane's illegally obtained alcohol lab report from the accident in hand, advises Mary Jane that they have to "help each other out." And, by helping each other out, Cece means keeping Mary Jane's lab report secret while Mary Jane pays her \$25,000. Mary Jane, with a new promotion to the SNC *Prime Time* show, agrees to pay in order to protect her career and image. Cece calls Mary Jane and her money her "blessing." Cece elaborates, "I was in a trying time in my life...just when I thought God had forsaken me, you crashed into my car...This accident is my blessing. You, Miss Mary Jane Paul, you are my

blessing.”²³⁸ As they develop their relationship, Cece challenges Mary Jane to reconnect with a “black on purpose” vision in her career and personal life.

Cece’s extortionist sensibilities and overall manner sets her apart from the other Black women on the show. Brock Akil and her team originally wrote the role for a man, but later cast Loretta Devine and tweaked the dialogue to reflect her pronouns. Other than that, Devine embraced the gender fluidity of her role, explaining, “I was trying to be as male as I possibly could. That’s all I ever thought about. I even thought about, ‘Is this woman attractive to me or not attractive to me?’ I wasn’t trying to do anything feminine. Everything was the way a man would do it, straight up. I think it worked, and I’m very proud of what I did.”²³⁹ Devine commented that typically she plays mothers, wives, and generally more feminine role, and this was her chance to play a “big character.”²⁴⁰ Cece’s attire of fedoras, bowling shirts, boxy blazers, and khakis physically signals that Devine’s portrayal embraces the earlier masculine qualities Brock Akil originally wrote into the role.

While getting to know Mary Jane through their bi-weekly payments, Cece tells her she would “rather keep our dollar in the Black community,” a community she caters to through her bookstore. The bookstore, called Miracle Books, hosts Black author events and sells African American authored books. When Cece is not busy extorting Mary Jane for money, she debates with her customers about the plight of Black folks in the present economy and the legacy of slavery. Cece claims the money is for the survival of the bookstore. Cece spends time arguing with Mary Jane about these issues as well, causing Mary Jane to ask her, “Do you think about anything besides Black people and race?” Cece quickly responds, “No, we are still at war.”²⁴¹

Cece seems to embody “black on purpose” in every scene she is in, and Mary Jane at times seeks her out to receive advice on race. After Mary Jane’s wounds heal from her car crash,

she takes over the *Prime Time* show on SNC. Reveling in her new promotion, Mary Jane speaks at a journalism class, where the students accuse her of being a sell-out who is only concerned with fame. Disturbed, Mary Jane goes to Cece's bookstore, and explains the situation to Cece. Cece sighs and tells her, "You prefer things and not value, especially not doing anything for anybody besides yourself." Mary Jane defends her promotion and her spot on *Prime Time* and Cece shoots back, "If the promotion is so good, then why are you so defensive? Mary Jane what do you want?" Mary Jane reflects and responds she wants to do *Talk Back* again, this time mirroring what happened in the "ugly Black woman" segment. Cece encourages her to go back and serve her community. Later, Cece arrives at her house and amends her comments, arguing that Mary Jane should do both *Prime Time* and *Talk Back*. She explains, "Don't go back to *Talk Back* for less money for your people, we don't need to tear down to build. We need you on *Prime Time* because that's progress and our babies need to see winners in all walks of life."²⁴² Cece becomes the only consistent promoter of Mary Jane's vision to have *Talk Back* be more *Talk Black*, and also assists in thinking through the vision of the show as Mary Jane attempts to reboot it.

Cece's question about what Mary Jane wants seems to flip a switch in Mary Jane's vision for her future. Instead of settling for the *Prime Time* slot, Mary Jane takes Cece's advice and asks to have *Talk Back*, too, as an hour long segment from the point of view of the marginalized. As Mary Jane and her new team are revamping *Talk Back* in Mary Jane's home, Cece shows up. Cece inserts herself into the team meeting, tears apart their topic board, tossing out ideas and telling the producers, "Write that down, baby!" A few days later, Cece feels she deserves compensation for her contributions to *Talk Back*, looking to extort Mary Jane once again. Mary Jane flips the script on Cece, and tells her that she wants to write a book about their relationship

because “our story makes a great book!” A few days later, Cece and Mary Jane arrive at the book publisher’s office, and Cece tells the editors their story, including admitting extortion. Cece explains, “Because of the smaller payments...and the extended amount of time we were able to bond as women, give each other advice, ultimately become friends.” At the end of the conversation, Mary Jane turns to one of the editors and asks, “You have enough?” He responds, “Plenty,” then arrests Cece. The “editors” were F.B.I. agents called together by Mary Jane to put Cece away and get her out of Mary Jane’s life. After her initial fury, Cece tips her hat to Mary Jane’s courage and ability to take charge. While Mary Jane is the reason Cece will be locked up, Cece is a primary factor to unlocking Mary Jane’s vision for her career and desire to serve the Black community purposefully.

Conclusion

The Akils enacted their “black on purpose” mantra through complexity, authenticity, and embracing complicated relationships between Black female characters on *Being Mary Jane*. I assert that the challenging and confrontational relationships between Mary Jane and Niecy, Lisa, and Cece explore stereotypes, issues within the Black community, and inspire conversations and reflection within the show and outside of the show. The complicated history of BET marks a departure from the story of broadcast networks like ABC. While Disney and ABC contain people of color and embed them in colorblind discourses that maintains white hegemony, BET’s history of navigating profitability and a social uplift promotes a more complex picture. In the specific context of the Akils’ strategy of “black on purpose” and *Being Mary Jane*, BET showcases a commercially successful show that capitalizes on authentic and complex representations of Blackness.

Brock Akil's journey with *Being Mary Jane* ended in 2015 when she and her husband signed an exclusive deal with Warner Bros. Television to produce a show for broadcast television.²⁴³ While still executive consulting on the show, she passed her vision on to a new showrunner and BET. The Akils' passion for highlighting Black women's voice and purposefully engaging complex representations of Black women now shifts to highlighting Salim's voice. Brock Akil reflected in an interview with *Essence*, "The past years have been me getting out what I wanna say about Black women. I'm really excited that this deal will be more inclusive of [Salim's] voice and what he wants to say about Black men. No one's really heard his voice yet."²⁴⁴ This time, their voices will be on prime time on a broadcast network, transferring their success on a niche cable channel to a potentially wider audience.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

The representation of Black women on television involves complex negotiations of identity and industry, exclusion and inclusion, and empowerment and marginalization. The two case studies in this project, *The Bachelorette* and *Being Mary Jane* negotiate Black womanhood in different and complex ways. Both television shows star Black women, at face value making their experiences visible to audiences. Yet, how each show negotiates the specific experiences of Black women reveals the tensions between Black women as visible on screen and making their cultural experiences visible. While the industrial discourses and the text of *The Bachelorette* promote colorblind discourse and privilege the invisibility of Rachel's identity as a Black woman, *Being Mary Jane* explicitly engages with the complexity of Black womanhood, making visible the experiences that come along with that identity.

The implications of each show's industrial strategy highlights their different approaches to navigating textual representations and casting decisions. The casting of Rachel has not shaken the colorblind ideology embedded within *The Bachelorette/Bachelor* universe, nor has having a lead of color ushered in a new era of casting more diversity. Rachel's season ended up having fewer viewers than the previous season of *The Bachelorette*. Mike Fleiss, the creator, balked at the ratings, stating, "I found it incredibly disturbing in a Trumpish kind of way. How else are you going to explain the fact that she's down in the ratings, when — black or white — she was an unbelievable bachelorette? It revealed something about our fans."²⁴⁵ The franchise took note, and their next move revealed something about their priorities. Following Rachel's season, ABC announced its new Bachelor, Arie Luyendyk, Jr. Arie, a fan favorite from season 8 of *The Bachelorette* in 2012, is a Dutch-born white American racecar driver. While *The Bachelor* made an unusual move to cast a star not seen since his stint on *The Bachelorette* six years prior, Arie's

pedigree of exciting career choice and “standard” good looks fits the traditional notions of how the franchise frames the ideal love interest. For *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, securing their profitable formula means limiting risks in casting, and casting a lead of color is a deviation from their formula, and thus a risk.

Despite ABC’s intentions to appeal to the masses and maintain the status quo, BET as a niche cable channel appeals to a specific audience that traditionally the industry does not deem the commodity audience. While ABC makes no explicit aims to meet any social or community obligations to its audience, BET offers a complex picture of balancing the explicit obligations to its core audience and making a profit. BET’s *Being Mary Jane* demonstrates to the television community that narratives and stories that center Black people, and specifically Black women, are not only worthy of telling, but suit the business and capitalistic needs of the television industry. The Akils established a brand for themselves on creating complex original content about the Black community and for the Black community. Their careers are not over yet, as they recently created *Black Lightning* (2018-) for The CW through their Warner Brothers deal post-*Being Mary Jane*. While *Black Lightning* has only aired a few episodes, it represents the Akils re-entry into broadcast television and the potential to assert Black audiences as a premium commodity audience on television. The Akils are industrial professionals that juggle the tensions of being in tune with the interests and concerns of their specific audience and fulfilling the industrial obligations to create a profitable show for the channel.

Limitations & Future Research

While this study contributes to scholarship by focusing on Black women and representation in television and complicating the tensions between text and industry, there are clear methodological limitations that open the door to future research directions. First, I chose

my two texts, *The Bachelorette* and *Being Mary Jane*, because they both starred Black women and had them at the center of their programs, were covered by industrial trade publications, and Black women had responded to both with reviews and recaps of multiple episodes. Both offered various ways to analyze casting strategies and practices in two different industrial environments: broadcast (ABC) and cable (BET). Furthermore, both shows assumed different audiences, allowing me to take into account how networks position shows differently depending on a mass white audience or a targeted Black audience. However, this also meant many other shows centering Black women were not included within this study. There are many other contemporary television shows that could be further examined to complicate the representation of Black women on television or how Black women represent themselves in the industry. Shows such as *Insecure* (HBO, 2016-), written by and starring Issa Rae, explore similar themes as my two case studies within the framework of a comedy. Lena Waithe, an Emmy awarding winning screenwriter for *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015-) and creator of *The Chi* (Showtime, 2018-), discusses her queer Black identity and infuses that into her characters, offering a new lens to complicate the representation of Black women. These are just two examples of Black women infusing their identities into various television programs that scholars could further research and unpack how they navigate creative and business goals.

The methodological choice to use already existing Internet commentary about each show meant I only looked at a small group of Black women who were responding and thinking critically about each show through written reviews and recaps. I was not able to capture, for instance, non-television critic responses to the show or incorporate Twitter responses from Black women. A future study could incorporate more extensive focus grouping to ask in depth

questions and garner more responses, or look at Twitter reactions to capture a wider diversity of responses.

In addition, finding specifically Black women commenting on both shows in online publications was difficult because of the different coverage across mainstream publications. *The Bachelorette* has coverage in a huge variety of mainstream sources such as *Hollywood Reporter*, *Elle*, *New York Times*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The New Yorker*. In contrast, I had to search for reviews and recaps for *Being Mary Jane* in specific blog posts mostly targeted at Black women. While *Being Mary Jane* is targeted towards a Black female demographic that fits these blog posts, it is a show that pulls millions of viewers and during seasons one through three consistently topped the cable ratings. Despite its high ratings, mainstream sources rarely covered it or acknowledged its existence among other premium cable shows. I cannot make any definitive conclusions about the implications of this type of coverage in this study, but offer that this as an opportunity for scholars to analyze how popular coverage of television shows privileges various networks, audiences, and viewpoints over others.

Furthermore, there are opportunities to expand the study of colorblind or purposeful casting through interviewing and observing industry professionals. While I set the parameters of my study to explore only semi-embedded deep texts that circulated within trade and popular magazines to analyze how stakeholders shaped public understandings of their shows, a different study could delve deeper by seeing how the creators and producers of shows operationalize their specific casting strategies throughout the writing, shooting, and editing process.

Concluding Thoughts

Both *The Bachelorette* and *Being Mary Jane* star a beautiful, successful, 30-something Black woman looking for love. Ari Curtis, as a real-life Black woman on the dating scene, can

relate to both Rachel and Mary Jane's negotiations of identity, representation, and romance. She writes on her blog *Least Desirable*, in response to *The Bachelorette*, that "normalizing romance for people of color—even if it's contrived, made-for-TV romance—is new, important ground for pop culture."²⁴⁶ Curtis's reaction to *The Bachelorette*, despite her misgivings with its fumbled discussions on race and promotion of Lee as a villain, reveal the complicated ways television negotiates race. The potential for television to tell unique, complex, and representational stories to diverse audiences remains. However, this study demonstrates that the potential to represent diverse experiences to diverse audiences requires recognition from the television industry that despite some people being labelled "least desirable," their stories can connect to audiences and make a profit. Black women, on television and in the dating pool, are not "least desirable," but as Mara Brock Akil stated, "are worth protecting, are worth loving...and we require nothing less than respect."²⁴⁷

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