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THE REAL ATLANTA: REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK SOUTHERN CULTURE, MASCULINITY, AND WOMANHOOD AS SEEN IN SEASON ONE OF THE FX SERIES ATLANTA

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THE REAL ATLANTA: REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK SOUTHERN CULTURE, MASCULINITY, AND WOMANHOOD AS SEEN IN SEASON ONE OF THE FX SERIES *ATLANTA*

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Introduction

Representations of Blackness in media have consistently abandoned realistic depictions of the social and economic status of Black America, reaffirming White discourse towards Black culture. Hip-hop has defined several aspects of Black culture, specifically notions of Black male hypermasculinity and Black womanhood, which are commonly not accurately addressed in media representations. Hip-Hop culture has become commercialized due to the appropriation of Black culture, and as such, media representations have maintained marginalized portrayals to stay consistent with the tried and true. As frustration mounts in the U.S and the racial divide begins to widen due to the most recent presidential election, Black shows are a much-needed breath of fresh air.

Earning the coveted one hundred percent on *Rotten Tomatoes*, the series *Atlanta* offers a unique comical approach to addressing social and economic class in Atlanta, Georgia. *Atlanta* is an FX original series featuring actor, comedian, and musician, Donald Glover (stage name: Childish Gambino). The series follows the lives of Earnest (Earn) Marks played by Donald Glover and his cousin Alfred "Paper Boi" Miles played by Brian Tyree Henry, as they navigate through daily life in Atlanta, Georgia. After dropping out of Princeton University, Earnest finds himself back in Atlanta, homeless and selling cell phones services on commission at the airport. With no money and no home, he goes to his cousin Alfred, who has found success with his newly released single and asks to manage him in an attempt to get back into the music industry. Earn (Earnest) who had a failed attempt at being a rapper still sees the potential in the music industry to provide for himself and his daughter, stating that he refuses to settle. *Atlanta* provides viewers with an authentic representation of Blackness in Black Atlanta while creating a dialogue that examines the intersection of race, class, and place. Rather than telling the audience how to

feel, Donald Glover (the creator of the series) wants the viewers to practice some self-awareness by asking themselves: Why am I laughing? Why does this make me feel uncomfortable? How does this moment relate to the current social and political climate?

Atlanta address matters of Black male masculinity in reference to gender and sexual identity to engage in conversations of sexual fluidity in not only hip-hop culture but in Southern culture; however, the series does little to address issues facing Black womanhood in relation to these concerns. Atlanta's writers challenge generalized notions that Black and hip-hop communities are resistant to LGBT matters because the issue of race continues to be prevalent in our society. Through an examination of homophobic rhetoric and hypermasculinity in hip-hop music, this project will engage hip-hop culture and its attitude towards same-gender relations, asking the question how does the series Atlanta address issues of sexuality and gender within hip-hop culture and Black communities? This project seeks to examine in what way is the series *Atlanta* a representation of Black culture, and how does the show offer something "new" and "unique" in its representation of Black women? Also posing the question of how does *Atlanta* signify Southerness in terms of Southern hip-hop culture, the Dirty South, and the New South?

Literature Review

Blackness and Media Representations

In his essay, *The Whites in Their Eyes,* Stuart Hall addresses how racial ideologies are a construction of media representations by examining three types of Black characters: the slave figure, the native figure, and the clown figure: the *slave* figure who is childlike and obedient, the *native* figure who is cheating and cunning, or the *clown,* whose sole purpose is to entertain White audiences at the expense of Blackness, as defined by Hall. The writers and producers of *Atlanta* have created four protagonist characters: Earnest, Paper Boi (Alfred), and Darius, all of which

avoid the overtly racist stereotypical roles of Black men and women on television that Hall examines. The lead female character, Vanessa (Van), challenges past stereotypes of Black women but she often displays characteristics of old tropes of Black womanhood. Although there are moments within the show that these negative stereotypical narratives do shine through, they are typically not at the expense of Blackness; more so, they are an attempt at educating the audience on the reality of Blackness in America, specifically in Atlanta. The characters that Hall discusses are typically one dimensional and have little depth or narrative. Hall points out that "one noticeable fact about all these is their deep ambivalence --- the double vision of the White eye through which they are seen."[1] He argues that representations of Blackness in the media are perceived in two ways by White audiences. Consciously perceived are good relations when watching programs featuring Black characters; however, the portrayal of Blackness in earlier television shows contributed to unconscious primitive imagery. Unconscious narratives depict Blackness in such a way as to not disturb the unconscious belief of White superiority, such as the mammy or the sambo.

According to Hall, the show *Amos 'n,' Andy* from the 1950s was one of the few representations of Black men and women on American television. Hall maintains that the sitcom helped to create a consciously perceived euphoric relationship between Black and Whites while presenting Blacks in stereotypical and subservient roles whose origins lay in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular forms.[2] According to Herman Gray in his text *Watching Race*, it was important that Blackness is represented as docile and subservient to preserve White supremacy, but also as humorous and childlike to entertain White audiences. Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, that

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[1] Gail Dines and Jean McMahon Humez, *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, ©2011), 84.

[2] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2004), 74.

primitive images of Black women such as the mammy, Black matriarch, Welfare Mother, and Jezebel, are preserved in an attempt justify the continued oppression of Black American women. Gray examines the way in which the Black characters of the Fifties were depicted as subservient caretakers, who did not have the capacity to function in traditional social and civic responsibilities. He states, "Black characters who populated the television world of the early 1950s were happy-go-lucky social incompetents who knew their place and whose antics served to amuse and comfort culturally sanctioned notions of Whiteness, especially White superiority and paternalism."[3] Hall's examinations of the *Grammar of Race* is about 'old movies' representations of Blackness, which adhere to the categories of Black television shows that Herman Gray discusses in *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness.*

Herman Gray asserts that the shows of the late Sixties and early Seventies are assimilationist programs that place Blackness into the everyday lives of White America. Blackness was in the form of a White hegemonic society, which created an unrealistic idea of race relations by marginalizing Blackness to build similarities between the two races. Gray argues that by assimilating Blackness into White culture, White audiences were able to ignore the social and cultural differences of Blackness. Gray's assertion then is similar to Stuart Hall's theory of a double-vision in how White America interprets race and race relations to avoid making Whiteness uncomfortable. The diversity within the Black community has historically been ignored, specifically the social class of Black Americans.

The series *Atlanta* takes steps towards the acknowledgment of different socioeconomic classes that have intentionally been omitted from television and film representations of Black culture. Donald Glover (Earnest Marks) and the creators of the show make it clear that the city of Atlanta is demographically a Black city with more than fifty percent of the residents being of

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[3] Ibid 75 WR.

African descent. *Atlanta* follows in the footsteps of shows such as *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son* by using humor to examine Black culture. Gray argues that these two shows (*Good Times* and *Sanford and Son*) in particular only added to the negative stereotypes facing the Black community and used racial humor that mostly diminishes Blackness. Gray discusses comedy as an outlet for Blackness to have discussions about race and class because comedy as a method of discussion has had widespread acceptance among television viewers.[4] He maintains that the Black comedic shows of the Sixties and Seventies did their part in reaffirming negative attitudes towards Black communities. Gray determines in his essay *Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-time Situation Comedy* that the financial risk of having Black men specifically represented as anything beyond the one- dimensional comedic and attractive characters, is the reason why negative representations persist today. He states, "suppliers must respect existing production and programming conventions; therefore, programs usually settle in the region of the tried and safe."[5] Historically, Black men are cast in roles closely related to the character of George Jefferson, who was characterized by his juvenile insults and hijinks. Since these shows have proven to be successful among the audiences, the pattern of representation has been slow to change. Gray concludes that using comedy is also a method of softening elements of the character's personality, history, and worldview which define them as Black Americans living in a multiracial society[6]. He uses the series *The Jeffersons*, one of the longest-running television series with a predominantly Black cast[7], to address illusions of upward mobility and middle-class success that for the most part were out of reach for the majority of Black Americans. It was during the late Sixties that American television pushed to represent Black

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[4] Herman Gray, "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy," *Media, Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (1986): 224.
[5] Ibid 226 TNM
[6] Ibid 229 TNM
[7] Ibid 228 TNM

families as middle class assimilated into White America; however, the characters are represented in a negative light. Gray uses the character, George Jefferson, to discuss the perceived aggression towards White America from Black Americans, in an attempt to examine the notion that Blackness equates to hostility and anger.

George Jefferson, played by Sherman Hemsley, was portrayed as a successful businessman, but he was angry and abrasive with White America while assimilating into White culture. *The Jefferson's* in many ways set the stage for other shows to represent Blackness in middle-class White America. This series and several shows that followed this decade made attempts at addressing social issues facing Black Americans; however, they fell flat as a result of continued representations of euphoric race relations in America. *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* are two examples of Black culture assimilating into Whiteness. These shows depict unobtainable upward mobility that very few Blacks could associate with during the Eighties and Nineties. Gray concludes that shows following the Seventies were just as detrimental to media representations of Blackness as the shows between the years 1950 and 1970; he asserts that *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, although progressive, were situated in the same White washed world that led people to believe in racial euphoria.

Deficit discourse directed at African Americans grew immensely due to President Reagan's feel-good politics that affirmed resentment towards the Black community and used Blackness as a source of resistance. Media representation of Blackness in the late Seventies equated to welfare queens, junkies, and criminals; whereas in the Eighties and Nineties representations of Blackness challenged societal views of African Americans. Gray states that while shows such as *The Cosby Show, Family Matters, 227, Frank's Place,* and *A Different World* were successful in breaking down barriers and bringing in a White audience, they also

perpetuated the concept of "Black and White television." These are a few of the shows that challenged the perceptions of Blackness in American society; however, critics contend that these shows helped maintain separate but equal doctrines. These shows were beneficial in showing White viewers that Black culture has some of the same problems, but according to Herman Gray, they failed to address racialized ideologies that perpetuate social and economic discourses towards Blackness.

The Cosby Show was the start of a new era for Black television. It was the first show to challenge stereotypes of Blackness. In their article, *The Cosby Show: The view from the Black Middle Class,* Leslie Inniss and Joe Feagin performed a research study with the goal of examining middle-class Black Americans' perception of the Huxtable family. They conclude in their research that while the Black middle class does not think the show is realistic, they enjoyed the program because it gave them something to work towards in their lives. Several of the middle-class Blacks who were interviewed in the research study felt that the show minimized real issues facing the Black community while creating the misconception that the Black communities were enjoying the same opportunities as Whites.[8] Many have argued that the characters were simply White characters in Blackface because the vast majority of Black families were surely not headed by a successful doctor and lawyer. Inniss and Feagin's study concludes that the show projected this notion of upward mobility in only one generation that was unrealistic; however, it offered an optimistic look at what Black Americans could have with the right amount of ambition. The men in the series were represented as educated, successful, and driven individuals; by bell hooks' definition, they were the epitome of what it meant to be a man by the White patriarchy masculinity standards that are valued in our society.[9]

[8] Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin, "The Cosby Show: The View from the Black Middle Class," *Journal of Black Studies* 25, no. 6 (1995): 693, 696.
[9] Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 88-89.

American culture's notion of patriarchal masculinity was ingrained into Black men and women during slavery and since has become the belief that has led to the continued oppression and dehumanization of Blackness. bell hooks argues that contemporary Black men and women have not attempted to challenge the narrow visions; instead, they have acted in compliance with the status quo, passively absorbing negative representations.[10] In her book of essays entitled *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* bell hooks discusses historical narratives that have led to the oppression and exploitation of the Black body and examines the shaping of the Black identities through centuries of misrepresentations that have marginalized Black men and women. To be masculine was to be the head of the household and Heathcliff Huxtable was the representation of a Black male character who had achieved the White patriarchal definition of masculinity. By these standards, *Atlanta's* protagonist characters, Earnest, Paper Boi, and Darius have yet to reach manhood and are perpetuating notions of Black men not taking the initiative to reach upward mobility. hooks, however, believes that Black men should reject the status quo opting instead to invent themselves.[11] In the series *Atlanta*, Earnest understands he must work hard to succeed in the music industry, which he sees as a means to provide. He is less concerned with patriarchal identities and more concerned with the reality of the daily struggle to provide financially in a society that equates Blackness to being lazy and irresponsible. While Earnest is able to forgo traditional patriarchal standards, Van (Vanessa) must operate and answer to modern societal views on what it means to be a mother. She is unable to live the life that she wants because not only must she take care of her daughter, she has to mother Earnest as well. The character of Van, played by German actress Zazie Beetz, is multifaceted in that she is a representation of several tropes of Black womanhood, including the mammy, the Black

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[10] Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 89.
[11] Ibid 88 BLooks

matriarch, and sapphire. The series creators attempt to provide new and unique representations of Black masculinity and womanhood; however, like many shows on television today the series often falls back into tropes of Blackness.

Atlanta takes great strides to show a realistic depiction of class and race unlike shows of the past that rarely depicted the harsh realities of poverty. As Gray discusses, *The Cosby Show* and its spin-off series *A Different World* challenged representation of stereotypical Blackness on American television, but were not able to actually change perceptions of Blackness. Gray believes that television constructions of Blackness in the series *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* are culturally significant because of the productive space it cleared and the aesthetic construction of Black cultural style it enabled.[12] *The Cosby show* did little to create discussions of class and race outside of middle and upper-middle class African American perspectives and issues; however, its spin-off show used diversity within the characters to engage different types of Blackness. *A Different World* highlighted the diversity among African Americans in a college setting and in doing so the show was able to address social issues that were relatable to Black audiences. Herman Gray argues that the show was significant in that it allowed Blackness to labor as the subject of complex questions and issues facing all people, especially African Americans.[13] The show addresses themes of masculinity and womanhood in relation to Blackness, but it fails to present a realistic depiction of the vast majority of Black men and women. *Atlanta* discusses the fluidity of Black male sexuality in conversations with class and race; the show offers a realistic depiction of how Black male sexuality and masculinity has preserved Black culture, specifically in Atlanta, Georgia.

Atlanta

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[12] Herman Gray, "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy," *Media, Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (1986): 79.
[13] Herman Gray, "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy," *Media, Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (1986): 104.

Atlanta has been called "the Black Mecca" with a majority of the residents being African American and for the potential for upward mobility; however, Matt Miller draws our attention to the wealth gap between the rich and poor, pointing out Atlanta has one of the highest ratios of wealth inequality in the country with the majority of the poor being Black.[14] Darren E. Grem elaborates on Miller's argument on the economic and social positions of Atlanta residents following the Civil Rights Movement, stating that by the time of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, the population of suburban Atlanta had become diverse, but Black Atlanta retained levels of crime, spatial segregation, and racial poverty that ranked among the highest of any American metropolitan area.[15] After fulfilling middle-class success, many of the people left the city, choosing instead to live in the suburban outskirts away from Black Atlanta and its poverty and violence. Reviewers believe that the series *Atlanta,* which takes place in the heart of the city, avoids overtly stereotypical portrayals of Southern hip-hop culture that are seen on American television while remaining authentic in its representation of Black culture. Recent depictions of Black and hip-hop culture in Atlanta have been of the middle and upper-middle-class Black men and women, who reinforce false notions of hypermasculinity, hypersexuality, and violence. Grem concludes that the first Atlanta-based rappers emerged from Black Atlanta, and like Miller, he acknowledges the role of the Miami-style bass music that influenced Southern hip-hop culture.

The city of Atlanta has not always been a mecca for the rap industry; it was not until the Nineties when Atlanta based rap groups *OutKast* and *Goodie Mob* created the Dirty South hip-hop sound; Matt Miller contends that it was the annual "FreakNik" spring break party that

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[14] Mickey Hess, *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, 2010), 469-470, March 3, 2017.
[15] Darren E. Grem, "The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America," *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 57.

brought attention to Southern hip-hop.[16] Grem agrees that the annual "FreakNik" block party played a major role in the creation of the "Dirty South" image in the early Nineties but argues that artists such as 2 Live Crew and Sammy Sam, created the original image of Southern hip-hop. Grem contends that "FreakNik" drew attention to Southern artists whose sounds were uptempo and hypersexualized, creating an image that categorized Southern hip-hop as "nice rap" better suited for sensitive listeners.[17] Miller and Grem examine the way in which the definition of the "Dirty South" changed as Southern hip-hop culture became commercialized and became a part of popularized culture. They make a point that Southern rappers in the Nineties felt that they were not getting respect because rap and place have a close relationship. In the Eighties and early Nineties, the rap industry was dominated by the East and West Coast, who saw Southern rappers as nothing more than "watermelon, chitlin-eatin', niggas,"[18] which in return created more aggressive lyrics coming out of the South in an attempt to gain respect. To outsiders looking in, the South was barefoot, country, and carefree, which did not match up to the gangsta lifestyles and lyrics of East and West coast rappers. The rap group Outkast became one of the first rap groups to represent Southern hip-hop culture that accurately depicted what it meant to be Black and living in the South, specifically in metro Atlanta. The series *Atlanta* offers a realistic look at Black Atlanta, without sugarcoating the reality of the impoverished areas of the city; the show's creators depict the city differently than shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* or *Love and Hip-Hop: Atlanta*.

Current representations of the city of Atlanta on American television are in the form of reality television shows such as *Love and Hip-Hop: Atlanta* on *VH1*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and its spinoff shows *Tardy for the Party* and *The Kandi Factory* on *Bravo*. Following

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[16] Matt Miller, "Rap's Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16, no. 2 (2004): 187.
[17] Darren E. Grem, "The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America," *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 58.
[18] Matt Miller, "Rap's Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16, no. 2 (2004): 195.

their personal and professional lives, these shows feature mostly Black women who are middle or upper middle class, although their husbands and boyfriends make small appearances throughout the season. These shows, on the one hand, represent successful, hardworking Black women; on the other hand, these women are perpetuating stereotypes of Black women as angry, violent, and loud. The irony is that none of these women live in the city of Atlanta. Grem points out in his article, *The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America*, that cast of Atlanta based reality television shows reside for the most part in the suburban outskirts in Duluth or Alpharetta. These television depictions isolate one narrative of hip-hop and Black culture in Atlanta, omitting the reality of the socioeconomic standing of a large majority of Black Atlantans.

Love and Hip-Hop: Atlanta features entertainers in the music business whose origins started in Atlanta, such as rappers Waka Flocka Flame, Lil Scrappy, Yung Joc, and recording producer Stevie J, all of whom have successful music careers. In his work *Love, Drama, and Tears: Hip Hop Feminism, Blackness, and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* Patrick D. Bennett analyzes the representation of Black feminism and masculinity presented under the umbrella of hip-hop and how these representations impact perceptions of the Black community.[19] Bennett makes a similar assertion to Grem and Miller stating, "Lil Scrappy's unique Southern slang serves as capital in that it helps him sell records in the hip-hop sphere; however, beyond hip-hop, it limits his agency to advance in society because his dialect is deemed abnormal or uneducated."[20]

Lil Scrappy along with his fellow cast members Stevie J and Yung Joc, sustain perceptions of Southerners as country, uneducated, and hypersexualized as discussed by scholars

[19] Patrick D. Bennett, "Love, Drama, and Tears: Hip Hop Feminism, Blackness, and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta," *Research Papers* 530, (2014): 1-77.
[20] Patrick D. Bennett, "Love, Drama, and Tears: Hip Hop Feminism, Blackness, and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta," *Research Papers* 530, (2014): 52.

Matt Miller, Darren E. Grem, and Patrick D. Bennett, while simultaneously ignoring the social class of the majority of Black Atlantans in the metro Atlanta. The Southern dialect is one of the reasons the East and West coast were resistant to Southern hip-hop in the Nineties. Miller and Grem credit Southern rap groups Outkast and Goodie Mob for being unapologetically Southern and creating the notion of the Dirty South. The Dirty South as shown through language and hip-hop culture is fast-talking Southern drawls that cut off parts of the words making it difficult to understand. Grem and conclude that the South was uptempo, rhythmic, and soulful, but lacked the aggression that was coming from the East and West sounds; in contrast, the East and West coast delivery was smooth and laid back.

Grem credits music executive L.A Reid specifically for pushing to redefine the Dirty South because he saw the potential for Southern hip-hop to compete in the pop-music genre. It was on LaFace Records that OutKast released *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, which was new, fast-paced, and energetic while discussing real social and economic conditions facing Black Atlanta, which challenged notions of the South as happy-go-lucky and carefree. It was the album's *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* and *Soul Food* by Goodie Mob that laid the foundation for and popularized the phrase "Dirty South," which became an essential description of Southern hip-hop culture. It is important to note that neither Goodie Mob nor OutKast created the phrase "Dirty South," but they popularized the phrase. Grem mentions that the phrase was used in the Eighties throughout the South.[21] Miller and Grem acknowledge that the Dirty South's culture and definition began to transition in the early 2000s. As the phrase, "Dirty South" became commodified and adopted into popular culture; both men claim that it was the shift from independent labels to national labels that catapulted Southern hip-hop onto the charts.[22]

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[21] Darren E. Grem, "The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America," *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 60.

[22] Matt Miller, "Rap's Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16, no. 2 (2004): 191.

Through commercialization of Southerness in the Nineties, by the early 2000s, the meaning of Dirty South shifted from one of social and economic connotations to a reflection of the South as "crunk" and vibrant. Miller states, "unlike the business-oriented boosters of the New South, the Southern urbanites who imagined the Dirty South did not wish to sweep the legacies of slavery and racism under the carpet."[23] Tricia Rose contends in her work that hip-hop and Black culture have been popularized for the consumption of White youth who want access to Blackness without the reality of being Black.[24] Popularized notions of Southern hip-hop and Black culture have been that of violence, hypersexuality, and misogyny, and these images are what sell. Grem and Miller agree that the "New Dirty South" for the most part abandoned conversations about socioeconomic conditions, choosing upward mobility instead. Atlanta based artists have gone from embracing their Southerness to exploiting it while simultaneously preserving notions of Black male hypermasculinity.

Homophobia, Transphobia, and Atlanta

Tricia Rose argues that homophobia in hip-hop culture is accepted due to aligned beliefs of same-gender love (SGL) with conservatives who focus on sexism and violence, ignoring other kinds of hatred and discrimination perpetuated by hip-hop.[25] She makes the argument that racial perceptions of Black men as violent are often reinforced through Hip-Hop music that projects Black men as hypermasculine. As Hip-Hop becomes a part of popular culture, images of violence, homophobia, and hypermasculinity have become the status quo of Black male masculinity and have marginalized Black culture entirely. Rose notes that hip-hop is known for embracing conservative values, such as a patriarchal, aggressive, sometimes violent masculinity,

[23] Matt Miller, "Rap's Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16, no. 2 (2004): 205.
[24] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 223.
[25] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 237.

and mentions that rap artist priorities are given to individualism and personal success over community empowerment.[26] Additionally, several rap artists have openly spoken out against same-gender attraction in the rap industry citing that hip-hop culture has no room for such deviance; the rhetoric within their lyrics represent the resistance to SGL. Southern hip-hop culture specifically has avoided conversations of SGL and homophobia. Atlanta-based rappers have the added pressure of not being perceived as gay in the Bible Belt South, although the city of Atlanta is perceived as progressive regarding LGBT advocacy.

Hip-hop culture has historically been resistant to SGL; however, same-gender relationships are prevalent throughout rap music. Heteronormative masculinity surfaces in lyrics from artists such as Young Jeezy, who raps in his song "Dreamin":

"One thing about it, I got love for you homie/ Two things about it, I'll take a slug for you homie/ Look at you now, you'se a businessman/ I'm proud of you dog, handle your business man/You like the brother I never ever had."[27]

"Dreamin" was released in 2007. It is clear that the "homies" are an essential part of a rapper's life and success. In the pilot of *Atlanta*, artist Yo Gotti's 2016 hit "Law" was featured as the introduction to the entire series:

"Don't fuck no bitch that's fucking with your dog, that's law/ If you come up *don't forget about your dogs*, that's law/ I'm a street nigga so it's fuck the law/ If you broke nigga that should be against the law."[28]

There is a common theme when discussing hip-hop culture and SGL, which is Black hypermasculinity as a defensive strategy. Matthew Oware makes a case for brotherly love in the

[26] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 107.

[27] Matthew Oware, "Brotherly Love: Homosociality and Black Masculinity in Gansta Rap Music," *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 2011): 28.

[28] Yo Gotti, "Law," Genius, February 19, 2016, accessed March 2, 2017, https://genius.com/Yo-gotti-law-lyrics.

hip-hop community which he defines as homosociality. Tricia Rose and Matthew Oware both acknowledge the market forces behind the perpetuation of Black stereotypes; both argue that White youth are the main consumers of rap music and label executives intentionally filter the music to accommodate White comfortability.[29] Hip-hop culture which resists White supremacy notions also is built on a foundation of hegemonic masculinity. Hip-hop artists pride themselves on their authenticity, but they rarely address anything authentic outside of the construction of Black hypermasculinity connected with violence and homophobia. Oware examines heteronormative practices, stating that the performance of masculinity is the "code of the street," whereby Black males who live in predominantly urban and poor environments comport themselves in a manner deterring any sort of altercation with other individuals; thus, males must come off as aggressive or inclined to violence in order to prevent violent confrontations from ensuing.[30]

James Joseph Dean would argue that these hegemonic masculine practices are also constructions of homophobia, in which masculinity and heterosexuality are one in the same.[31] Dean argues that heterosexual masculinity can indeed be anti-homophobic stating that men who display conventional masculine identity often implies that they are heterosexual; however, this does not necessitate practices of homophobia.[32] Several rappers have openly admitted to not wanting to be associated with SGL; rapper 50 Cent stated, "hip-hop isn't for gays," because the genre is too aggressive for SGL, the implication being that gay men are weak, feminine even.[33] The rhetoric of rappers and rap music is typically hostile and aggressive which has translated to

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[29] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 223 and Matthew Oware, "Brotherly Love: Homosociality and Black Masculinity in Gansta Rap Music," *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 32.

[30] Matthew Oware, "Brotherly Love: Homosociality and Black Masculinity in Gansta Rap Music," *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 24.

[31] James Joseph Dean, "Heterosexual Masculinities, Anti-Homophobias, and Shifts in Hegemonic Masculinity: The Identity Practices of Black and White Heterosexual Men," *Sociological Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 536.

[32] Ibid 536. JJD

[33] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 238.

rappers being homophobic. Dean examines the way in which masculinity has been constructed through homophobic practices by interviewing straight men. The subject that stood out the most was teacher Rodney, a Southern Baptist African American male with strong opinions on SGL. Rodney defines his homophobia by citing SGL as morally wrong, a belief that was surely inspired by his Southern Baptist roots. The interview concludes with five out of six Black men who were strongly against SGL citing religion as the source of their beliefs.

Historically, the American South has been known for its conservative beliefs that are for the most part rooted in Christianity. Denise Herd further examines social and cultural patterns that are believed to contribute to the preservation of violence and homophobia within hip-hop culture. She argues that social constructions and social patterns of urban communities promote the confirmation of stereotypical belief systems that marginalize rap and rap artists as homophobic.[34] Based on this argument, the research study completed by James Dean shows that preconceived notions of rap culture as homophobic are simply a stereotypical social construct. The men using their religion and Southern background in Dean's research to justify their opposition to same-gendered relationships are not homophobic because of their beliefs and upbringing. Homophobia is used as a tool to reassure masculinity within heterosexual men, who often exaggerate their character to represent hegemonic notions of masculinity. According to Herd, "bell hooks indicates that 'sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.'"[35] While some believe social and cultural patterns have sustained homophobia in rap culture, others see the structural factors of patriarchy that shape gender relations in the rap community leading to homophobia.

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[34] Denise Herd, "Conflicting Paradigms on Gender and Sexuality in Rap Music: A Systematic Review," *Sexuality and Culture* 19, no. 3 (2015): 585, 587.
[35] Ibid 581. DH

Tricia Rose continues bell hooks' argument discussing patriarchal factors that have led to homophobia in the rap community stating that Black men have been long-denied access to the full powers of patriarchal masculinity, which in turn may have encouraged a particular brand of Black homophobia.[36] In pursuit of patriarchal masculinity, hip-hop culture, which is largely dominated by Black men, has embraced homophobic rhetoric in an attempt to access hegemonic notions of masculinity. Rose goes on to even suggest that hip-hop is a reflection of the important role that homophobia plays in defining masculinity.[37] Rose and James Dean both acknowledge in their work the construction of masculinity that influences homophobia in the hip-hop community.

This literature review examines past representations of Blackness on television to understand how representations have changed with the social and political climate. The goal is to deconstruct the television show *Atlanta* to understand in what way the show has challenged other narratives based on Blackness. In examining the current literature, there is a gap in realistic depictions of Black and Southern culture on mainstream television, and critics state that the series *Atlanta* gives an authentic look into life in Black Atlanta. Donald Glover, a successful rap artist himself, takes conversations on the show to an often-uncharted territory but creating dialogue on Southern hip-hop culture's relationship with the LGBT community.

Joining conversations on media representations of Blackness on American television, this project seeks to contribute to the discussions about current Black television representations by focusing specifically on the FX series *Atlanta*. With the recent increase in shows with a predominantly Black cast, this project will examine the way in which the series *Atlanta* has stood out in a crowd of popular Black television series. *Atlanta* is believed to have created a dialogue

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[36] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 237.
[37] Ibid 237.

on social and economic problems facing the Black community to challenge notions of Southerness and Blackness, while simultaneously celebrating Southern and Black culture. Just as the rap artists of the Nineties, the creators of *Atlanta* stay authentic in their portrayal of Southern culture, using the actual city to create a realistic depiction of class and race. Current representations of the city and Black culture are in the form of reality television, which fails to highlight significant issues facing Black communities and perpetuates stereotypical notions of Blackness, Southerness, and rap culture. Focusing on the role of Southern culture in the rhetoric of rap that is often deemed homophobic this project will also add to conversations on the Southern hip-hop community and its perception of same-gender relationships. This project specifically seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. In what way is the series *Atlanta* a representation of Black culture, and how does the show offer something "new" and "unique" in its representation of Blackness, specifically Black womanhood?
2. How does *Atlanta* signify Southerness in terms of Southern hip-hop culture, the Dirty South, and the New South?
3. How does *Atlanta* address and create a dialogue on issues of sexuality and gender within hip-hop culture and Black communities?

The research methods used in this capstone project are literary and visual analysis. Using existing literature on media representations of Blackness to examine Black characters on American television, this project seeks to highlight significant moments in African American portrayals to explore how *Atlanta* challenges notions of Black culture. Literary analysis will help to deconstruct the representations of Earnest, Paper Boi, Darius, and Van the four protagonists in the series. The men do not represent hegemonic notions of manhood as described by bell hooks; however, their characters are realistic depictions of Black men from Black Atlanta. While Van, the lead female role, is often portrayed using controlling images of Black womanhood. Literary

critics, for the most part, agree that historical Blackness on American television has been marginalized to caricatures to avoid disturbing notions of good race relations and to accommodate White supremacy. While engaging representations of Blackness on television, this project join conversations on Black male masculinity in hip-hop culture and its relation with same-gender love (SGL). Through literary analysis, this project engages topics of same-gender love and the hip-hop community to explore perceived homophobic practices.

By visually analyzing *Atlanta*, this project examines signs of Southerness. The dialect, behaviors, and appearances of the characters are often omitted from popularized depictions of Atlanta and Black culture. By analyzing the rhetoric and visual imagery in the series, this project will identify signs of Southern hip-hop culture, the Dirty South, and the New South in terms of Black identity and culture in Atlanta.

Chapter One of this project examines the history of Blackness in Atlanta. The chapter then explores the ways the series *Atlanta* uses visual imagery to represents Southern Black culture. Chapter Two will then explore how the series creators use comedy to address LGBTIQ issues and Black masculinity within the same context; while looking to hip-hop culture and rap artists to address notions of homophobia in the hip-hop industry. The Final Chapter addresses Black womanhood within the series. Within the framework of scholar Patricia Hill Collins and her explication of controlling images of Black women, the Final Chapter will also discuss how the show has created new representations or relied on existing tropes of Black womanhood.

Chapter One

***ATLANTA ON FX*: BLACKNESS AND SOUTHERN CULTURE IN THE CITY OF ATLANTA**

Reviewers of the series *Atlanta* have argued that the show creates a dialogue on social and economic issues facing the Black Atlanta community. The series *Atlanta,* which takes place in the heart of the city, attempts to avoid overtly stereotypical portrayals of Southern hip-hop culture that are seen on American television while remaining authentic in its representation of Black culture. First, in exploring the trajectory of mayoral candidates in the city, starting with William Hartsfield, I reveal the history of Black Atlanta. By looking at popular representations of Atlanta, this chapter analyzes visual presentations of Southerness and Blackness. Next, I look at how the show, *Atlanta*, explores and challenges notions of Southerness and Blackness while celebrating Southern and Black culture. I then explore the opposition present in shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Love and Hip-Hop: Atlanta.* Finally, I analyze the rhetoric and visual imagery in the series to identify signs of Southern hip-hop culture, the Dirty South, and the New South in terms of Black identity and culture in Atlanta.

History of Black Americans in Atlanta

Before the 1960s, Atlanta was primarily populated by White communities until the city experienced a substantial migration by Whites to suburban neighborhoods surrounding metro Atlanta. Kevin Kruse explores in his book, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism,* the political and social influences that led to the migration of White communities during the Sixties using the city of Atlanta to analyze the trajectory of desegregation in the American South. He examines the rate at which desegregation impacted entire communities; pointing out that non-Southern cities were affected; although, the influence on the reshaping of cities and the course of White resistance was much more considerable and rapid in the American

South during the Fifties and Sixties, specifically in the city of Atlanta. Following the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of Brown v. Board of Education that ended legal racial segregation, many Whites turned to violence as a way to actively resist progressive race relations. In the 1960s, Atlanta experienced a tremendous increase in White families and communities opting to move out of their neighborhoods rather than integrate. Kruse argues Southern ideologies that lend themselves to White superiority and increased concerns with property values, as the central reasons for White flight from metro Atlanta during the Sixties. White communities began to dismantle as Whites opted to leave the comforts of their neighborhoods as they started to witness changes within the city as desegregation reshaped social and political aspects of the inner city. During the period in which White flight was rapid, White Atlantans were fearful of the city becoming "Black," although many Whites asserted the reason for their relocation was concerns with property values rather than race.

In 1949, William Hartsfield was re-elected for a fourth term and is currently the longest-serving mayor of Atlanta, after holding office for six nonconsecutive terms. Atlantans re-elected Hartsfield due to his ability to obtain the political and financial backing of Atlanta's White business community, White voters on the north side of the city, civic and ethical government organizations, and the leadership of the African American community.[38] He provided an opportunity for Atlanta's White business community to wield more significant influence in political affairs that would directly affect the economy in return for their support. Hartsfield believed that Atlanta should remain a White majority city under the control of the middle-class; however, he assured African American leaders that affluent Whites were dedicated to improving relations between races.[39] He assured Black community leaders that he would actively promote

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[38] David Andrew Harmon, *Beneath the Image of the Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations: Atlanta, Georgia, 1946-1981*, Studies in African American History and Culture (New York: Garland Pub., 1996), 59.
[39] Ibid 49-50.

good race relations and segregated public spaces, along with the economic security that both would eventually provide.

Before the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, Hartsfield projected the notion of Atlanta as a racially diverse and utopian city, later coining the phrase "Atlanta… a city too busy to hate." As the Civil Rights Movement approached, the reality of Atlanta's racial relations became increasingly evident, with the rapid increase in White communities abandoning the city. The Black community in the mid-1940s, which comprised roughly thirty percent of Atlanta's population, was restricted to approximately ten percent of the city's developed residential lands.[40] The African American population sought to settle in the areas of Atlanta that were economically and politically developed in an attempt to access the lifestyles in which White communities were accustomed. Kruse examines the argument that Whites were more inclined to leave the city because of economic progress, as the result of Atlanta's interstate; which became the boundary between White and Black communities.[41] With newfound access to suburban Atlanta and increased movement by Black families into traditional White communities, White Southerners saw the opportunity for economic prosperities in new regions outside the city.

Choosing flight over fight, White Atlantans were not inclined to uphold White patriarchal supremacist ideologies that would have violently force Blacks out of the city, opting instead to place their focus on property values and economic profits. Kruse argues that as Whites moved in the surrounding suburban areas, they adopted new ideologies that would explain the need for White flight and the need for racial segregation, such as legal rights and individual freedoms. He states, "White Southern conservatives were forced to abandon their traditional, populist, and often starkly racial demagoguery and instead craft a new conservatism predicated on the

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[40] Ibid 63.
[41] Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism (Politics and Society in Modern America)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 42-78, 86.

language of rights, freedoms, and individualism."[42] Many upper-class White Southerners felt it was an inherent right to live in segregation. The expected impact of living in a "Black" neighborhood would affect White Americans ability to maintain their current socioeconomic positions, as well as their ability to relish in the freedoms and rights they were accustomed. Atlanta's White communities were able to contain their disdain of Hartsfield's promotion of shared public spaces, for the most part avoiding violence and intimidation to promote racial separation in the city. Kruse notes that in 1960 the total White population of Atlanta stood at barely more than 300,000, and in over the course of that decade, roughly 60,000 Whites fled from Atlanta. He adds that during the 1970s, another 100,000 would leave as well. 'The City Too Busy to Hate,' the skeptics noted, had become 'The City Too Busy *Moving* to Hate."[43]

The Black community in the Seventies made up over forty-five percent of the total population and one-third of the registered voters in the Atlanta effectively becoming the political majority. White officials were no longer being backed by the political and financial support of White business owners and community leaders who had relocated, leaving the Black community to take more of an active and influential role in Atlanta municipal affairs. Following the heated civil movements in the Sixties, sixty-four percent of Black voters turned out to vote in the 1974 election between Maynard Jackson and Samuel Massell, the city's first Jewish mayor-elect.[44] Since that 1974 election, the city of Atlanta has consistently elected African American mayors; most recently, the election of the fifty-seventh mayor, Keisha Lance Bottoms. Maynard Jackson became the first African American mayor to serve in the American South and is currently the second longest-serving mayor of the city following William Hartsfield, holding office for five nonconsecutive terms. During his tenure as Atlanta's mayor, he tackled police brutality,

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[42] Ibid 6.
[43] Ibid 5.
[44] Jessica Ann Levy, "Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 3 (February 24, 2015): 427.

discrimination in the workforce, and often projected the ideologies of the civil rights leaders from the Sixties. "As a civil rights activist and the first Black mayor of Atlanta, Jackson claimed a certain level of authority in dictating the boundaries of civil rights. Gesturing to this power when he told Atlantans, 'I am a lawyer who has fought for human rights and civil liberties too long to turn my back on an issue of civil rights just because it is highly controversial."[45] Jackson's 1974 win represented a turning point for the racially unjust politics and policies experiences by Black Atlantans for decades.

In her article, *Selling Atlanta: Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990*, Jessica Anna Levy, uses Atlanta's first two Black mayors, Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young, to examine the change in politics in the city of Atlanta over the course of two decades. Her article discusses the transition from the Civil Rights Movement and the lingering activism that drove terms of both Jackson and Young. The shift in politics promoted new social and cultural transformations, which Levy explores, including the increased visibility of the LBGTIQ community. Realizing that Black communities were not the only groups disadvantaged by previous mayoral elections, racially driven politics, and political underrepresentation, Jackson and Young campaigned as the voice of the "people." Throughout the Seventies, Jackson met with gay rights activists, and other underrepresented community leaders, in an attempt to close a gap and build relationships to promote a city that was socially and culturally diverse.

As a civil rights leader, Jackson wanted to make other underrepresented communities feel as if though they were a part of his plans. Jackson's advisers made his strategy even more explicit, noting that by using civil rights as an organizing framework, Jackson could make gay and lesbians "feel a part of what he's doing" while at the same time preventing them from asking

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[45] Ibid 427.

for separate clarification at their rally.[46] Levy argues the success of Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young was crafted from their ability to promote and implementations of pro-business, multicultural politics that brought together White liberals and a majority of the city's Black voters.[47] In 1988, Young in cooperation with the Bureau of Cultural Affairs published a promotional book titled, *Atlanta, A City for the World;* in his foreword to the book he praised Atlanta as a city with a growing number of "visitors, residents, and investors from all over the world."[48]

By the Eighties, the city had increased in population and diversity with a large number of Hispanic and Asian communities forming throughout the metro area. In 1990, the number of Hispanic and Asian immigrants' soared to over 115,000; however, this number was far less than that of cities like Chicago and Los Angeles. Although Atlanta was behind in regards to foreign migration, the city was known as a Black Mecca because of the overwhelming amount of Black culture and politics that took over following the Seventies. As Whites fled the city, Black Americans quickly became the majority in metro Atlanta. Atlanta's mayors have a history of promoting the city as exceptional to other Southern cities. William Hartsfield dubbed the city "too busy to hate," while Andrew Young considered Atlanta "the city for the world"; however, it could be argued that Atlanta is no longer or has never actually been a mecca.

Following the election of Mayor Maynard Jackson, Atlanta morphed into a center of art and culture for the Black world making it the go-to destination for Black Southerners looking for upward mobility. Black business owners were now able to interact with civil rights leaders and municipal officers in regards to economic movements that would influence the way in which the city would move forward following the Sixties. With new political power structures that were

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[46]Jessica Ann Levy, "Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 3 (February 24, 2015): 427.
[47] Ibid 420-421.
[48] Ibid 420-429.

more in favor of the Black community, Black business owners and community leaders were now able to reap the same rewards that the previous White occupants relished. The shift in political influence compelled politicians, both White and Black, to court the Black vote, and forced elected officials and their challengers to campaign among the people.[49] Having Black representation in political office was the driving force for many Black Americans to migrate to the city, leading to more Whites leaving to escape desegregation taking their culture with them. Southern Whites who remained were able to live cordially among the Black community, which portrayed the notion that the city was racially harmonious. During the Seventies, the city was able to flourish amidst the White flight, and the African American community was able to invest in Atlanta's property market and business economy, creating a sellable city for Andrew Young. Atlanta as a Black Mecca is not only in reference to Black political power in the city. Black Mecca is in reference to the abundance of Black educational institutions (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), LBGTIQ activism, cordial Black and White race relations, and access to the middle and upper-class success. Most of Atlanta's affluent Blacks fought their way up from the bottom on their own, and although there had been significant support, the White population was not responsible for the Black progression in the city.[50] Atlanta offered Blacks across different classes the opportunity for upward mobility, which many took advantage of by starting new businesses, purchasing in the affordable housing market, and investing in the community through activism.

The local art that emerged at times celebrated the Black Mecca, yet criticized its shortcomings as well; the criticism appeared across numerous plains and art forms, but since the

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[49] Maurice J. Hobson, *The Legend of Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 205.
[50] Ibid 13.

Nineties, Southern Rap discourse has dominated the conversation.[51] The creation and development of Southern hip-hop music opened Black Atlanta and the New South to social commentary from a new generation of rap artists who hailed from the underbelly that had been trampled over by the city's pursuit of global respect and commercial success.[52] Other critics of Atlanta's "Black Mecca" title point out a large number of homeless Black Atlantans, recent community displacements, unjust incarceration, limited access to upward mobility and school resources, as well as the ongoing residential segregation throughout the city. Although there are Black Atlantans who have obtained upward mobility, making it to middle and upper-class status, there are still large numbers of Black Atlanta residents who have yet to have access to such resources. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, there was a distinctive divide between affluent Black elites and the poor Black community, and that can still be seen today as the city becomes gentrified.

Following the 1996 Olympics and the international viewings, the city became more appealing to visitors and viewers who saw the inexpensive housing market and the booming economy as their chance to access financial and social mobility. The Olympics and the calculated steps that were necessary to book them provide a view of how extensively invested local and international Blacks were in Atlanta.[53] Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Atlanta has experienced an increase in White migrants back into what is now considered traditionally Black neighborhoods. "Gentrification has become a major issue as dissatisfaction with the metro area's endless traffic congestion, the popularity of Atlanta Beltline and the promise of new tech jobs in Midtown and Buckhead are driving people to move into the city. That has created a boom in apartment construction and sent home prices soaring in once-

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[51] Ibid 205.
[52] Ibid 205.
[53] Ibid 5.

affordable neighborhoods such as Old Fourth Ward. Rents in the Vine City, English Avenue, and other nearby areas – once a place few metro Atlantans would venture – have increased as much as 38 percent over the last four years, according to a recent Georgia Tech study."[54] The increased economic mobility has drawn the attention of foreigners and Americans from both the north and west. Neighborhoods like Inman Park, Grant Park, Old Fourth Ward and West Midtown were once populated mainly by African Americans, poverty-stricken and included the homeless. As Whites moved in and rebuilt their homes, many of these people were displaced. The process of gentrification, once slow, has increased rapidly with new attractions, sports teams, and stadiums throughout the metro Atlanta that are now calling once Black neighborhoods home. Officials said efforts to remake the [Metro Atlanta] area because of the new Mercedes-Benz Stadium have attracted speculators grabbing up available land in hopes of turning a profit.[55]

Property values continue to increase as the city's real estate companies took advantage of the new attraction being built near their properties, seeing the opportunity to sell their homes for much higher prices. Once affordable neighborhoods such as Adair Park and Pittsburgh are still majority Black and have welcomed an increase in young upper and middle-class Blacks. However, the property values increase as the new homeowners renovate and make the neighborhood more attractive to White Atlantans. Since 2000, the city of Atlanta has seen substantial increases in single-family property values, with median price increasing by 12.4 percent annually from 2000 through 2006.[56] The process of gentrification, which is always ongoing, raises the cost of renting and purchasing even homes that are rundown, leaving poor Black families who cannot keep up with the cost of living to move to more impoverished

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[54] Leon Stafford. ATLANTA'S WESTSIDE: As Gentrification Nears, Fund Helps Neighbors Stay: City, Private Sector to Team up to Help Poor Residents Stay in Homes. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (Atlanta, Ga)* 2017.
[55] Ibid
[56] Dan Immergluck. "Large Redevelopment Initiatives, Housing Values and Gentrification: The Case of the Atlanta Beltline." *Urban Studies* 46 no. 8 (July 2009): 1735.

neighborhoods outside of metro Atlanta. The population of Black Americans in Atlanta was slowly decreasing following the Olympics. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the decrease in Black Atlantans has become increasingly rapid, with newfound wealth and mobility in the metro area from Whites. Although neighborhoods that were once considered Black are going through the process of gentrification and Blacks are being displaced physically and economically, the city does not lack in signifiers of Southern Blackness. Southern Black culture and signs of Southerness can be seen throughout the city. The next section of this chapter will examine how Atlanta is represented on American television and the current signifiers of Black Southerness on these television series.

Representations of Atlanta and Southern Culture

The most recent representations of the city of Atlanta on American television have been in the form of reality television series, although, the city has become a hub for the production of films and television series. The film and television industry has contributed over nine million dollars to the Georgia economy in 2017 alone. With increased incentives such as tax credits and access to various landscapes and backdrops, Georgia has been referred to as the Hollywood of the South. Because of tax incentives and the diverse landscapes, the city of Atlanta has become a hub for movies and film with over three hundred filmed here in 2017 alone. Last year several box office hits were explicitly filmed in metro Atlanta, like the 2017 film *Baby Driver* directed by Edgar Wright and starring *The Fault in Our Stars* actor, Ansel Elgort.[57] Instead of masking the city off as another major city Edgar Wright decided to change the setting of the script to feature metro Atlanta. The film made over 200 million dollars at the box office which benefits the Atlanta economy, although most movies have taken place on the outskirts of the city or small

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[57] Adam Chitwood, "Baby Driver: Filming Wraps on Edgar Wright's New Film". *Collider*. May 16, 2016**.**

towns such as Macon, Georgia. Atlanta has become somewhat of a hub for reality television series that showcase Blackness and Black culture.

The television series *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA) initially aired in the fall of 2008 with just over 600,000 viewers, but the number continued to grow as the women engaged in verbal and physical altercations that captured the attention of a large audience. In her article, *Realism's Housewives*, Emma Lieber explores the realism in television series that feature an ensemble of women having daily interactions with each other, including most of the *Real Housewives* franchises in her discussion. She examines the way in which these shows provide much needed female representations in "lead" roles on American television, although the women do not experience or portray real-life scenarios. Lieber states that "the appeal of Real Housewives is somewhat paradoxical since their narrative arcs are relatively tame, or at least predictable, focusing on the trials and tribulations of marriage, motherhood, and female friendship."[58] The women on RHOA are relatable in their Blackness and Southerness to most of their audience; however, the lives they live are not realistic to that of the same audience. Many Black women have backgrounds that are similar in experiences, which say the show has something to say about the role of Black women in a Southern home. The series simply fails to truly and realistically represent the role of Black women in a Southern home, in terms of class. Liber examines this in her article stating,

> "… if these shows undoubtedly have something important to say about certain contemporary trends—about our continuing, or perhaps recently renewed, cultural investment in the traditionally feminine realm of childcare and homemaking; about the ongoing question of how women might step out of that realm without leaving it behind entirely; and about the place of the female body and female desire in popular culture

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[58] Emma Lieber. "Realism's Housewives." *New England Review* no. 4 (2013): 114.

generally—then they reveal above all just how fraught with complexity these issues currently are."[59]

Many Black women often criticize the show for not making these things more overt, calling the show's producers out for the often violent representation of Black Southern women. These series represent successful Black women but perpetuate stereotypes of Black women as angry, violent, and loud. Other shows that follow this same framework include *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta* and *Married to Medicine: Atlanta*, which brings Black femininity and Black masculinity together under the umbrella of Hip-Hop.[60] In these series audiences often witness hypermasculinity and misogyny from the men, while the women are typically loyal to their man, demonstrated through aggressive and sexual acts. These reality shows rarely leave room for either group to break the mold and portray Black masculinity and femininity in a new light.

Currently, *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta* (LHHA) is one of the top-rated series on the network VH1 with a majority Black audience. The series follows the lives of a different ensemble of rap artists each season, both male and female, trying to make it in the hip-hop industry in the city of Atlanta. It is significant because it highlights the experiences of women of color, who indeed enacted post-feminism and challenged the paucity of postfeminist popular culture forms that feature women of color.[61] More importantly, the women display postfeminist characteristics that work to re-secure the terms of White femininity to White masculine domination, while simultaneously resurrecting racial divisions by undoing any promise of multiculturalism through the exclusion of non-White femininities.[62] The series deprives the audience of a realistic depictions of Atlanta because they follow so much of the individual lives

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[59] Ibid 114.

[60] Patrick D. Bennett, "Love, Drama, and Tears: Hip Hop Feminism, Blackness, and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta," *Research Papers* 530, (2014): 1-77.

[61] Melvin L. Williams. "My Job is to be a Bad Bitch: Locating Women of Color in Postfeminist Media Culture on Love and Hip-Hop: Atlanta." *Race, Gender & Class 23, no. ¾ (August 2016).* 2.

[62] Ibid 1.

of the subjects. Omitting the most culturally important and relevant representations of Atlanta that are "outside" of Blackness (i.e., strip clubs are a staple in Atlanta Hip-Hop and Black culture, so the men have meetings at the multitude of strip clubs the city has to offer).

LHHA portrays hip-hop and R&B artists; however, the audience rarely gets to experience the music. Instead, the characters introduce the audience to the ins and outs of their personal lives. Once in a while, the artists will meet at the studio to have conversations, but the show does not introduce the audience to Atlanta's hip-hop culture. *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta's* creators and producers had the opportunity to depict a realistic representation of Black and hip-hop culture; however, it seems that the story arc focuses on spectacles that bring in high ratings. Unfortunately, the drama and spectacles are often at the expense of Blackness and hip-hop culture, rather than a celebration of Southern hip-hop music and Southern Blackness. The artists on the show are typically successful and well known before the season even airs; although the series presents itself as a show of new artists looking to come up in the Atlanta hip-hop business. In his work *Love, Drama, and Tears: Hip Hop Feminism, Blackness, and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta,* Patrick D. Bennett analyzes representations of Black feminism and masculinity presented under the umbrella of hip-hop and how these representations impact perceptions of the Black community. He examines the individual relationships between the cast members with one common trend, conflict with masculinity and control. The women are often being controlled by the men, in their relationships or careers. The women are independent and strong in that they are entrepreneurs and business owners, but they are often seen being controlled and manipulated by the male figures in the series.

Although the women are performing in a postfeminist arc, the men assert dominance over many aspects of the women's decisions and lives; the women are still able to present themselves

as independent and strong. Also, depictions of Black and hip-hop culture in Atlanta have been of the middle and upper-middle-class Black men and women, who reinforce false notions of hypermasculinity, hypersexuality, and violence for those in the poor class. The men and women of LHHA can access both classes because of their claims to hip-hop "authenticity" before the series, and their current access to upward mobility and economic success. One of the significant issues with the series being under the genre of reality television is that the show does not portray a class lifestyle that is relatable. Of course, there are individuals who watch the series and live the same lifestyle such as Atlantans who reside in Alpharetta or Buckhead. However, that number is small compared to the overall audience.

Majority of men and women on Atlanta based reality television series do not live within the metro area of the city. However, they often have meet ups at different locations in the metro Atlanta area that are scripted. The women on *Real Housewives of Atlanta* mostly live in the Buckhead area, or Alpharetta and Duluth, Georgia, which are primarily populated by White communities. Buckhead before the 1950s was not a city of Atlanta, and Black Americans made up the majority of the population due to William Hartsfield's agreement with local business leaders to relocate Black residences away from the business invested North metro Atlanta area. Buckhead became the home to many Black residences. By the time the city got its first mayor in 1973, the White community was determined to make Buckhead an upper-class enclave, even as the majority of Atlanta's White population moved to the more distant suburbs.[63] Most recently residents of Buckhead have called for the enforcement of licensing laws at the local bars, as the city starts to become more of a college hangout. As more Whites have left Buckhead, they are relocating to places like Alpharetta, Sandy Springs, and Duluth, where the property values are

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[63] Katherine B. Hankins, Robert Cochran, and Kate Driscoll Derickson. "Making Space, Making Race: Reconstituting White Privilege in Buckhead, Atlanta." *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no. 4 (June 2012): 385.

reasonable and the Black community limited. The audiences for Atlanta reality television series are Black women; however, they are not able to connect to the class levels that are depicted throughout the series. Representations of Atlanta are most frequently in the genre of reality television, but the reality of the series is not always relatable or authentic. Most often the cast of the RHOA and LHHA are seen frequenting high-end boutiques and restaurants, which are typically out of the financial reach of most Black Atlantans. The women are seen shopping, dining, and vacationing throughout both series, but the audience is rarely provided with a depiction of Black Atlanta culture and values outside of the middle and upper-class. The series *Atlanta on FX* brings something new to the table in terms of representing the city of Atlanta in its truest form, by featuring actual restaurants and other Black-owned businesses.

Atlanta on Fx: **Representation of Atlanta**

The series *Atlanta* offers the audience not only a realistic depiction of Black Atlanta but a relatable representation of Black Atlanta culture. *Atlanta* on *Fx* is currently one of the most accurate representations of the metro Atlanta region regarding Blackness and Southern culture. Reviewers believe that the series *Atlanta,* which takes place in the heart of the city, avoids overtly stereotypical portrayals of Southern hip-hop culture that are seen on American television; while remaining authentic in its representation of Black culture. Recent depictions of Black and hip-hop culture in Atlanta have been of middle and upper-middle-class Black men and women, who reinforce false notions of hypermasculinity, hypersexuality, and violence. Within the show, there are moments in which the characters fall into similar tropes. However, the series creator, Donald Glover, was purposeful in his representations of Blackness and Southerness, so it can be assumed that the tropes the characters fall into were intentional.

The visual context within the series distinguishes the show from other films and television series that are produced or are meant to take place in the city of Atlanta. In the film *Baby Driver*, Ansel Elgort's character attempts to evade the Atlanta police during a bank robbery. The film not only features the ins and outs of metro Atlanta at a street view but also depicts the skyline and famous Atlanta traffic. These signifiers of Atlanta are also in the series *Atlanta*; however, the show's producers take it a step further by having the characters interact at businesses that are Atlanta owned. In the reality television world, audiences rarely get a glimpse at the inner city; typically, the camera will pan over the major city in which the series is being filmed but does not film within the actual city. Throughout the entire series the audience witness signifiers of Atlanta culture. In the first episode, "The Big Bang," Earnest takes the MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority) bus, which is the actual transit system used by Atlantans in metro Atlanta as the transit goes to the major counties of Fulton, DeKalb, Clayton, and Gwinnett. Not only does he ride the transit like most Atlantans, but he even encounters a stranger on the bus who is off-putting and slightly intimidating. In the past, MARTA officials have attempted to discourage the homeless and drug-addicted community from accessing the transit system. Using advertising that read "No, they cannot spare a dollar. Don't beg on MARTA" to discourage Atlanta's homeless community from soliciting and intimidating MARTA passengers. Throughout the series, Earnest is seen taking the MARTA, which is an accurate portrayal of Atlanta culture, as the MARTA is one of the most recognizable symbols of the city.[64] The writers also feature staples of the metro Atlanta community and Southern culture, such as Chic Fil A, Jr. Crickets, and Zesto.

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[64] Mark W. Flanagan, and Harold E. Briggs. 2016. "Substance abuse recovery among homeless adults in Atlanta, Georgia, and a multilevel drug abuse resiliency tool." Best Practices in Mental Health no. 1: 89. (January 3, 2018): 102.

It is the smallest details within the series that makes it relatable. In the final episode, adult Black men are walking around dressed as cows. For someone who is not from the South it would seem off to have this visual in the episode. However, those who are from the American South, specifically the city of Atlanta, are aware that this is a social commentary on how even Black men in the South enjoy Chic Fil A. Black men are willing to dress up as a cow for a day to receive a free chicken sandwich from the restaurant, which could be considered a commentary on the multidimensionalism of Black men who have limited access to personality and character traits outside the status quo. One of the more defining moments in the series in terms of visual representations of Black Atlanta culture would be when Paper Boi and Darrius visited Jr. Crickets, a famous Atlanta wing spot. In the hip-hop community specifically, artists have raved over the fried chicken wings at Jr. Crickets, more specifically, the lemon pepper wings. In the scene, the waiter tells Paper Boi and Darrius that the chef gave them "Lemon Pepper Wet," which is an Atlanta city staple instead of the dry lemon pepper rub. Besides the food, the series also features the Hartsfield Jackson Airport, which is another Atlanta staple.

Another small but meaningful visual moment in the series is in the first episode when Earnest goes to work at the airport, selling credit cards to travelers. The Hartsfield-Jackson airport in Atlanta was the collaborative work of former mayors, William Hartsfield and Maynard Jackson, over several decades of economic politics. Both men pushed to make the airport a domestic and international hub to increase economic profits and employment rates. Under the watch of Maynard Jackson, the city built new relationships which helped to catapult Atlanta into the world of aviation. "Thanks to the work of Jackson, the airline increased to over 2,400 flights a day, which attracted new migrants and new businesses alike. Old stalwarts like Coca-Cola were joined by new corporate giants, such as Delta Airlines, BellSouth, Home Depot, United Parcel

Service (UPS), and the Cable News Network (CNN).[65] All have continued to employ a large number of Atlantans; however, the Black community has continued to be underrepresented in these organizations. In many ways working for one of these companies is an honor, a career that would make other Atlantans envious. In the Black community specifically, working at the airport is often considered a direct means of socioeconomic mobility.

Black Atlanta culture can be pointed out as well in the series during several episodes, from the strip clubs and Cadillacs, to pit bulls and the music that plays throughout the series. In one particular scene between Paper Boi and a few neighborhood kids, the apartment buildings behind them are reminiscent of the projects that many Black Atlantans lived prior to the gentrification of the city. The city began to relocate these residents to tear down the low-income housing due to increased crimes, lowered property values for the surrounding homeowners, and the ongoing process of gentrification in Atlanta. The visual contributes to a hyper-realistic depiction of the Black Atlanta "hood"; which makes sense why Paper Boi approaches the young kids playing with a toy gun. The kids are in an environment that is prone to injustice at the hands of police officers, who could easily claim that they feared for their lives and thought the gun was real. As Black youth, they are more inclined to have this encounter with an officer who might take the toy gun for a real assault weapon, so Paper Boi is attempting to educate them to avoid the potentially tragic consequences.

The strip-club is an important aspect of the series although small because it is an important aspect of Southern hip-hop culture.[66] This could be argued as a social commentary on Atlanta based artists who got their starts in the industry in places such as Blue Flame, Follies, and Magic City. In the series, Earnest and Paper Boi actually go to the strip club to get Paper

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[65] Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism (Politics and Society in Modern America)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 242.
[66] *T Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold On Young Black Women (New York: New York University Press, ©2007).*

Boi's single played during a dancer's set. Southern rap artists are typically interested in creating a "strip-club anthem;" a song the women can dance to which would bring more attention to the artists' music. Donald Glover would have been remiss as a Southern rap artist and Atlantans to not include this small detail in the series. The series surrounds three Black men in the rap industry, so including the strip-club makes the music in the series seem more authentic. The South has historically been underrepresented and underestimated in the hip-hop industry, and the series *Atlanta* brings that to light through its representation of the complexity of Southern Hip Hop and the role Atlanta has played. *Atlanta on Fx* does its part to represent Atlanta in its most realistic light, and in doing so, the creators of the series have produced a series that depicts a "New Dirty South."

Atlanta on Fx: **New Dirty Urban South**

In 1993, Freaknik took the city of Atlanta by storm with thousands of young Black college students traveling from all over the United States to the city for an annual picnic. Originally an HBCU spring break picnic, the event continued to increase in size each year, and the spectacle drew the attention of the local authorities and community leaders. "In the early 1990s, the flow of students who came to Atlanta for the event continued to increase, exceeding 100,000 people. Piedmont Park, located in a White upper-class suburban community in Midtown Atlanta, in particular, became a focal point of festivities."[67] The White community leaders were unnerved by the traffic jams, violence, public disorderly conduct, and the overall increased visibility of the Black community in their traditionally White neighborhoods. In 1994, the number of people who attended soared to over 200, 000 with the large majority of students congregating in the Piedmont Park neighborhood; the magnitude of students alerted the local

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[67] Thompson, Krista A. "Performing Visibility: Freaknic and the Spatial Politics of Sexuality, Race, and Class in Atlanta." TDR: The Drama Review 51, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 28.

authorities. Atlanta's Black college community felt there were alternative ways to manage and respond to the rowdy crowd; however, as the attendees' behavior became lewd, the city officials leaped into action. By the following year, the city was prepared to make sure the event would not take place. "Atlanta police officers lined the city streets making their armed presence felt on every corner. Exits off Atlanta highways were blocked by police barricades, leaving many visitors attempting to enter the city stranded or lost on Georgia interstates. Law enforcers shut down local malls and cordoned off residential neighborhoods, making them inaccessible to vehicular traffic. Many local stores and restaurants closed their doors for the weekend. Hotels refused to rent rooms. The city of Atlanta, renowned for its 'Southern hospitality,' practically shut itself down and assumed an openly confrontational stance against the students' presence in the city."[68] Atlanta seemed only to be "too busy to hate" when the visibility of the Black sexuality and class, were contained to the poorest and underrepresented parts of the city.

Even with Freaknik coming to an abrupt end the city of Atlanta was well on its way to being known as a Black hip-hop mecca. In 1994, Andre 3000 and Big Boi, forming the rap duo Outkast, released their debut album *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* which launched the group into stardom after the single *Player's Ball* made it to number one on the rap billboards. It was Freaknik that drew attention to Southern artists, like Outkast, whose sounds were up-tempo and hypersexualized, creating an image that categorized Southern hip-hop as "nice rap" better suited for sensitive listeners.[69] Before 1994, Atlanta introduced pop style Southern artists, including TLC, Xscape, and the rap duo Kris Kross; all of which produced music with subject matters that were universal, and lack the Southern accents and slang of the hip-hop lyrics that were

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[68] Ibid 24.
[69] Darren E. Grem, "The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America," *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 58.

popularizing in Florida and Louisiana.[70] Outkast's' sound and lyrics were at the time the best representation of the Black South, specifically in Atlanta. Their sound was known as "Dirty South" music. The way in which the "Dirty South" is defined has continued to change as Southern hip-hop culture became commercialized and became a part of the popularized culture. To outsiders looking in, the South was barefoot, country, and carefree, which did not match up to the gangster lifestyles and lyrics of East and West coast rappers. The city of Atlanta had long been perceived as a socioeconomic and racially diverse city; however, Outkast became one of the first rap groups to represent Southern hip-hop culture that accurately depicted what it meant to be Black and living in the South, specifically in metro Atlanta. The series *Atlanta* does the same thing; it provides the audience with a hyper-realistic depiction of Black Southerness, not sugarcoating the reality of current Black socioeconomic standings in the "Black Mecca." Artists and groups of the Nineties such as Outkast and Goodie Mob brought honesty and commitment to Black empowerment with lyrics that told stories of unemployment, depression, and low-income survival in the Dirty South, which *Atlanta* depicts throughout the series.[71] According to Darren Grem, it is in this sense that the Dirty South showed that it not only had something to say for itself, but it also had a great deal to say about racial identity, regional identity, and the selling of both in modern America.[72]

Grem argues that following the 1998 release of Outkast's *ATLien* the rap industry in the South had gone from outcast to a commercialized hub for the entertainment industry. He states that during the transition from the "Dirty South" to what he defines as the "New South," the real-life experiences of inner-city African Americans living in the post-civil rights South faded form

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[70] Ben Westhoff, "*Dirty South: Outkast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-Hop*" (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011), 101.
[71] Ibid 105.
[72] Darren E. Grem, "The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America," *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 71.

articulation of what it meant to be Black, Southern and a part of the "Dirty South."[73] He argues that as popular culture commodified Southern rap artist and culture, the perceived characteristics of the south moved away from that of a region that was racially divided and economically impoverished. The New South introduced the world to *country* and *crunk* hip-hop music with a new upbeat and flasher sound. Atlanta became the go-to spot for new and innovative sounds, making the city the third rap hub in the US following New York and Los Angeles. The series *Atlanta's* representation of Black Southerness lends itself to more of the "Dirty South" that Outkast described in their music; as the creators avoided the overtly flash rap lifestyles that series such as *Empire* and *Love & Hip-Hop: Atlanta* depict.

The series *Atlanta* is all about the music; the show does not have a theme song. Instead, the creators use music by different Atlanta based artists. In the first episode, the series opens with Migos's *One Time* playing from Paper Boi's Cadillac speaker, as he, Earnest, and Darius smoke marijuana outside the liquor store. The Cadillac and liquor store visuals are remnants of the Dirty South sound in the lyrics of Outkast; however, the music by rap trio Migos is modern and new age. Throughout the series different new and old Southern-based artists are featured during the opening and closing credits instead of a typical theme song. The series creators explore race, class, and gender as it pertains to Black Atlanta culture, which includes the exploration of hip-hop music in the city. Outside of reality television, other series that represent hip-hop culture, such as Empire, depict the affluent and wealthy class. Paper Boi, played by Brian Tyree Henry, is an up and coming trap rap artist, it would have been cliché to make him an overnight sensation regarding his celebrity and socioeconomic standing.

The reality is even with a single on the radio many artists are still invested in the "hustle" lifestyle that Paper Boi represents even as a somewhat successful artist. Instead of giving the

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[73] Ibid 65

character overnight upward mobility, the creators are realistic in the representation of how artists come to be household names. With three men attempting to make it in the hip-hop industry, the series represents the most accurate portrayal of what it is like to try to get a foot in the door without the financial resources audiences see on shows such as *Love & Hip-Hop: Atlanta.* The wealthy and extravagant lifestyles are not necessarily normal, especially for Southern hip-hop artists who are coming from some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the city. Many Southern rap artists find themselves continuing to have to live the lifestyle of "hustling," selling drugs and other criminal activities, for years before they are financially independent and having access to upper-class Atlanta. Paper Boi admits to his cousin, Earnest, that he sells drugs in order to fund his music career; while Darius hustles guns and pit bulls to make ends meet. Earnest, throughout the series, is dealing with homelessness which the audience does not learn until the last episode of the season. These are all authentic depictions of Black and hip-hop culture in the city of Atlanta that closely resemble the "Dirty South" discussed in the music of the Nineties.

The series *Atlanta* depicts a "New Dirty South" that we have yet to experience on television through its social commentary that relates to a younger Black Atlanta audience. Black millennials can relate to the relationships and events that Earnest experiences with his family and friends, such as his "situationship" with his daughter's mother and not being allowed into his childhood home after dropping out of college. Donald Glover is a Black Southern millennial; his depictions and representations of the city of Atlanta are authentic and relatable to the audience that lives the same experiences every day. The producers of *Atlanta* create an authentic trajectory of hip-hop success by showing the socioeconomic class many young artists experience during their "come up" before they make it big in the music and entertainment industry. Using a young Black millennials' point of view, the series continues to break the mold through its examination

of social and political factors, such as trans- and homophobia, and Black masculinity in the city of Atlanta, including arguments on sexuality as a spectrum.

<center>**Chapter Two**</center>

<center>**A COMEDIC APPROACH TO LGBTIQ ISSUES AND BLACK MASCULINITY**</center>

Atlanta's take on the LBGTIQ community is examined throughout this chapter and compared to past representations that are within a Black media context. I explore the past representation of the LBGTIQ community within a Black comedic framework which allows me to reveal the historical context of LBGTIQ communities' portrayals in media representations. I then juxtapose this with the representation of LBGTIQ communities in Atlanta. In doing this, I reveal the comedic history of Blackness on television, and address homophobic practices in the hip-hop community. Then I examine progressive representations of queerness in a Black context, by exploring the dialogue created on the series *Atlanta.* Finally, I synthesize how social constructions of Black masculinity contributes to notions of homophobia in the Black and hip-hop community.

Comedic History

Blackness, according to Herman Gray, has consistently remained in the comedy genre as it is the most open to Black actors and actresses to obtain leading and regular roles, also pointing out that Black men are often cast as the comic relief throughout the history of television and film.[74] Comedy as a means to create social commentary can be traced back to the Seventies starting with *The Flip Wilson Show*, which introduced White America to mainstream Black comedy. Flip Wilson is considered the first successful Black man to host a television show which set the stage for comedians to use their humor to address the current political and social climates. *The Flip Wilson Show*, like most Black comedy series of the Seventies, relied heavily on racial humor as an inclusive move, and in doing so often perpetuating stereotypes at the expense of

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[74] Herman Gray, "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy," *Media, Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (1986): 223-225

Blackness. Christina Acham writes in her book, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and The Struggle for Black Power*, "Flip Wilson's' humor was not made up of biting political satire, and he generally did not show a disdain for the racist politics evident in American society."[75] In her discussion, she examines the way in which Wilson forwarded an all-American, individual agenda; stating, "he was the 'pulled himself up by the bootstraps' archetype, the image that continually purports the notion of the classless and raceless American Society."[76] Although he was able to introduce White audiences to "softer" aspects of urban Blackness and Black culture as a whole, he did not engage in the political or social commentary that would be deemed confrontational. Indeed, the comedy that he performed was for the comfortability of White audiences even with his most popular and famed character, Geraldine Jones.

Wilson was considered mild-mannered; however, the show was often criticized by White audiences for its reliance on racial humor, while on the other hand many in the Black community felt the show lacked real social commentary and considered him to be a sellout. Wilson went on record stating, "I'm selling professional entertainment. Politics is for politicians. I don't have to think Black—or not think Black. I just have to entertain. I'm just a comic."[77] Geraldine Jones, played by Wilson in drag, became a celebrity in her own right with her confident catchphrase and unapologetic Blackness. Although Wilson paved the way for comedians such as Redd Foxx, Sherman Hemsley, and Richard Pryor to take their comedic commentary to mainstream media outlets, he is often overlooked as one of the first comedians to have a successful television series. *The Flip Wilson Show* essentially avoided using the genre of the comedic variety show as a forum for confrontational Black politics; because of this Wilson was dismissed and condemned by many of the militant groups within Black America for his seeming lack of engagement with

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[75] Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2005), 67.
[76] Ibid 69.
[77] LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830*, Reprint ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012) 408.

Black political issues.[78] At the tail end on the Civil Rights Movement and the start of the Black Power Movement, Black audiences wanted social and political commentary that pointed out the real race and class struggles in American society, rather than another series that assimilated to White mainstream media.

Wilson should be credited with bringing urban Blackness to the mainstream, and for creating a platform for comedian Redd Foxx and his hit series *Sanford and Son*; another depiction of the urban Black class on American television. Redd Foxx as Fred Sanford, commented on social and political commentary throughout the series five-year run dubbing him one of the first successful Black comedians with his own series, often overlooking the work of Wilson. Unlike Wilson, Foxx performed explicit and risqué stand-up comedy, rarely containing his personal views, and creating social commentary for years before he was given his own television series. He was able to tame down his language and soften his belligerence enough to create a series that could be marketed to White audiences. The series demonstrated the commercial viability of Black sitcoms on mainstream television, paving the way for several other series in the Seventies.[79] Foxx's social commentary was comfortable enough for White audiences, yet confrontational enough for Black audiences who were in need of mainstream media representations that addressed or created social and political dialogues. He was able to create social commentary, but he remained homophobic and gender narrow throughout the series. Conversations created by Black comedians on sexuality and gender in the Seventies were created simply as a means to entertain, neglecting to take advantage of their platform and create a meaningful social commentary on the Black LBGTIQ community. The Black community was focused on the racial climate in America leaving little role for commentary on sexuality and

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[78] Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2005), 68.
[79] LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830*, Reprint ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012) 409.

gender which was considered a separate issue from Blackness. The Black community has typically responded positively to shows featuring Black men representing Black women in what is often an exaggerated and stereotypical representation.

Wilson is said to have respected and to have had great affection for the characters he portrayed specifically Geraldine Jones, who has inspired many other gender-bending characters. The caricature of these strong Black women was meant to be relatable to Black audiences yet entertaining and none threatening to White mainstream media. Ironically, White America often depicts Black caricatures in such a way as to ridicule or belittle women.[80] Wilson's portrayal of Jones created a platform for *Martin*'s Sheneneh Jenkins and *In Living Color's* sketch entitled *"Men On…"* and the character Wanda, played by Jamie Foxx. Wanda and Sheneneh Jenkins were both strong but brash women, and the way, in which they were portrayed, the characters were more like caricatures. The women fell into the tropes of Black femininity that create the notion of Black women as angry, aggressive, and loud. The women being portrayed by Foxx and Lawrence engage in dialogue and behaviors that place them into tropes of Black femininity. Black women are often portrayed or perceived as loud, angry, and aggressive due to persistent media depictions that perpetuate misconception Black femininity and womanhood. The caricatures, Sheneneh and Wanda, only aided in sustaining these misconceptions, as both Foxx and Lawrence proclaimed that the depictions were inspired by women they grew-up with before they were famous. The representations did little to create a political or social commentary about gender and sexuality. Similar to Flip Wilson, many comedians of the Nineties did not use their platform to address issues of sexuality and gender but used race heavily throughout their careers. The sketch *"Men On…"* featured on *In Living Color*, Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier, created a social commentary on gender and sexuality through its exaggerated portrayals of gay

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[80] Ibid 408.

men. The sketch demonstrated the ongoing misconception that being gay is to be extremely feminine because it does not follow traditional hegemonic masculinity. This was demonstrated through the exaggerated queer characteristics given to the caricatures, Blaine Edwards and Antoine Merriweather. These roles are now looked at with more criticism as the Black community becomes more interconnected consciously with sexuality, gender, and queerness. Black television has avoided significant or meaningful conversations on LBGTIQ identities, not to say that the series *Atlanta* is not the first show to create these dialogues, however, other shows have failed to do so in the same context of Black Southerness.

    Martin was one of the first series *centered on middle-class Blackness* to even play with the idea of gender; however, it is difficult to consider the character of Sheneneh Jenkins as a representation of queerness. Martin Lawrence, the creator of the series, portrays the character of Sheneneh and in doing so; he perpetuated stereotypes in regards to Black women. Sheneneh, highly independent and successful, is a caricature of just another aggressively loud and obnoxious Black woman; her "positive" traits are no longer relevant once she is deemed ghetto. Lawrence told one reporter, "Sheneneh represents the 'around-the-way-girls' he grew up with, stating 'A lot of people don't understand the way they act or why they wear the big, big earrings and things like that… I had never seen a show that gave that type of women a voice."[81] Martin's audience that was largely Black embraced a man dressed as a woman, just as Flip Wilson's audience did; it is unfortunate that Sheneneh was mostly stripped of her femininity in Lawrence's exaggerated comedic portrayal. Wilson's, Geraldine Jones, was also based on a woman from his neighborhood in Jersey City, who had convinced him to shoplift 'fingernails' for her;[82] another example of how Flip paved the way for comedians like Martina Lawrence and

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[81] Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: the Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.
[82] Kevin Cook, *Flip: the Inside Story of Tv's First Black Superstar* (New York: Viking, 2013), 144.

Donald Glover. Using drag as a part of Black comedy the representations were never of actual queerness; Blackness and queerness are thought to be separate issues. Early representations on queerness in Black television were created for laughter, but they were never meant to address homophobia or any issues facing LBGTIQ individuals within the Black community. Comedic play with gender and sexuality created a segue for Black social commentary on race and class in the Nineties, but still lacked significant commentary of the Black LBGTIQ community.

The popular Nineties sketch comedy series, *In Living Color,* featured comedians Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier as two flamboyantly gay critics who did not do much other than play around with exaggerating gay sexuality. Of course, this skit is one of the most popular in this history of this show, but the segment had its critics. A representation of two gay men on a show that was largely watched by a Black audience was a step in the right direction; unfortunately, the skit was so exaggerated it was unable to address anything series within the segments in terms of same gender loving. Through all the laughter, they failed to address social issues facing the Black gay community at the time such as the Aids epidemic in the Black community, homophobia in Black families, and hate crimes in the Black gay community.

Of course, there have been shows such as *Will & Grace* and *Modern Family* to represent sexuality and gender outside the "norm," but these shows are centered in a predominately White context. We have unconsciously linked LBGTIQ issues to only being associated with Whiteness. The television world has come a long way in attempting to diversify representations of gender and sexuality and addressing issues concerning the LBGTIQ community. *Orange is the New Black* features an ensemble cast who portray a wide range of sexualities within the fictional Litchfield Penitentiary. One of the storylines follows Sophia, played by activist and actress Laverne Cox, a Black transgender woman. Besides having to deal with daily othering by some of

the women and guards, Sophia is looked up to in prison and befriends Sister Ingalls, a nun. Sophia is the show's outlet for political and social dialogues about trans- issues relating to incarceration, by bringing religion into her storyline it makes for a multi-dimensional character. The popularity of Sophia speaks to how creators and writers are now pushing mainstream comfortability with their representations of trans- actors. Although the series produced several breakout Black actresses including Laverne Cox, *Orange of the New Black,* is not within a Black discourse and lacks any serious dialogue on the Black community, gender, and sexuality. The series portrays the trans- community within the prison system; in addition, it explores the challenges of being a trans- woman housed in a women's prison. The series fails to create an overt social commentary on trans- issues within the Black community, but it creates a discussion in regards to race and gender. The character, Sophia, is rejected by the Black community outside of the prison; however, the Black community within the prison embraces her gender although they often comment on her transition from humor.

More recently in television representations, *Master of None* writer Lena Waithe made history as the first African American woman to win the award for *Best Comedic Writing*, at the 2017 Emmy Awards. She co-wrote the "Thanksgiving" episode of season two with Indian actor Aziz Ansari, in which she details her coming out story over the span of twenty years, creating a dialogue on Blackness and queerness. During the episode, viewers witness her transition from dress to baggy clothing and her gradual acceptance of her evolving sexuality. In one of the most touching moments of the episode, Denise (Lena Waithe) tells her mother, played by actress Angela Bassett, that she is gay [at a local diner.] Although the episode takes place during Thanksgiving over the span of several years Denise does not tell her mother at the dinner table with family present, which suggest that Black families are not always accepting of their gay

children. Earlier in the episode Denise explains to Dev (Aziz Ansari) that "being gay is not something Black people love to talk about… some Black people think being gay is a choice, and when they find out that their kid is gay, they try to figure out what they did wrong."[83] She states that as a Black parent your child is a part of the ongoing competition with other Blacks to display the ability to maintain or keep up with hegemonic notions of what it means to be a parent. After Denise comes out her mother states, "I just do not want life to be hard for you. It is hard enough being a Black woman in this world, and now you want to add something else to that?"[84] This is often why other communities feel as if though the Black community is not interested in social or political topics regarding LGBTIQ matters; arguing that Blackness tends to focus on issues of race and class. Her mother did not accept her sexuality right away, and the episode ends with Denise still working with her family to come to terms with her sexuality.

The interactions and dialogues regarding gay identity, homophobia, and the intersection with Blackness in previous television shows are not typically happening in the context of hip-hop culture; Black television series often do not touch on LBGTIQ matters in hip-hop which is one of the lures of *Empire*. The character of Lucious is brutally open and honest with his opinions of his son Jamal's sexuality and reminds him that it will not be accepted within the hip-hop industry. The drama within the series often masks the seriousness of these social commentaries. The rhetoric and language in regards to same-gender-loving in the show is prevalent in the hip-hop and rap industries. Lucious is positioned in a historical context of Black men in the hip-hop industry, in regards to same gender loving. He views Jamal as unmasculine due to his sexuality, which is a typical reaction of Black fathers and the hip-hop industry to same-gendered loving. Lucious even throws Jamal in the trash as a child when he displayed what Lucious considered

[83] "Thanksgiving." *Master of None*, season 2, episode 8, 12 May 2017. *Netflix*
[84] "Thanksgiving." *Master of None*, season 2, episode 8, 12 May 2017. *Netflix*

feminine characteristics. According to the writer of the series, Lee Daniels, his father did this to him as a child. The image of Lucious placing Jamal in the trash, played in flashbacks throughout the first season, allows the audience to experience the frustration and fear many fathers have when a son displays what is deemed feminine qualities. The ongoing commentary regarding Jamal's sexuality, although dramatized, is an accurate representation of being a gay Black man in the hip-hop industry.

In the hip-hop industry, "those who refuse to yield to hypermasculine dictates of contemporary rap music; there is literally no place to exist in an industry that seemingly demands their silencing and removal."[85] The series *Atlanta* challenges this notion with Paper Boi who defends hip-hop/rap culture and Black male masculinity in several episodes throughout the first season. *Atlanta*, which is constructed around Blackness in relation to the current social and political climate in America, led the writers to cover matters of trans- and homophobia, in a few episodes throughout the series. As a comedic sitcom, *Atlanta's* creators and writers steered clear of overtly ridiculous representations of the LBGTIQ community in the city of Atlanta, by developing realistic interactions and situations that are entertaining and thought-provoking.

New Media Representations

Atlanta addresses Black culture and gender identity in the second episode of the season titled, "Streets on Lock." In this episode, Earnest defends the questionable rhetoric around him as he sits in jail, stating, "Sexuality is a spectrum," coming to the aid of a Black transgender character and another inmate that they are free to interrupt and express their gender and sexual identity in whatever way they see fit. This is an essential moment in the show because outside of the series Donald Glover is an award-winning rap artist and pioneer in the hip-hop and the Black community. It is not every day that an artist of his statues uses their platform to support matters

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[85] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities (Postmillennial Pop)* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2013), 69.

of sexuality and gender that are often considered separate issue from Blackness. Just as shows have created a generalization about LBGTIQ individuals, so have representations of Black men in regards to same-gendered loving. Glover provides a conversation on Black male sexuality in an unconventional yet practical and realistic way by creating the dialogue while sitting in the holding area of an Atlanta city jail.

After the night out with his cousin Alfred "Paper Boi," following the shooting at the gas station, Earnest sits in jail waiting to be bailed-out. He finds himself sitting in the middle of two individuals who have a romantic history. Earnest asks if they would like him to move; however, he is aggressively shut down by the male detainee, Johnny, who continues speaking with Lisa, the transgender detainee; Earnest squirms uneasily as they began discussing a previous sexual encounter at a movie.

Johnny: Hey, man, what's your problem, man?

Earnest: No, I--no problem. I can move if you want…

Johnny: I didn't ask you to move nigga! I'm trying to talk to my girl, and you're acting all weird and shit.

Detainee 1: Your, girl?!

Johnny: Yeah man. This my ex Lisa, man. We used to talk back after my mom's kicked me out the house.

D1: My nigga that's a man!

Johnny: Wha-no, man, this my ex.

D1: Your ex-girlfriend a man. Why you think she in jail with the men. She'd be on the other side. Nigga, you gay.

Johnny: Nah, man, she… Nah man! So you think I'm gay

Earnest: Nah. No, I--

Detainee 2: This nigga gay as hell.

Johnny: Shut the hell up, man. Y'all niggas are trippin'. Man, I'm not gay! Yall niggas fuck guys in here, anyways.

****D2:** No, that-that ain't gay; that's just jail. You were on the outside fucking booty holes.

Earnest: Sexuality is a spectrum. You can really do whatever you want.

D2: Man, that boy gay as hell. [laughter from detainees]

Johnny: I'mma stab your old ass when we get upstairs to those cells, man! Niggah sit down [stated towards Earnest who is attempting to move away from the situation]. Everyone can shut the fuck up, now! I know what yall think she is…. but I'm not on that faggot shit!

Often Black men within the prison system can detach their sexuality from their sexual activities and in doing so some participate in same-sex intercourse during the sentence. In her article, "Incarcerated Masculinity," Teresa Miller examines prison masculinity and the rate of sexual victimization among incarcerated Black men. She argues that on release, many of the male prisoners who were either victims or perpetrators of sexual violence in prison return to relationships that predate their incarceration or begin new relationships, typically with heterosexual women.[86] In this particular scene detainee 2, just like many men, find same-sex intercourse in prison just another part of the prison culture. Miller goes on to argue that just as there is a social hierarchy of masculinity outside of the prison, the need to exude heteronormative

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[86] Teresa A. Miller, "Incarcerated Masculinities," in *Progressive Black Masculinity* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 169-170.

ideas of masculinity is exemplified. Following social norms of gender roles and hypermasculinity requires some of the "weaker" or less masculine men to be taken advantage of and even forced to behave in a feminine manner. The inmates who are a part of the LBGTIQ community are often kept separately to avoid any abuse; however, they find ways to have relations with men who consider themselves heterosexual outside of prison. Within the confines of prison some men partake in same gender relations as a means of bargaining for goods or simply to survive; however, that is not necessarily the case for all inmates. The setting and dialogue that leads to Glover's line, "Sexuality is a Spectrum," encompasses several aspects of Black male masculinity and sexuality; including, Johnny who does not consider Lisa's sexuality.

Atlanta like many shows has its downfalls. The city of Atlanta has a sizeable Black LBGT community, and it is difficult to imagine that Johnny would not know Lisa's gender; however, *Atlanta's* writers are defending general notions that the Black community is resistant to LGBT matters. What is to be gained from this dialogue is that sexuality is up to the individual; however, it is crucial to recognize place when analyzing the exchange. Sexuality in prison is often performed differently than outside the confines of a correctional facility. Having this conversation delivered in a Black context challenges assumptions in the Black community that gay is entirely separate from Blackness. "By claiming gayness in a Black context, Black gay and lesbian people may help destabilize the idea that the two statuses are inherently unconnected and inevitably in tension."[87] Many Black men are reluctant to engage in conversation on SGL or trans- issues out of fear that they will be deemed gay for even acknowledging gayness exists. bell hooks argues that "Black men remain reluctant to engage in progressive movements that might serve as meaningful critical interventions that might allow them to speak their pain. On the terms

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[87] Darren Lenard Hutchinson. Devon Carbado, ed., *Black Men On Race, Gender, and Sexuality: a Critical Reader*, ed. Devon Carbado (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 30.

set by White supremacist patriarchy, Black men can name their pain only by talking about themselves in crude ways that re-inscribe them in a context of primitivism."[88] She goes on to argue that Black men should free themselves of their phallocentric masculinity in an attempt to explore their fears and hatred of other men [to] learning new ways to relate.[89] By creating a platform that opens up dialogue on sexuality it is possible to unite Black men together, no matter their sexuality to fight a common enemy...White patriarchy.

Many believe that homophobia has taken a backseat race because the issue of race is still so prevalent in our society. Darren Lenard Hutchinson argues in his essay, *"Claiming" and "Speaking" Who We Are,"* Black hostility toward gays is attributable in part to a perception that homosexuality does not fit the social picture of normality African-Americans wish to project to combat racist stereotypes.[90] Earnest defending Lisa and Johnny creates a brief and rare moment on television in which trans- is being represented as interconnected with Blackness. Johnny becoming defensive is due to his manhood being called into question by the other detainees, who are more interested in making a joke of his ignorance in regards to Lisa's sex than his actual sexual preferences. They do not even seem to be interested in Lisa at all. Earnest comes to the defense of Johnny and Lisa. He gives Lisa support indirectly, and she also acknowledges it with a smile; however, it can be argued that she is silenced and not allowed to speak for herself due to her gender identity. The men do not engage in any context that would be defined as a display of aggression towards Johnny; however, they are blunt but comedic in their opinions on his sexuality, which is a realistic representation of how Black men see and communicate sexuality.

For Black men who are not receptive to LGBT issues, the episode initiates a conversation or at least an acknowledgment of different sexual and gender identities. In the *BAN* episode,

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[88] Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 112.
[89] Ibid 112.
[90] Darren Lenard Hutchinson. Devon Carbado, ed., *Black Men On Race, Gender, and Sexuality: a Critical Reader*, ed. Devon Carbado (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 29-30.

Paper Boi illustrates that many Black men are just unaware of gender and sexual statuses outside of their own, stating in reference to Caitlyn Jenner, "I just found out they [transgender] exist."[91] Conversation and representations of SGL are typically limited to just that… same-gendered relationships, often overlooking the Black trans- community. The notion that trans- is in any way related to Blackness is relatively new, but recently there has been an increase in Black trans-representations. Black trans actress Laverne Cox portrays the character Sophia Burset on *OITNB,* which has created a dialogue about the Black trans- community. *Atlanta* is progressive in is representation in that not only does it generate discussion on trans- situations, such as transphobia and violence towards the trans- community, it does so while representing authentic Black Atlanta culture. In a single episode, the creators of *Atlanta* addressed issues of police brutality, mental health, and trans- and homophobia, within the context of Blackness. It could be argued that the Black community has the tendency to look at transgender individual just as they did the character, Sheneneh Jenkins. Trans- in the Black community is interpreted as men merely dressing up as women and the notion that a man could have a gender identity that differs from their assigned sex has only recently surfaced as a discussion. Paper Boi states that he was not aware that transgender people even existed, leading to the female guest on the show, Deborah Holt, played by Mary Kraft, to state:

"There's a large swath of gender and sexuality roles that are just being exposed to a large portion of the public. It's harder for certain sections to deal with this transition because of conflict of interest and identity issues. In this case, the rap community! I truly believe it has more to do with issues of masculinity in the Black community than actual homophobia and transphobia."[92]

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[91] *Atlanta*. "B.A.N." Donald Glover. FX Network, 11 October 2016.
[92] Ibid

Society has created an illusion that media representations often perpetuate o Black men as the most homo- and transphobic community. Black men are plagued with having to adhere to patriarchal masculinity only to be deemed homophobic for merely being a Black man.

Masculinity:

Mark Anthony Neal discusses in *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinity,* the queering of Black masculinity in popular culture starting with Gene Anthony Ray's portrayal of Leroy in the 1980s film *Fame*. In his discussions he examines how true masculinity admits little or no space for self-interrogation or multiple subjectivities around race, arguing that Black masculinity has historically been inflexible due to one White notion of masculinity. Using popular male artists, from Gene Anthony Ray to Jay-Z and R. Kelly, Neal discusses how these men are considered "illegible" in terms of Black masculinity in American popular culture. He argues that the most "legible" Black male body often thought to be a criminal body and a body in need of policing and containment – incarceration – is just a reminder that the Black male body that so seduces America is just as often the bogeyman that keeps America awake at night.[93] The exploitation of the Black male body is justified due to social constructions of Black masculinity; Black men are expected to remain legible by maintaining marginalized characteristics; however, they are considered to be intimidating and threatening when attempting to perform the role of hypermasculine. In episode five, "Nobody Beats the Biebs," the writers cast a Black actor to portray pop star, Justin Bieber.

Due to Black artists "co-signing" Bieber, including R&B singer Usher Raymond, he has been considered an honorary member of "Black" popular culture even rocking dreads. In the episode actual behaviors performed by Justin Bieber are portrayed; the Black actor is forgiven for his misdeeds including peeing in random places, leading the audience to consider the

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[93] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities (Postmillennial Pop)* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2013), 5.

question: What if Bieber was Black and behaved this way? Paper Boi is deemed violent and aggressive from the moment he entered the charity event but attempts to show a softer side to gain more media coverage. He is told by a reporter, "Listen, I want to give you some advice—play your part. People do not want Justin to be the asshole. They want you to be the asshole. You're a rapper. That's your job."[94] Paper Boi, who was blown off by the reporter who is only interested in interviewing Bieber, eventually grows frustrated and jealous with the constant dismissal of Bieber's bad behavior, while he is being demonized by simply entering the room. He becomes aggressive on the basketball floor while guarding Bieber and perpetuates the hypermasculine and aggressive Black male role he was initially trying to avoid.

Black male masculinity once again is brought into question when examining Black culture's views on Same Gender Loving (SGL) and gender identity when Paper Boi (Alfred) goes on the fictional talk show *Montague*, to defend his comments about Caitlyn Jenner**.** Holt states that Black men have historically been predisposed to transphobia due to the lack of father figures in the Black community. The argument is that without a strong male presence during adolescence Black men grow up questioning their masculinity, but one thing they are assured of is that homosexuality is not a representation of Black masculinity, so they are hostile towards the issue. Paper Boi comments on trans- and homophobia in the Black community:

> "What? Lack of a father? Do you hear yourself? Nigga, shut up! Man, here's the
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> thing, it's hard for me to care about this when nobody cares about me as a Black,
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> human man. Caitlyn Jenner is doing what White men have been doing since the
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> dawn of time, which is whatever the hell he wants, so why should I care?"[95]

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94 *Atlanta*. "Nobody Beats the Biebs." Hiro Murai. Stephen Glover and Donald Glover. FX Network, 27 September, 2016.
95 *Atlanta*. "B.A.N." Donald Glover. FX Network, 11 October 2016.

The argument is made that the topic of transphobia is so closely related to the Black struggle the rapper should be more sensitive to trans- struggles. Paper Boi replies, "I do not have a problem with gay people, trans- people because that's tolerance but where is the tolerance for people like me?"[96] The writers attempt to develop an understanding that Black men are not necessarily trans- or homophobic by concentrating on issues that affect Black men directly. Paper Boi's comments emphasize the ongoing frustration felt by straight Black men who are also subjected to intolerance and injustices in America. Heterosexual Black men receive limited support or understanding of their perspectives and individual backgrounds, due to consistent marginalization as they attempt to access hegemonic masculinity. Atlanta addresses the performance of Black male masculinity and perceived homophobia that are products of the racially driven social and political ideologies in America. Paper Boi expresses genuine concerns held by many Black men in America; his comments bring attention to the dismissal of the issues facing Black men daily.

Before there were concerns about the treatment of the trans- and gay communities, the Black male body was being exploited and appropriated for social and political advancements; however, Black men do not receive the same sympathy and rights to justice. The comments also acknowledge that in terms of gender and sexuality Black men do not have the same freedom of expression that White men possess; specifically, the performance of feminine characteristics. There are currently racial stereotypes in which White forms of femininity occupy a cultural norm, and nonwhite femininities are measured as excessive or inadequate in relation to that of the norm.[97] White men have the ability to access their femininity because hegemonic masculinity subscribes to White male superiority; Black men are not allotted the same privileges to

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[96] Ibid
[97] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities (Postmillennial Pop)* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2013), 91.

expressive gender and sexual identities. Straight Black men who are striving to obtain hegemonic masculinity frequently perform as hypermasculine, specifically those in the hip hop industry who sell exaggerated masculinity as authentic. It is the rap communities silence about [hypermasculinity] and homophobia that helps obscure the fundamental connections among patriarchal masculinity, femininity, and homophobia to the hip-hop industry.[98]

Hip-hop artists pride themselves on their authenticity, but they rarely address anything authentic outside of the construction of Black hypermasculinity connected with violence and homophobia. Hip-hop culture which resists White supremacy notions also is built on a foundation of hegemonic masculinity; the hypermasculinity in hip-hop culture stems from not only a lack of awareness of oneself, but also insecurity as Black men continue to fall short of hegemonic notions of manhood. Homophobia in the hip-hop and the Black community is a reflection of Black men attempting to avoid appearing feminine because it is considered to be the ultimate weakness. Tricia Rose reflects on the critical role homophobia has played in defining masculinity in hip-hop culture; she argues that in hip hop's version of heterosexual masculinity, the parameters of manhood are being protected when 'homosexuality' is equated with femininity, but both are designated as weak and subordinate.[99] Authentic hip-hop masculinity is, in fact, a façade; created in an attempt to mask the actual standing of Black men in America by seemingly giving rap artists' power through hyper-aggression. With several top artists speaking out in support of the LBGTIQ community it was not until recently that homophobic rhetoric in hip-hop has been challenged because for so long the hypermasculinity, aggression, and misogyny have been considered to be the norm in the Black and hip-hop communities. Rose also argues that the general culture of homophobia is compounded by Black males' long-denied access to the

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[98] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, ©2008), 237.
[99] Ibid 237.

full powers of patriarchal masculinity; which in turn encouraged a particular brand of Black homophobia.[100]*Atlanta* tackles the hip-hop community and its role in promoting homophobia by addressing the scrutiny rap artists receive due to the perceived homophobic rhetoric in their rap lyrics.

Artists have the freedom to produce and create music that tells a story to them; Paper Boi eventually states "Look, I should be able to say something that's weird without people hating on me… Freedom of Speech." The female guest agreed with his argument that as a person with inherent value he has the freedom to express himself. Although the lyrics within rap music are aggressive and offensive, this does not have to translate to the rap and hip-hop community as a collective being homophobic. The rap and hip-hop industry is very much about maintaining an image, which was created in part by White youth as the most significant consumers of the genre and capitalism that appropriates Blackness for profit. According to bell hooks, when individual Black men achieve wealth or become celebrities, they symbolize alternative ways for all economically dislocated Black men to assert capitalist identities.[101] Once money, and not the realization of a work ethic based on integrity and ethical values, became the sole measure of the man, more Black men could enter the game. [102] When Black rap artists achieve upward mobility with their work, other Black male artists feel that if they display the same hypermasculine characters in their lyrics (typically real narratives) they too will be successful.

Tricia Rose asserts that hip-hop remains a genre primarily valued for its seemingly autobiographical nature, "leading criminal lives seems to enhance artists' credibility, as has been the case for artist such as 50 Cents and Atlanta native, artist TI. While some artist lost credibility not because they lack talent but because they [are] discovered to be telling lies about their

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[100] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, ©2008), 238.
[101] bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.
[102] Ibid 18.

criminal past or origins in "the hood."[103] Most rap artists have indeed experienced the events and lived the realities that they put into their lyrics; the problem is keeping up with the hypermasculine trends which often use homophobic rhetoric. She goes on to state that while homophobic lyrical content laces many rappers' rhymes, the music videos that get produced and aired do not consistently accentuate homophobia or feature gay characters.[104] The homophobic rhetoric within Southern hip-hop lyrics has dwindled with Southern artists of today using their lyrics to boost their "credibility" to the rap industry and their "come up."

After an interview with *Rolling Stone* Atlanta artists Quavo, Takeoff, and Offset, who make up the newly popular rap trio Migos, found themselves doing damage control after their comments in regards to iLoveMakonnen (Makonnen) coming out on Twitter were misrepresented by the magazine. Glover, a fan of the group, actually took a moment during his 2017 Golden Globes acceptance speech to thank the artist; inadvertently launching their single *Bad and Boujee* to no. 1 on the Billboard charts. *RollingStone* interviewer and writer of the article, Jonah Weiner writes:

> "Damn, Makonnen!" Quavo bellows after an awkward interlude. I mention support I saw online for Makonnen's decision. "They supported him?" Quavo asks, raising an eyebrow. "That's because the world is fucked up," says Offset. "This world is not right," Takeoff says. "We ain't saying it's nothing wrong with the gays," says Quavo. But he suggests that Makonnen's sexuality undermines his credibility, given the fact that "he first came out talking about trapping and selling Molly, doing all that." He frowns. "That's wack, bro."[105]

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[103] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 136.
[104] Ibid 237.
[105] Weiner, Jonah. "Migos' Wild World: One Night in the Studio with 'Bad and Boujee' Trio." RollingStone. February 8, 2017. Accessed September 10, 2017.

After the article was released, fans urged the group to clarify their statements asserting the interviewer, Jonah Wiener, was cryptic in his representation of their comments. The article left readers questioning rather the group was indeed homophobic, although they had previously worked with Makonnen and stated, "We ain't saying it's nothing wrong with the gays."[106] Their response may not be "socially" correct, but it should be considered that they are Black Atlanta trap rap artists who are being asked about another man's sexuality. Wiener, a White man, has control over the interview and how they will be represented to the readers, as such; it could be argued that they were apprehensive simply because Black men have historically attempted to preserve hegemonic notions of Black masculinity. Homophobia in the Black and hip-hop community adheres to a "keep it real" mantra, but questions the masculinity of those who might be closeted, while undermining their authenticity in the event they might come out.[107] Artists are expected to be their true self as long as that true self-adheres to hegemonic masculinity; although, more recently hip-hop culture has taken strides towards LBGTIQ acceptance.

Conversations on sexuality in the hip-hop community at one point were taboo; however, the industry has made great strides to be inclusive just as the American people have in regards to LBGTIQ communities. Artists in the hip-hop industry who have recently expressed and openly embraced their sexuality and gender identities include female rappers Angel Haze and Young Mia, rappers Taylor Bennett (brother of Grammy-winning artist Chance the Rapper) and Makonnen (Atlanta native), and singer Frank Ocean just to name a few. These artists have been embraced in the most part by the hip-hop and R&B industry as a collective with artists Beyoncé, Rihanna, Chris Brown, John Legend and *Def Jam*

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[106] Ibid
[107] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities (Postmillennial Pop)* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2013), 69

Records CEO Russell Simmons all speaking out in support of the LBGTIQ community. Hegemonic masculinity [in the rap industry] is grafted onto a history of racism and systematic oppression, so Black masculinity has never been taken for granted; strategies of preserving normal Black masculinity led to practices and values that indulge in homophobia, sexism, and misogyny.[108] Although members of hip-hop and R&B industries have spoken out, the rap community has primarily remained distant and silent on their support or disapproval. Southern rap artist Boosie Badazz, for example, has been blunt and unapologetic over the past year about his impression and experience with the gay community. During an interview with DJ Vlad, Boosie stated, "They're trying to make everyone f****** gay. They're putting it in our culture. They're putting it everywhere. Gay stuff is everywhere."[109] While most recently he has been in the news due to a video he posted in July of this year whereby he graphically recalls being in prison and seeing two men engaging in sexual acts; many found his comments and recollection to be excessively homophobic and crude. In 2015, rapper and producer 50 Cents entered into a heated social media debate with *Empire* actress, Taraji P. Henson, after blaming the shows drop in rating on the gay storyline within the series. It is this type of homophobic rhetoric that is a direct product of the ongoing uses of masculinity as a weapon of self-empowerment for straight Black men in America. Mark Anthony Neal, argues that authenticity in hip-hop is often gendered and sexualized which leads to resistance in the industry stating, "aggressive responses stem from the consumption of rap music in popular culture, which creates constructed identities that maintain Black hip-hop discourses of gender and sexuality."[110]

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[108] Frederik Dhaenens and Sander De Ridder, "Resistant masculinities in alternative R&B? Understanding Frank Ocean and The Weeknd's representations of gender," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (May 2014): 3.

[109] djvlad. "'The Vlad Couch' Ft. Boosie BadAzz (Full Interview)." *YouTube*, YouTube, 17 June 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4Yrd29_nGI.

[110] Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities (Postmillennial Pop)* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2013), 37.

As popular culture maintain constructions of Black gender and sexuality identities, social media now force rap artists to defend their comments. Homophobic rhetoric in the hip-hop industry has become less of the norm due to social media and the potential for career damaging repercussions.

Although our society has become conscious and intolerant of the discrimination inflicted on underrepresented communities, rap artists continue to maintain their authenticity through the use of hypermasculine and aggressive lyrics that the hip-hop industry thrives on. *Atlanta's* creators address homophobia in the hip-hop industry, while also bringing to attention the lack of tolerance towards Black men in America. Conversations in regards to the relationship between the hip-hop industry and LBGTIQ community are not ongoing throughout the series; however, the writers create a dialogue on the interconnectedness between Blackness, the hip-hop community, and queerness. They did so by using comedy, which has been the genre of choice when creating a social commentary that is constructed in Blackness and addresses some category of sexuality and gender.

Historically, the use of Black comedy as a source of social commentary only created more racial stereotypes in popular culture and did little to address issues of gender and sexuality in the Black community. These comedic representations often played around with gender and sexuality but only as a segue into conversations in regards Blackness in America. White comfortability plays a significant role in the representations of Blackness on American television including the ability for Blackness to address gender and sexuality openly. Comedians who were able to have mainstream success in the Seventies and Eighties did so by avoiding controversy in their creation of social commentary, which in

turn made the comedy more critical than the intended message. By the Nineties, Black comedy had entered into a new era and began to address ongoing social and political injustices facing Blackness in American, however, rarely using the platforms to examine sexuality and gender in relation to the Black community.

The city of Atlanta has one of the largest LBGTIQ communities in America. The series creators would have been doing the city a disservice by not addressing such an important community. The series representation of Blackness and queerness are not without faults; however, they are authentic in that they represent the LBGTIQ community in relation to the hip-hop and rap industries. The series offers progressive representations of gender and sexuality while remaining authentic in its portrayal of the daily struggles of being Black men in the city of Atlanta. The Black community has long been detached from issues regarding gender and sexuality, as they have both been considered unrelated to Blackness. Black men are unable to take possession of their femininity because of hegemonic masculinity and femininity that prescribes to Whiteness as a cultural norm. *Atlanta* examines the lack of flexibility in the Black and hip-hop industry for the embracement of sexualities and gender identities outside of hegemonic patterns; however, Black men continue to strive for these hegemonic limitations. The exploitation and marginalization of the Black male body centuries ago left a lasting impression on masculine identities in straight Black men. The show analyzes notions that gender and sexuality concerns have taken a backseat to issues of Blackness as a whole; nevertheless, they examine how Black men are one of the least tolerated communities in America.

The creators bring much-needed attention to the inconsistency in our society, which calls for a performance of hypermasculinity only to marginalize straight Black men as

aggressive and violent, as well as homophobic and misogynistic. Donald Glover uses his platform to examine issues of Blackness and homophobia, along with the authenticity of hip-hop culture in relation to Black masculinity. The current progression over fear in the industry is because of those who have used their platform to bring attention to issues that indeed affect the Black LBGTIQ community. The dialogues within the show are brief; however, they are useful in creating the social commentary the writers were seeking. *Atlanta* conversations on homophobia and rap culture are intended to make the audience inquire about the social and political ideologies that directly interfere with accurate representations of these relationships. The is progressive and new in its depictions of Black masculinity, trans- issues, same-gender relationships, and homophobia, due to the events occurring in an urban Black context that is often not portrayed on American television. However, the show has its downfall, as it often portrays Black women in what could be considered primitive or stereotypical roles to represent Black women in Atlanta. The next chapter explores past representations on American television in an attempt to examine the women on the television *Atlanta.*

<center>**Chapter Three**</center>

<center>*ATLANTA* **ON FX: PAST AND PRESENT REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN**</center>

<center>**ON AMERICAN TELEVISION**</center>

Representations of Blackness in the media are often perceived in two distinct ways according to author and scholar, Stuart Hall. He states that consciously good relations are perceived when watching programs featuring Black characters; however, the portrayal of Blackness in earlier television shows contributed to primitive unconscious imagery. Unconscious narratives depict Blackness in such a way as to not disturb the unconscious belief of White superiority.[111] In exploring the commodification of Black female bodies, I first discuss the capital and economic gains that created lasting media representations. I then look at the symbolism that has long defined and sustained negative representations and perceptions of Black women, while also examine how Black women have contributed to these stereotypes. I conclude my analysis by looking at the ways in which the series *Atlanta* challenges or propagates past media representations of Black women.

The Commodification of Black Female Bodies

What has been firmly ingrained in the consciousness of White America as Mammy and Sapphire, the images of Black women that emerged from slavery are visible today on modern television.[112] In *Selling Hot Pussy,* an essay from *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks examined the historical exploitation and perceived expendability of the Black female body that has persisted in our contemporary society. She opens with an examination of the Black female body as a slave on an auction block, being objectified as nothing more than a commodity. hooks provides the reader with an example of the humiliation the Black female body has endured

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[111] Gail Dines and Jean McMahon Humez, *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, ©2011), 84.

[112] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 72.

when she discusses Sarah Baartmann. Baartmann, who became known as the "Hottentot Venus," was a South African woman who was promised a better life in Europe but was ultimately sold as an oddity in a London exhibit. Baartmann, whose body became somewhat of a symbol for biological racism, was paraded around and made a spectacle of due to her large breasts and "oversized" buttocks. The largeness of her buttocks and other extremities were seen as abnormal to the small, slender figure of the European woman, and as a result, the Black female body was perceived as inferior. Due to European fascination with the Black female body, Baartmann continued to be exploited when her remains were harvested as if she were a scientific experiment, and again put on display for an audience. There has been a distortion of the Black female body from inferior commodities, such as Sarah Baartmann, to a contemporary sexualized representation, which hooks examines through Black female entertainers and artist. Baartmann's image was used to justify the sexualization of Black women bodies. White men used cultural differences to control the image of Black women and defend their devious and often violent behaviors towards the Black women body. This is just one example of the history of Black exploitation in the United States. Throughout the reading, hooks explores the ways in which the Black female body has been exploited through "othering" and commodified for what she defines as imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Black female sexuality historically has not only been exploited but restricted and regulated for White usage and convenience. Controlling Black women's bodies has been especially important for capitalist class relations in the United States. Patricia Hill Collins argues in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* that when it comes to U.S. Black women's experiences, two features of capitalism remain noteworthy. First, Black women's bodies have been objectified and commodified under

U.S. capitalist class relations, and secondly, Black women's bodies have been exploited. Via mechanisms such as employment discrimination, maintaining images of Black women that construct them as mules or objects of pleasure, and encouraging or discouraging Black women's reproduction via state intervention, Black women's labor, sexuality, and fertility all have been exploited.[113] Because of racialized images that support these mechanisms of oppression, the Black female body continues to be defined as expendable. Just as during slavery, the Black female body is often not distinguished between the Black male body.

K. Sue Jewell argues that because of economic factors such as slavery, Black women have historically been confined to the same labor requirements and treatment as Black men. She states that the economic profitability of slavery did not allow for a differentiation of gender difference from male and female slaves; arguing that to treat the women differently would imply that female slaves are not capable of performing the same "masculine" duties as men, which in turn would have decreased the profitability of Black female slaves. Because of the blinding powers of White ideologies, Black women are fundamentally linked to their men by class exploitations and racist oppression, which does not discriminate between the sexes.[114] The economic motivation for images that define African American women as domestics, and consign them to perform menial tasks that others in society are reluctant and unwilling to perform, is significant as such images led to societal perceptions and expectations that African American women who fill occupational positions other than those defined by cultural images are in status-discrepant positions.[115] Today, Black women are still expected to be full-time workers in an assortment of marginalized domestic fields, while also providing for her family as a homemaker and absorbing the negative images that define women of color.

[113] Ibid 132.
[114] Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 142.
[115] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 55.

Popular culture provides countless examples of Black female appropriation and exploitation of "negative stereotypes" to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits.[116] The Black female body is sold and commodified today, as many Black women have absorbed and perpetuate negative social and political ideologies that lend themselves to White superiority. bell hooks argues in *Black Looks: Race and Representations* that the Black female body is rarely looked at as a whole, rather individual aspects are commodified such as Black women's butts. Black female sexuality is regulated and demonized as Black women are labeled as hypersexual and promiscuous. These perceptions are often accompanied by images of Black women in roles that are hypersexual. The hypersexual image was also created during slavery as the Black female body was objectified and demonized for its largeness. hooks argues that because the Black female body has been demonized, White men are able to invade and violate Black women with no fear of retribution and retaliation. Although demonized the Black woman's body and characteristics such as the butt and more recently Black female protective hairstyles, are sold and commodified in popular culture, as society attempts to mimic perceptions of Black femininity.

As media representations of Black women continue to marginalize and exploit, our society continues to appropriate the very same culture and attributes of Black women that are demonized. The commodification of Blackness as a whole has created a social context where appropriation by non-Black people of the Black image knows no boundaries. If the many non-Black people who produce images or critical narratives about Blackness and Black people do not interrogate their perspective, then they may simply recreate the imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize.[117] Historically, Black female bodies have been

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[116]bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 65.
[117] Ibid 7.

commodities, available to White individuals who are able to pay the price for the attributes and culture of Blackness. These powers have oppressed and maintained Black women in America to the lowest social and economic spheres of our society. The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination.[118] Specifically, Black women have been portrayed in such a way as to perpetuate misconceptions and devalue the Black female body. Media landscapes that are overrun by what Patricia Hill Collins defines as the *White Gaze* have meant for Black women being depicted through controlling images that maintain a negative Black discourse.[119] The earliest representations of African American women were confined to stereotypes such as incompetent, child-like, and/or hypersexual, with Black actress having no option but to take on limited roles as mammies, servants, or the comedic relief for Whiteness.

Gray discusses the trajectory of Black representations on American television and how they intersect with social and political discourses. Black representations during the Fifties and Sixties attempt to assimilate Blackness into America (White) by casting African Americans in roles as maids, cooks, mammies, and other servants, or as con artists and deadbeats. "Black characters who populated the television world of the early 1950s were happy-go-lucky social incompetents who knew their place and whose antics served to amuse and comfort culturally sanctioned notions of Whiteness, especially White superiority and paternalism."[120] In order to keep the unconscious racism that Stuart Hall discuss, media representations during this time did little to address White supremacy, if anything it created an illusion of a utopian world. These

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[118] Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 72.
[119] Rachel Alicia Griffin. "Pushing into Precious: Black Women, Media Representation, and the Glare of the White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchal Gaze." Critical Studies In Media Communication 31, no. 3 (August 2014): 183.
[120] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 75.

images continued well into the Sixties until there was a shift in representations of Blackness due to political and social movements. Gray argues that by the Seventies and early Eighties media representations of Blackness had shifted due to Reaganism. He states, "As a formation, Reaganism was built on desires to dismantle the welfare state, to curb an intrusive government, to stimulate corporate growth through unrestrained market forces, and to ensure a long reign of conservative authority in key areas of public and private life."[121] African American discourse grew immensely due to President Reagan's feel-good politics that affirmed resentment towards the Black community. Media representation of Blackness in the Seventies equated to welfare queens, junkies, and criminals; whereas, in the Eighties and Nineties, representations of Blackness challenged societal views of African Americans.

Controlling Images of Black Women

Using bell hooks, scholar and Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins argues that Black women have been "othered" mammy in American society in an attempt to continue primitive objectification of what has long been considered a subordinate group. She states that as subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history; however, as objects, one's only reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationships to those who are subjects.[122] Black women are typically confined to roles in American society that are considered "safe" in terms of White comfortability and domination. In particular, the image of Mammy is so deeply rooted in American culture that it can be found in virtually every form of print and visual media, which K. Sue Jewell argues in her book *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy*. Jewell states, "The importance of the

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[121] Ibid 23.
[122] Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 71.

Mammy image cannot be understated, for it represents the African American female adult just as the bad Black girl is [currently] representative of the African American female youth and young adult.[123] The Mammy caricature serves as a symbol of Black femininity in our society today because she represents the roles performed by Black women before emancipation, which has become a lingering image due to the mass media. Although female slaves performed a multiplicity of duties on the plantation, from working in the fields as laborers to assuming the primary duties for the slave owner's household, it is this last function, which became the foundation for imagery that symbolizes African American womanhood.[124] Submissive in character, the Mammy, is obedient and loyal to her employer (owner); however, hostile and aggressive towards other African Americans specifically Black men.

The role of Mammy was meant to be content in her position as a caregiver and domestic worker, seeking to provide for not only her family but the families of her employers. Even though few Mammy images exist today, and those that do have been cosmetically altered, leading to the impression that Mammy work has disappeared, the Mammy work has assumed new forms.[125] The Mammy often acts as an emotional nurturer and problem solver by taking on the burdens of other people; a role many Black women in the US still take on to this day.[126] Following the Civil Rights Movement, the visibility of Mammy began to fade; however, popular cultural images such as Aunt Jemima still linger in the twenty-first century. "By the Eighties, media portrayals introduced more positive and representative images of African American women yet, simultaneously, including one of the old stereotypical images of African American women. The other practice is to introduce an image reflecting the strengths and positive qualities

[123] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 37-38.
[124] Ibid 38.
[125] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 40.
[126] Ibid 40.

of African American women and then, later, seeking to invalidate the positive attributes of this image."[127] These representations transformed in terms of class with series that featured Black women functioning in the middle-class and upper-middle-class roles, such as the series *The Cosby Show*.

Black communities have historically contained a high percentage of families headed by Black single mother creating one of the more popular controlling images, the Black matriarch. Just as the Mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the "bad" Black mother; the image of the matriarch is central to intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and race, like the Mammy.[128] These women are typically portrayed outside the home in the workforce, leaving their children to raise themselves. The Black matriarch representation fails to fulfill her role as a traditional "women" which is commonly assumed to be the reason for social disparities within the Black community. Black women who are unable to perform in the role of traditional women are assumed to be the major contributing factor in their children's failures, which leads to a perpetuation of socioeconomic class standings. It is television representations that depict the shortcomings and absence of Black women in the matriarch role, that allow for White men and women to blame Black women for the failures of the children. From the dominant group's perspective, the matriarch represented a failed Mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant.[129]

Often described as aggressive and verbally abusive the matriarch tends to be a single mother as her male partners find her too assertive. She fails as the matriarch and as a woman

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[127] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 36.

[128] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 75.

[129] Ibid 76.

because she is seen as unfeminine in character, frequently emasculating the men in her life. "Labeling Black women unfeminine and too strong works to undercut Black women's assertiveness. Many Black women who find themselves maintaining families by themselves often feel that they have done something wrong."[130] As the image of the Black matriarch seeks to regulate Black women's behavior, it also seems designed to influence White women's gendered identities.[131] White women are able to challenge White patriarchal powers that dictate what it means to be a woman while continuing to be defined as feminine or womanly. Black women with similar characteristic are defined as aggressive left to head their families alone and are generally seen as unfeminine by both the Black and White community. Collins argues, labeling Black women as matriarchs erodes their self-confidence and ability to confront oppression. She states African-American women who must work encounter pressures to be submissive mammies in one setting, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes.[132]

Another controlling image of Black women includes that of the welfare mother, a contemporary image that emerged in the Sixties and Seventies. Typically, tied to working-class Black women, the welfare mother also has access to government assistance to aid in heading the household. This image was constructed to portray poor working class Black women who use the benefits that are made available to them in an attempt to survive in poverty. Collins states, "As long as poor Black women were denied social welfare benefits, there was no need for this stereotype. But when U.S. Black women gained more political power and demanded equity in access to state services, the need arose for this controlling image."[133] The image of the welfare queen creates a notion that Black women are perpetuating a culture of poverty by deliberately

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[130] Ibid 76-77.
[131] Ibid 77.
[132] Ibid 78.
[133] Ibid 78.

reproducing and not working, in order to receive government assistance. This is another way that White patriarchal powers have used politics to control and govern the fertility of Black women. The term welfare has come to be associated with single low-income Black women not deserving of assistance as they should be working to provide for their families. Although White women receive government assistance as well, they are assumed to stay in the home and perform their womanly duties, while the Black welfare mother is expected to go out into the workforce, leaving her children to raise themselves. The welfare queen image constructed a notion that the Black community as a whole is lazy and unwilling to work to achieve any sort of social or economic advancements. Welfare queens are presumably content with being "married to the state" as they consume the money of hard-working Americans. Collins argues that the welfare queen signals efforts to use the situation of working-class Black women as a sign of the deterioration of the state.[134]

If not confined to roles as domestic servants, the Black matriarch, or the welfare mother, Black women are portrayed as the angry Black women (Sapphire), the hypersexual Black women (Jezebel), or the Tragic Mulatto. While Sapphire is portrayed as hyper-aggressive in a constant battle with the Black male, the bad Black girl or Jezebel is depicted as hypersexual, actively seeking out sexual encounters. The Jezebel is depicted as alluring, sexually arousing and seductive. She fulfills the sex objectification requirement of White womanhood, although she is portrayed as a less naive, worldlier seductress.[135] Historically, the sexuality of Black women has been restricted by White powers as a way to sustain White superiority over the Black body. The Jezebel image relegates all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically

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[134] Ibid 80-81.
[135] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 46.

reported by Black slave women.[136] The Black female body has long been invaded and viewed as dismissible, as popular culture continues to demonize yet sell Black femininity. Because Jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagine her as a "freak."[137] This representation is typically not seen as a characteristic of the Mammy or Black matriarch; however, other controlling images of Black women such as the Jezebel and the Tragic Mulatto take on the label of hypersexual caricatures.

Characteristics such as independence, aggressiveness, and decisiveness are defined by those in power as qualities associated with masculinity; they are exaggerated and defined negatively when they are associated with images that symbolize African American women. If these attributes did not represent a threat to male privilege, they would not be defined negatively by those in power."[138] Jewell argues that attributes that are negatively defined by the privileged class are the same qualities that many Black women positively represent, such as being strong and independent without the added label of angry Black or bad Black women. Also, pointing out that the negative attributes are not always perceived as negative. There is an intersection between race, class, gender, and sexuality that defines what and who are to be considered within the negative stereotypes of Black women. Other controlling images of Black women include the Tragic Mulatto. A lighter toned, a fair complexioned Black woman who is often depicted in the middle of two racial spaces. What makes the mulatto tragic is that although she may pass for White, because often the character is biracial, she possesses at least one drop of Black blood making it impossible for her to achieve White social and political status. Despite passing for White, the tragedy of the Tragic Mulatto identity is that she may hate or even fear Whites, yet

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[136] Ibid 81
[137] Ibid 82
[138] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.

seek their approval. Traditional portrayals of the Tragic Mulatto, Mammy, Aunt Jemima and Sapphire began to diminish following the Seventies, but that is not to say that these images disappeared entirely.[139] The bad girl and Sapphire are regularly depicted on American television with slight modifications that divert from the stereotypes that are still being represented. Media representations of Black women in the twenty-first century are often limited to reality television series or films that depict Black femininity in primitive roles as slaves and servants. Many Black women and critics today believe that the reality television series take away the dignity and respectability of Black women by portraying them as a modern-day Sapphire.

Black Women on American television

In 1939, Hattie McDaniel won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role as "Mammy" in the classic romantic film *Gone With the Wind*; making her the first African American entertainer to win an Academy Award in any category. McDaniel's win was a momentous moment in Black entertainment history. However, not everyone was thrilled by her win, specifically leaders of the NAACP who felt she was perpetuating misconceptions of Black women as subordinate to White elites. McDaniel along with many Black actors and actresses during the era felt that the NAACP failed to see the potential in using such roles to address racial barriers that kept the Black community at the lowest socioeconomic classes. The image of the "Mammy" intersected not only race and gender, but included marginalizations based on class and sexuality; this image was racially oppressive but influence Black maternal behaviors.[140] Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves, the image of Mammy as loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and "family" better than her own, symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male

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[139] Ibid 47.
[140] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 73

power.[141] "Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White "family," the Mammy still knows her "place" as an obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination."[142] As a symbol of African American womanhood, the image of Mammy has been the most pervasive of all images constructed by the privileged and perpetuated by the mass media.[143] While the Mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes.

One of the most popular representations of the Black matriarch in the Eighties was Claire Huxtable from the hit television series *The Cosby Show*. Claire Huxtable, the matriarch of the family, was widely known and beloved by viewers for her no-nonsense attitude and dedication to her family. She performs the role of educated modern matriarch. Although she is a successful partner at a law firm in New York, she is rarely depicted in a professional setting. Instead, the character is portrayed performing domestic duties, housework, and raising her five children, while taking on the burdens of other characters as the disciplinarian. Collins argues that placing the character in the workforce outside the home would have introduced the theme of her sexuality into the workplace, and exploring these contradictions apparently were beyond the skills of the show's writers. Instead, she was allowed to be a sexual being, but only within the confines of heterosexual marriage and family. Collins states, "Black professional women negotiate the slippery terrain of distancing Black women from the assumptions of aggression and sexuality attributed to working-class Black women while not making middle-class Black women unsuitable for hard work."[144] In the series, Claire Huxtable performs as the patriarchal ideal Black mother, as she functioned inside the home and actively took part in the lives of her

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[141] Ibid 72.
[142] Ibid 72-73.
[143] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 37-38.
[144] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (USA: Routledge, 2005), 140.

children. The representation of Claire Huxtable was a normalized depiction of Black women during the Seventies and Eighties as the show's creators attempted to sell a Black family to White audiences. Although in the Fifties and early Sixties, Black actresses were merely placed into a White world with little to no context on their Blackness, such as the series *Julia* starring veteran actress Diahann Carroll.

Prior to *The Cosby Show* the series *Julia* aired in 1968 making it one of the first television series to portray a Black woman in a role that was not overtly stereotypical. Julia was a single mother, working as a nurse for Dr. Morton Chegley (Lloyd Nolan) at a local hospital, putting her into the role of the Black matriarch. The series at the time was new and refreshing in its depictions of Black women. Julia was not only a loyal employee to Dr. Chegley but a dedicated mother to her young son, with good moral values that were previously unseen in Black female characters on American television. The character of Julia was progressive; although, the series lacked social commentary on matters facing the Black community such as race relations and socioeconomic positioning, specifically on Black women in America. The character of Julia was problematic in that she confined herself to White comfortability and lacked depth in terms of being a multidimensional character that was in any way relatable. The series *Julia* attempted to make Black women acceptable to Whites by containing them or rendering them, if not culturally White, invisible.[145] The series, like many shows of the Sixties and early Seventies, integrated individual Black characters into hegemonic White worlds void of any hint of African American traditions, social struggles, racial conflicts, and cultural difference.[146] In his book, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, Herman Gray discusses Black invisibility on

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[145] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 76.
[146] Ibid 85.

American television; mapping out the transition in the representations of African Americans as a whole on television series such as *Julia*, *The Cosby Show*, and *A Different World*.

These images like Mammy stem from an intersection of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Sapphire and the Jezebel are both represented as strong and independent Black women; however, problematic in that they are oversexualized and made to be hyper-aggressive towards Black men. In the 1980s Jackee Harry, one of the stars of the television sitcom "227," gained tremendous popularity for her portrayal of the [Jezebel] in her character, Sandra Clark.[147] The character of Sandra is described as man-hungry and sex-crazed, often wearing flashy form-fitting attire to attract men. Sandra would often tease her neighbor, Mary Jenkins (Black matriarch) played by actress Marla Gibbs, who performed the traditional role of housewife, as she felt there was more to life than working and raising children. Typically, the role of Jezebel is at odds with another woman, who finds her "ways" to be promiscuous and unbecoming of a "woman."

For Sapphire, specifically, the main point of contention is represented by the Black male as the two often engage in verbal altercations with each other. K. Sue Jewell states that Sapphire's sheer existence is predicated upon the presence of the corrupt African American male whose lack of integrity and use of cunning and trickery provides her with an opportunity to emasculate him through her use of verbal put-downs.[148] The most popular Sapphire image was portrayed by Ernestine Ward, in the Amos and Andy series, who played a character known as Sapphire. Her husband, Kingfish, played by Tim Moore, was the man who fulfilled the male requirement for the Sapphire image in this television series.[149] Another of the earliest and popular representations of Sapphire is Aunt Esther played by Esther Winfield Anderson on the

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[147]   K. Sue Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy (New York: Routledge, 1993), 46
[148] Ibid 45.
[149] Ibid 45.

series *Sanford and Son* during the Seventies. Aunt Esther frequently engaged in a verbal argument, filled with insults, with the main character played by Redd Foxx, Fred Sanford. The role epitomized the sharp-witted and sharp-tongued role of Sapphire, as Aunt Esther mocked and berated the men she often encountered much like the character Florence Johnston on *The Jeffersons*, played by actress Marla Gibbs. Aunt Esther and Florence Johnston are ingrained in Black television history as wisecracking and sassy women who were brass in their objections towards the men they encountered, including her employer George Jefferson.

These images have become less overt with time, but they are still visible on several American television series today. On the hit series *Empire*, the character of Cookie Lyon played by actress Taraji P. Henson has perpetuated many stereotypes of the Black matriarch and Sapphire. Assertive, persistent, and overbearing, the role has been criticized for its portrayal of another angry Black woman. Credited with redefining the Black women on television, the series *Grey's Anatomy, Scandal,* and *How to Get Away with Murder* feature strong Black women in influential roles, but commonly fall victim to the perpetuation of tropes that negatively define Black women. Miranda Bailey from *Grey's Anatomy* is known for her aggressive tones and no-nonsense attitude that is an extension of the angry Black women or Sapphire. While characters Olivia Pope (*Scandal)* and Annalise Keating (*How to Get Away With Murder)* are representations of modern mammies as they are portrayals of Black women created to satisfy White audiences. These women are often featured having sexual encounters that are outside the norm for Mammy roles; however, they are typically in control, not at the mercy of a man or portrayed as hypersexual. More recently television series such as *Black-ish, Grown-ish,* and *Insecure*, have attempted to challenge negative representations of Black women, although they too often fall into the tropes of shows that preceded them. Although representations of Black

women on American television are continuously changing, they are also remaining the same as seen in the series *Atlanta*.

Black Women and *Atlanta*

The series *Atlanta*, for the most part, focuses on the lives of the three main characters, Earnest, Paper Boi, and Darius, rarely depicting Black women outside of the only female lead, Vanessa (Van) Keefer. Because the series focuses so much attention on social commentaries related to Black masculinity in the hip-hop industry and in the American South, the writers and producers fall flat with their representation of Black women in the city of Atlanta. Vanessa, played by actress Zazie Beetz, is the on and off again girlfriend and "baby mama" to Earnest as well as an elementary school teacher at a local Atlanta public school. Although not featured in the series as often as the men, Van has an episode completely dedicated to her as a Black woman in Atlanta. The episode, titled *Value*, offers the audience an opportunity to understand better the hardships of being a Black woman in Atlanta by creating a social commentary on Black female worth. The episode starts with Van meeting with her "frenemy" Jayde, for dinner at a high-end Thai restaurant. Both of the women could be considered modern day Sapphires as they exemplify many of the characteristics of the controlling image that consistently marginalizes Black women today. Sapphire is typically a comedic character that is not taken seriously and often has an ally, another African American woman who shares many of the same characteristics.[150] In the scene with Jayde, the two, although allies are unable to have a calm dinner because they share similar defensive characteristics which cause tension in their relationships. The behaviors displayed by the women during the dinner scene are remnant of the encounters featured on reality television series such as *Real Housewives of Atlanta* or *Love &*

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[150] K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of Us Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.

Hip Hop: Atlanta. Instead of being the supportive friendships that normally define this sort of relationship, these women engage in passive-aggressive dialogues in order to belittle the other individual.

During the first few moments of their dinner, Jayde makes a comment in regards to the natural hairstyle Van is wearing. Van passively accepts the statements; however, she reminds serial dater Jayde that she must pay for her own expenses and does not have the luxury of a man paying. Jayde reminds Van that she decided to be "one of those girls" who is defined as a "baby mama" dealing with the indecisiveness of a Black man who is seeing other women. The conversation only intensifies as Van explains that she too is dating other people outside of her relationship with Earnest. She argues that she is satisfied within her relationship with Earnest, but this is hard to believe as the series goes on to show that Van does have a deep affection for him, as he is her daughter's father. The sexual politics that Black women have to deal with have created an ongoing love-hate relationship in regards to Black men. Black women's troubles with Black men often generate anger, and from that anger self-reflection.[151] Black women are not necessarily angry at Black men; however, they are frustrated at themselves for the ways in which they have allowed themselves to be treated. Van does not seem to have any hatred towards Earnest, although, it is clear she wishes he were a better co-parent in terms of financial responsibilities. Van plays into the stereotype of a poor single Black mother, frequently called a "baby mama." This frustrates Jayde who wants Van to better understand and recognize her value as a Black woman.

Jayde, who is accustomed to a lifestyle of lavish jet-setting, thinks that Van is not living up to her value stating, "Women need to be valuable. Black women have to be valuable. Why are

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[151] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 152.

you messing around with this broke-ass nigga? The NBA players I fuck with fuck with me because I provide a service and I am worth it. I am cultured, intelligent, and beautiful and that is hard to come by."[152] Jayde mentions that she provides a service to the athletes and one can only assume what that service entails, as athletes are not known for giving away private jet rides simply for the company of a Black woman. Jayde in many ways is made to be hypersexed, or the Jezebel, as she invites two men to dinner which is surprising to Van who is not interested in using athletes to further her socio-economic standing. Jayde states that she is cultured, intelligent, and beautiful which is not uncommon for actresses who take on Black female roles; however, the character of Jayde is dependent on men to further her socio-economic standing and looks to others to determine her self-worth. The creators of the series fail to show how a Black woman can be independent and not rely on a man to find socioeconomic prosperity, similar to the television series *WAGS (Wives and Girlfriends of Sports Stars) Atlanta*. Wags are typically women who only date high profile athletes and are often deemed gold diggers for their willingness to sacrifice an emotional connection in exchange for material items; however, that is not necessarily the case for all women who date athletes. In the case of Jayde, the show's creators and producers failed to provide the viewers with a background that would explain how the character provides for herself. This leaves it up to the audience to make the assumption that Jayde is a wag. Again, this is remnant of other reality television series in which the women often proclaim independence and control over their womanhood. However, their careers and personal lives are often managed and controlled by the men in the series who the women are typically in romantic relationships with, much like the character of Jayde. Jayde could be considered a

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[152] "Value." *Atlanta*, season 1, episode 6, FX, 04 Oct. 2016. Hulu.

modern-day representation of the Jezebel as she is portrayed as hypersexed, using her sexuality to move her social and economic standing.

Following the tense encounter at dinner, the two women decide to make amends while enjoying a joint (marijuana) in the car, which Van is initially reluctant to partake in but is convinced by Jayde. Although Van is an elementary school teacher and a mother, it is not unrealistic to assume that she participates in recreational marijuana usage, as it continues to become popular and legalized throughout the United States. The series is honest in its portrayal of marijuana usage, but it is unfortunate that the writers decided to have Van fired from her job due to the usage. Van could have simply been portrayed as a good mother dealing with a millennial "situationship," a relationship that is unlabeled. Instead, she is depicted as irresponsible, by putting her enjoyment and partaking in illegal activities ahead of her responsibilities of being a mother. It is often expected that Black women as single mothers will produce several offspring, who are unable to reach upward mobility effectively perpetuating the socioeconomic class standing of the Black community as a whole.[153] Due to the overwhelming number of Black men who are unemployed Black women must take on their burden as head of the household; with a one income household, most single Black mother lives below the poverty level. Van must provide for her daughter without the help of Earnest, who has chosen to drop out of Princeton to pursue his dreams of being in the music industry. Earnest proclaims that he should not have to give up his dreams to provide for his daughter, which upset Van turning her into the angry Black women. He is able to appear as a father throughout the season and break the mold of the absent young Black man. However, Van plays into the stereotype of the poor single Black mother, who is forever at odds with a Black man in her life.

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[153] Moynihan, D.P. (1965). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.* U.S Department of Labor.

Earnest is able to partake in marijuana usage throughout the series and receives no backlash or consequences for his actions; however, Van must lose her job. This demonstrates the Black female burden. Black women are expected to live their lives while providing as the head of household, but Black men do not have expectations of being in the home. Van must not only deal with being a woman expected to perform as head of the household, but she also must perform within a White setting at her place of employment. However, she fails to do so as she messages Paper Boi to purchase more marijuana after being fired from her job. Van represents a caricature created by television series such as *Atlanta Housewives* and *Love & Hip-Hop*; the character is problematic in that she does not truly represent Black womanhood in Atlanta. Instead, she is a representation of misconceptions of Black women in Atlanta. This representation of Black women as irresponsible and self-involved is also featured during a scene with Paper Boi and a group of children who are playing with a gun.

In the second episode of season one titled "Streets on Lock," Paper Boi approaches a group of children imitating the rapper while playing with a toy gun. Paper Boi becomes conscious of the effects his actions in the previous episode has had on the children in the community, who have the ability to relate to his experiences. As a rapper and Black man, he is expected to be unapologetic in term of his actions and behaviors. While in jail, he laughs off the shooting he was involved with; sure he would not be punished for his actions. However, Paper Boi does not take gun violence as lightly when he sees the influence he has made of a young Black child in his own neighborhood. Taking a moment to explain how his music is a representation of his own experiences and his behavior is not something to be imitated, the boy is hesitant to listen even pointing the gun at Paper Boi. The boy's mother runs over, and before addressing Paper Boi, she takes the gun from her son, exclaiming that he is not allowed to play

with such toys. She attempts to teach her son an essential lesson in gun safety as Black men are frequently at the receiving end of police and gun violence.

When Paper Boi introduces himself as a rapper, she gives the gun back to her son. The mother fails at shielding her son from the potential violence and harm associated with toy guns, as she gives the access back in order to flirt with a local celebrity. Like Jayde, the mother is interested in the company of a man who is financially inclined to give and support an upper-class lifestyle, making these women feel in some way that they are "valued" by a Black man. Britney Copper writes in her book, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, "that despite the fact that Black women outpace Black men educationally, Black men still have far more net wealth because of patriarchal powers that maintain male dominance. This means that marriage has long been the path to economic stability for women of all races. Yet it is Black women who get branded as welfare queens by the government and as gold-digging baby mamas by Black men."[154] For Van who is already in a complicated relationship with Earnest, her focus is less on male companionship and more on financially providing for herself and child, as she risks losing her job to partake in drug usage.

As Van frantically tries to pass her drug test at work, she is confronted by another teacher who is dealing with a student in Whiteface. This could be a commentary on the White world that Van and the student function within. It is the Tragic Mulatto who is often stuck between a Black and White world in terms of conduct and the way in which she presents herself. The education system is not meant for students and teachers of color to succeed. The imagery of the student in Whiteface is a reminder that within the confines of the education system, Van must perform as White. Earnest gets to examine the battle between the two worlds when Van invites him to high-

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[154] Brittney C. Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: a Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin, 2018), 239.

class party in Buckhead. In this episode, Earnest has to leave his Blackness at the door of an upper class "Juneteenth" party held by friends of Van's.

In an attempt to follow White ideologies of a relationship between two individuals who co-parent, Van orders Earnest to play the role of her Ivy League husband at the event. At the event, in honor of the emancipation of African Americans, the two are bombarded by African and African-American art and culture as they are schooled by Monique's White husband, Craig. This rubs Earnest the wrong way, which upset Van who thinks Earnest is not giving the couple a chance. He sees Craig's attempts at being cultured as some sort of White guilt, while Van appreciates his efforts at educating himself. Although Craig has done his research and seems to be knowledgeable of Black history his wife, Monique has stripped herself of her Blackness in order to play the role of a White man's wife. Van is overwhelmed with the event and her drinking spirals, as she sees herself going nowhere in her career and personal relationship, and becomes more envious of Monique's situation as the evening goes on. Van has a taste of the upper-class life, and can only question what would have happened if Earnest would have stayed in college and they were together as a couple. This is another of the characteristics of Black women on American television. They are often chasing after the love of a Black man who is unable to commit in the way the woman feels she deserves.

In *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower,* Brittney Cooper examines the love-hate relationships between Black women and Black men, arguing that Black women have long been labeled angry and aggressive towards Black masculinity. She also explores the love that White Americans have for the angry or sassy Black woman. She even looks to Black relationships in her attempt at explaining why Black women are often seen as aggressive and hostile. She argues that because Black men refuse to own their feelings about the

effects capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy have had on the history of Black men in America, they often blame Black women for their inability to succeed. Black women who are labeled sassy, which Copper points out White Americans love, are too assertive making them less feminine than White women. Often when Black men show a vocal preference for White women, Black women are not pleased by this and are labeled bitter and angry; however, genuinely Black women find it unfair that Black men are able to interact with a colorblind lens.[155] Many Black women feel that the Black male dating pool is limited in terms of single, educated, ambitious, and successful men especially in the city of Atlanta. Seeing Black men who do fall into these categories romantically involved with White women is often infuriating for some Black women who see man Black men as lazy. Many young Black women find themselves as a single mother, heading their households with a Black man who refuses to commit to them romantically similar to the relationship between Van and Earnest. Van acts as the Black matriarch as she often has to mother not only her child but also Earnest, even bailing him out of jail in an episode. Throughout the series *Atlanta*, Van displays characteristics of several controlling images including Sapphire as she battles with her personal and professional life, often projecting her emotions in an angry fashion. She asks Earnest, "Why do you make me the angry Black women?" In which Earnest answers, "Because you are." Earnest explains to Van that he wants to follow his dreams that only infuriates her more. He is able to abandon what is considered the traditional patriarchal fathering for his dreams, while Van must play mother to him and his daughter.

Van is multifaceted as she displays characteristics of several controlling images of Black women including the Black matriarch. Throughout Season one she battles being seen as nothing more than a baby momma while dealing with the hardships of Black love. Black women are

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[155] Ibid 193.

expected to play several roles within our society as patriarchal ideologies that lend themselves to primitive media images continue to marginalize Black womanhood. Van falls into tropes of Black women as she chases after the love of Earnest while commonly displaying angry and aggressive characteristics out of frustration with Earnest's behavior. The role provides an accurate depiction of the multitude of functions and roles Black women must hold as well as addressing millennial Black love relationships and the oppressive nature of living as a Black woman in America. Patricia Hill Collins argues that negative stereotypes in popular culture that are applied to African American women are fundamental to Black women's oppression, such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and welfare mother image. She also states that larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite White male interests and worldviews.[156] Many characters that are meant to represent Black women fall into tropes that perpetuate notions that Black femininity is loud, aggressive, and angry. The television series *Atlanta* fails to represent Black women in a new or unique fashion; however, the series does allow for a glance into the reality of being a Black millennial in the city of Atlanta. Although the topics and discussions on the series challenge notions of Blackness in Atlanta, the series does was not able to avoid tropes of Black women in the media.

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[156] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, [2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.

CONCLUSION

Black shows in the 1980s and 1990s attempted to address issues facing all American people through the construction of Blackness. *Atlanta* attempts to address the issues facing Black America through the same construction. *Atlanta* follows the lives of Earnest Marks (Donald Glover) and his cousin Alfred "Paper Boi" Miles, played by Brian Tyree Henry, as they navigate through daily life in Atlanta, Georgia. Within the first minute of the pilot episode "The Big Bang," the audience is introduced to World Star Hip-Hop and some common media representations of African Americans in Atlanta, in the form of hypermasculinity and violence. The show creates a dialogue that examines the intersection of topics such as police brutality, mental health, and transphobia in relation to the systemic racism and violence experienced by Black America.

Atlanta's writers are attempting to highlight real political and social issues addressing Blackness. During one of the most controversial episodes of the season entitled "B.A.N" (Black America Network), writers cover matters of trans- and homophobia. The creators and writers of *Atlanta* do not hold back from the controversy, and when asked during an interview with NPR about the message being projected to the media about African-American culture and life in the U.S, Donald Glover states:

> "I'm less interested in showing what should be, and more interested in showing what is, from my perspective. I don't like being preached to by TV shows about how people should act. It doesn't feel authentic. I would like for people to wonder why they're laughing or why that made them feel uncomfortable, rather than tell them like why they're a bad person or good person for feeling that way."[157]

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[157] NPR. "Donald Glover Explores A Surreal Feel In 'Atlanta'." *NPR*, NPR, 17 Sept. 2016, www.npr.org/2016/09/17/494390868/donald-glover-explores-a-surreal-feel-in-atlanta.

As frustration mounts in this country and the racial divide begins to widen due to the most recent Presidential election, this show is a much-needed breath of reality. Rather than telling the audience how to feel, Glover wants the viewers to practice self-awareness.

In popular culture, the city of Atlanta is often represented as lavish. The television series, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA) features the city as a backdrop although the women of RHOA mostly live in Buckhead, Duluth, or Alpharetta, which are all neighborhoods primarily populated by White, affluent communities; however, the series often features the ladies visiting local metro Atlanta establishments. Audiences rarely are provided with a depiction of Black Atlanta culture and values outside of the middle and upper class in the series. However, the series *Atlanta* takes place in the heart of the city, even using local landmarks to make the show hyper-realistic. Small moments in the show signify Southerness such as the MARTA, Jr. Crickets, and Chic-Fil-A. By depicting the struggle of being lower-class and Black in Atlanta, *Atlanta* is currently the most accurate television depiction of the socioeconomic structure of the city. The series represents a New Dirty Urban South in that it presents a millennial Black Atlanta, which has rarely been depicted in popular culture. Although the series is progressive in its depictions of Black Southerness and representations of Black millennials, it fails to represent Black women outside of primitive controlling images.

Controlling images of Black women flood popular culture, such as the Black matriarch and Sapphire, which *Atlanta* was unable to avoid. Van is the show's only female lead character and one of the only representations of Black womanhood in the series. The role is multifaceted because it upholds several tropes of Black women. The images that are being displayed are primitive in that they were created to ensure Black women stayed inferior

to White male masculinity. In the episode "Value," the audience not only gets to understand who Van is as a character but also why Black women are often undervalued in our society. Although they attempt to address it, the series creators only perpetuate many of the notions they are trying to debunk about Black women.

The creators of the series also bring millennial Black masculinity into question. It is a widely accepted notion that most Black men are homophobic and transphobic. *Atlanta's* writers defined this generalized notion that the Black community has been resistant to LGBTIQ matters because the issue of race is still so prevalent in our society. There is only one female guest on the show that states Black men have historically been predisposed to transphobia due to the lack of father figures in the Black community. The argument is that without a strong male presence during adolescence Black men grow up questioning their masculinity, but one thing they are assured of is that homosexuality is not a representation of Black masculinity, so they are hostile towards the issue. bell hooks writes in her book, *Black Looks: Race and Representations*, "The portrait of Black masculinity that emerges in [many] work[s] perpetually constructs Black men as failures who are psychologically fucked up, dangerous, violent, sex maniacs, whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context."[158] Unfortunately, due to media representations of Blackness, Black men are subject to being portrayed as hypermasculine, aggressive, and violent, which Donald Glover and his team challenges throughout the series.

Atlanta is exemplary in that the show addresses current events and issues facing Black America in the context of Blackness. The show is playful and humorous while creating dialogue on serious issues facing the Black community that are often overlooked on American television. Instead of telling audiences the way things should be in our society, the

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[158] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 98.

series depicts the way things currently are, which has created an authentic representation of Blackness. Although it is a comedy, *Atlanta* gives a surreal depiction of the intersection of race and class in regards to trap music, policing in America, gun violence, and gender identity, making it stand out in the crowd of Black television shows.

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