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HOW HBO'S A BLACK LADY SKETCH SHOW UTILIZES HUMOR TO COPE AND
RESIST AGAINST RACISM AND SEXISM

REGINA L. SANDERS

102 Pages

HBO's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is a sketch comedy series with a cast and crew of Black women. I draw on rhetorical scholarship from various traditions and Black Feminist Standpoint to analyze how the writers and performers use humor imbued with African American rhetoric to cope with and resist systematic racism and sexism in the United States of America. I begin by analyzing interviews with the creator Robin Thede. Then I analyze sketches and the intentional use of African American rhetoric, such as rhythm, stylin', indirection, call and response, signification, and double word choice, which leads me to three themes: trauma, support, and sex and romantic love as expressions of coping with and resistance to systemic racism and sexism. Trauma centers around the pain that Black women experience, support concerns how Black women support the Black community, and sex and romantic love highlights Black women exploring their sexual and romantic desires. These themes are expressions of systemic racism and sexism's impact Black women's daily lives as seen through the lens of the Black women who create, write, direct, and star in this show because systemic racism and sexism cause Black women trauma, alter how and when they give support, and affect the lens through which they view healthy romantic and sexual relationships. I argue this show allows the confrontation of painful tropes and historical experiences while Black women can be themselves.

KEYWORDS: Humor, Racism, Sexism, Television, Black Feminism

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RESIST AGAINST RACISM AND SEXISM

REGINA L. SANDERS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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RESIST AGAINST RACISM AND SEXISM

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Self-Reflexive Statement

As a Black woman, Black sitcoms and dramas like *Good Times*, *The Parkers*, *The Jamie Foxx Show*, and others were staples in my household. I saw myself, or at least the best possible representation of myself, in each dramatic and comedic moment on screen. I developed an academic interest in television after taking a course titled Seminar in Critical Studies in Mass Communication Representations of Race, Class, and Gender in Media while attending Illinois State University. We read a critique on the popular NBC sitcom *Friends* and the show's depiction of Manhattan as predominately White. I compared this scholarly evaluation with my favorite sitcom from the time. I preferred *Friends*' predecessor *Living Single*, which chronicled the lives of six Black friends living in their Brooklyn brownstone. I found myself relating to and laughing more often with the characters of *Living Single* than of *Friends*.

My frustration for *Friends*' universal praise and what felt like *Living Single*'s erasure grew when David Schwimmer, known for playing Ross on *Friends*, commented that there should be an all-Black version of *Friends*. I was confused at Schwimmer's lack of awareness as Queen Latifah, the star of *Living Single*, previously spoke about the NBC network executive who explicitly stated his desire to create a show like *Living Single* before creating *Friends* (Rosen, 2020). This same frustration fueled my desire to support Black projects. I was tired of projects not receiving recognition, such as *Moesha*, *Girlfriends*, and *The Parkers* (Sanchez, 2020), and I wanted to add my own views as support. So, I was excited when HBO premiered *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. I argue that *A Black Lady Sketch Show* offers answers to my frustrations. I argue that by taking an Afrocentric approach to affirm Black culture, using a Black Feminist

Standpoint to highlight Black women's knowledge, and using humor infused with African American rhetoric *A Black Lady Sketch Show* has the unique position of addressing the issues that Black women face. The use of African American rhetoric in each sketch lends credibility to the fact that *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is centering Black voices and Black culture. My choice in themes reflects my Black Feminist Standpoint Framework and the uplifting of Black female voices. I argue that the trauma Black women suffer, the support Black women give and receive, and sexual and romantic relationships Black women engage in are affected by systemic racism and sexism. The following sections are introductions to this theoretical framework as I situate my interest in this project and examine some contemporary issues that inform my perspective.

Black and Lady in Contemporary Contexts

Living Single was a program that contributed greatly to my personal identity as a Black woman. Not only did I witness characters with the same skin color, but I saw myself as silly as Synclaire, hardworking like Khadijah, and witty like Max—and I shared a name with Regine. This show reflected my lived experience. Collins (1989) writes about the subordinate position society puts Black women in and how that affects believability. Black women do not have a shield of being White or male and must rely on their lived experiences as evidence of credibility. It is through lived experience that Black women become the experts (Collins, 1989). This experience is knowledge and Black women are the experts. My experience watching *Living Single*, enjoying it, and seeing myself in it, work to create knowledge of my unique worldview. By watching this show and critiquing its reception I am engaging in.

Black Feminist Standpoint, ultimately, revolves around Black women's shared attitude about the oppression we face and how we structure our resistance (Collins, 1989). This means I,

as a Black woman, can insert myself into the conversation. I cannot divorce myself from my identity. The fact that I am a woman and I am Black shape how I interact with the world as well as how the world interacts with me. I am both personally and academically invested in the portrayal and reception of Black women on television. The original draw for *A Black Lady Sketch Show* was both my interest in comedy and my desire to support Black creatives. I have long held the notion that if there are numbers demonstrating viewership then the network will renew the program. It is important to me that a power dynamic exists where Black people can control the narrative about Black people. Types of representation is important in the conversation of what images are considered “normal” by society and inform the status quo. Collins (2005) discusses controlling images for African American women. She gives one such example of a “bitch” and how this image is often attributed to poor or working-class Black women. She continues that the controlling image of a bitch “depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy” (Collins, 2005, p. 123). These images can be attached to behavior and lead to the creation of tropes, such as “bitch” or The Angry Black Woman. When society is socialized to *only* see Black women through these controlling images, Black women lose the acknowledgement that we are not monolithic. I, personally, want *A Black Lady Sketch Show* to succeed because its success opens the door to other shows like it. More shows mean that Black women do not have to rely on one show to represent every Black woman’s experience. It is understandable if not every Black woman sees herself represented in *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. More shows about more Black ladies means the status quo does not rely solely on the controlling images in the few depictions of Black women in entertainment.

Smith (1992) begins his investigation into how African Americans choose to self-label by understanding why there is a need for a label in the first place. He notes the loss of language, community, and other cultural ties to identity when Africans were stolen and enslaved. Slaves were forced to adapt to a new culture, resulting in African Americans building their own culture. This building of culture also brought a new way of self-definition. He begins with colored which encompassed both mixed and non-mixed people, it also included anyone brown. He then moves to Negro, supported by individuals like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, because it was more grammatically correct and focused specifically on Black people. Negro, however, had to overcome its association with nigger and how White people used both terms in derogatory fashions. After discussing Negro, Smith (1992) moves to Black as a label as the Civil Rights movement moved away from Negro. He writes that Black Muslims and the Black Panthers greatly supported the label Black. Radical youth often used this term, although as time went on, politically connotations fell away. Still, it carried a negative connotation. Kenneth Ghee (1990) acknowledges the comparison of dark and light to Black and White. Finally, African American was introduced by Ramona H. Edelin to connect to our ancestors and reflected how White Americans identified, for example Polish American. The idea of connecting to our ancestors, enslaved Africans robbed of their culture, is something Kenneth Ghee (1990) also acknowledges. There was criticism for African American, mainly that African is too encompassing and does not acknowledge the many cultures existing on the continent (Smith 1992).

Ghee's (1990) scholarship and the work of Lerone Bennett Jr., Roland A. Barton, and W. E. B. Du Bois all acknowledge that there has not been a consensus one label for African Americans. Ghee (1990) concludes that ideology, global identity, and personal identity are three

factors that play into how an American descendant from slaves identifies (Ghee, 1990). Bennett, Barton, and Du Bois (1969) push this idea further by concluding that, “And in the course of that movement, on one level or another, every "Negro" and/or "black" and/or "Afro- American" is going to have to choose a name in the process of choosing his being. Who are you? What is your name?” (p. 412). Due to scholars' acknowledgement of various labels but lack of consensus, I choose to use the terms Black and African American interchangeably. I use Black because it was chosen deliberately as the title of the show. I also use African American because of its connection to Africans stolen and forced into chattel slavery in the United States. The historical context of African Americans is key in understanding the humor presented in *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and the term African American acknowledges that history.

Second, we must discuss how to define lady. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) writes about controlling images and “the Black Lady.” As a definition, she notes that the Black Lady as someone who “uses standard American English, dresses impeccably, and always has a dignified demeanor” (p. 141). She drives this image home by invoking Claire Huxtable, the matriarch on *The Cosby Show*. She was a wife, a mother, and a lawyer. Although her role was confined to the home, the audience did not witness her at work, it was emphasized that she could balance her work and family life. Her image contradicted the “freaky” sexual image associated with poor and working-class Black women (Collins, 2005). The controlling image of Black Lady is one that cannot be ignored when considering a show titled *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. The Black characters featured in the sketches do not necessarily reflect Claire Huxtable’s image. They do not always use standard American English, they do not always dress impeccably, and the characters do not always have a dignified demeanor. Yet, the women in the show are still Black

ladies. This show is taking a controlling image and making the argument that there is no one way to be a lady or to be Black. It presents images counter to the status quo.

If a constant image of Black women is touted as correct and then repeated, that image can affect how Black women are seen in real life, such as stereotyping Black women. Also, how Black people are treated in the media can emotionally affect the Black community. For example, Sherri Williams (2016) wrote about being bombarded with images of Black death constantly in the news. She acknowledges that as a journalist these heinous acts should be documented known. In another vein, however, she questions what happens when Black people are subjected to image after image of Black pain on their social media feeds (Williams, 2016). I have had to navigate the tension of wanting to be informed, while also finding myself overwhelmed by the cell phone recordings and body cam footage of Black people dying. Kimberlé Crenshaw, an activist who helped create the Say Her Name movement, notes that “the names of Black women who were also killed are generally missing from Americans' collective memories” as they protest racial injustice (Kelly & Glenn, 2020, par. 3). Although only one example is of death, two examples of Black women experiencing pain stick with me. The first was Megan Thee Stallion posting photos on Instagram of her feet after she was shot. This followed large speculation of who shot her and whether she was injured. By posting the photos in response to various jokes, Megan made the statement that her pain was real and not a laughing matter (Butler, 2020).

Another moment that stuck with me was Breonna Taylor’s murder. Taylor was murdered when officers entered her home with a no-knock warrant under the belief that her boyfriend was in possession of drugs. Dismissing an ambulance and not providing medical attention for twenty-minutes are all police actions that resulted in her death. (Carrega & Ghebremedhin, 2020). None

of the officers involved were charged although one was fired and two were placed on administrative leave (Opper & Taylor, 2020). Meanwhile the call to “arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor” became a meme and clothing sale opportunity. Potentially well-meaning individuals tweeted seemingly unrelated sentiments before ending their message with calls to arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor. For example, a June 19, 2020 tweet from Chris Garcia read, “re-watching Friends and so far, my favorite episode is “The One Where They Arrest The Cops Who Killed Breonna Taylor” (Haasch, 2020). Etsy has t-shirts listed with the phrase and red baseball caps reminiscent of Donald Trump’s MAGA hats that strike out the line “great again” and replace it with a phrase calling for the arrest of Breonna Taylor’s murderers (Haasch, 2020). Her death was commodified and meme-ified, with the meaning and injustice of her killing slowly slipping away.

Both Megan Thee Stallions’ shooting and Breonna Taylor’s murder highlights how Black women’s pain is treated by society. Their lives were mined in exploration of who they presented themselves as and the tropes associated with those images drove the conversation about their treatment. Megan had to display her injuries to quell jokes while calls to action for Breonna became memes. I saw quips about both women constantly in the news cycle, the same constant images Williams (2016) referenced. Eventually, I decided that my desire to stay abreast of the current news cycle was not worth seeing Black women’s pain displayed so carelessly. I was disturbed by the reaction to Megan’s shooting and, as I was her fan, it was played heavily across my social media feed. I did my best to keep up with the news cycle and every channel and page I looked at was the face of Breonna Taylor, a woman who could have been me, who did not

deserve to die. It felt, and continues to feel, like everywhere I turned someone was saying that Black women do not matter.

Black women matter and deserve to create their own space, where we can laugh to laugh and laugh to deal with our pain. A Black Lady Sketch Show does this by taking control of the controlling image. This sketch embraces various experiences concerning how Black women are treated. In this sketch show Black women can admit that they want to reject societal standards. Black women are also able to negotiate wanting to be noticed without being harassed or what it means to not be fully acknowledged despite doing amazing in the workplace. In the hands of Black women themselves, the cast and crew who are armed with the knowledge of their lived experience can change these images. They become less about tropes making fun of Black women, and instead transform into depictions of one way that Black women can live their lives. This show, along with other popular and acclaimed shows created by Black women, such as Debbie Allen, Shonda Rhimes, and Issa Rae, works to counter tropes and controlling images that dominate the conversation concerning Blackness and being a woman. That is not to say that Black ladies cannot use standard American English or dress a specific way. Rather these shows argue that Black women are not monolithic and controlling images are not the only way *to be* a Black woman.

The show is unapologetically Black. It was created by and is acted out by Black woman. Each sketch stems from the lived experiences of those Black women. These lived experiences are reflected in manner of dress, location, speech patterns. One example of this is the show's opening. The intro is forty-seven seconds long and features the main cast as puppets. Robin robs a lemonade stand, Quinta is in a club cheating on her husband, Gabrielle's dryer at the hair salon

begins smoking while she is reading a puppet version of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozaka Shange, and Ashley Nicole Black robs a convince store. Megan Thee Stallion's Hot Girl serves as the opening theme and the backdrop to our main characters engaging in bad behavior. Choosing a theme song that's a rap echoes Black culture, while the choice of a song by a Black female rapper signals dedication to supporting women. Choosing to have the puppets at the neighborhood lemonade stand, at a club, at a hair salon, and at the corner store all reflect potential stapes of Black neighborhoods.

Ultimately, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* uses humor influenced by African American rhetorical styles. I use a Black Feminist Standpoint framework to justify the production behind and final product of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* as uplifting the Black woman's lived experience as knowledge. The show accomplishes this by using an Afrocentric lens, centering and actively involving African American voices. This stylistic choice is what allows the show to resist against and cope with systemic racism and sexism. In this thesis I begin by examining functions of humor. I discuss the importance of viewing *A Black Lady Sketch Show* through an Afrocentric frame, understanding affiliative groups, and satire. I then discuss structures and tropes surrounding the representation of African Americans, from slavery to modern times, in both life and entertainment. I then move to my method. I discuss how I employ an Afrocentric lens to *A Black Lady Sketch Show*'s sketches and African American rhetoric. Next, I discuss Black Feminist Standpoint as my framework before giving a breakdown of my artifacts and explain steps to study these artifacts. I then move to my analysis, beginning with interviews about the show in order to gain insights about the creators' intentions. Then I focus on fourteen of the sketches presented in the show that are explicitly about how society treats Black women and the

experiences of Black women and developed the themes of trauma, support, or sex and romantic love. These stand out as examples of African American rhetoric to inform the humor used to address systemic racism and sexism. Lastly, I move to my discussion, limitations, and future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I discuss the functions of humor and African American representation to better understand how the Black women behind *A Black Lady Sketch Show* utilize humor. First, I introduce the functions of humor, particularly affiliative groups and, coping with trauma, and satire. Next, I discuss African American tropes and representations commonly featured in American entertainment, specifically minstrel shows, vaudeville, and then television. I conclude with the notion that *A Black Lady Sketch Show* expertly uses the Afrocentric lens and humor to help the audience deal with systemic racism and sexism.

Functions of Humor

In this section, I discuss various functions of humor with the goal of outlining the importance of seeing comedy as more than providing a quick bout of laughter but as a useful tool for dealing with suffered trauma. Exploring Afrocentricity is critically paramount because *A Black Lady Sketch Show* was created by African Americans about African Americans. This means that the conversation about how African American rhetoric is operating in *A Black Lady Sketch Show* should happen from a lens that centers African Americans as the subject. Molefi Kete Asante (1991) notes that Afrocentricity “is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person” (p. 171). This means putting an “African world view” at the center of the conversation. In an educational setting, Asante illustrates an Afrocentric approach by studying the world through an African lens. This allows African American children to adjust their viewpoint as participating in knowledge. Jackson and Richardson support this with the following definition, “When rhetorically examining phenomena via Afrocentric lenses, one approaches and apprehends the critical object by encasing one’s

analysis from the standpoint of African ancestral traditions, morals, and ideals in an effort to ascertain the possibilities of human potential and liberation” (Jackson & Richardson, 2003, p. xvi). An Afrocentric lens moves away from the Eurocentric view of “The Classics” and instead looks at the world from an African American standpoint. Asante (1991) further clarifies that an Afrocentric lens is not the Black version of a Eurocentric lens. Instead, he points out that a Eurocentric lens “is based on White supremacist notions whose purposes are to protect White privilege and advantages in education, economics, politics, and so forth” (Asante, 1991, p. 171). A Eurocentric lens assumes that it is *the* way to approach and engage with the world. Asante stresses that, “the person of African descent should be centered in his or her historical experiences as an Africa” (Asante, 1991, p. 172).

For example, consider one of the “classical” definitions of humor, which calls for self-control meaning you should not laugh at misfortune (Grant, 1924). An Afrocentric approach, however, uses humor to deal with misfortune in life (Outley, Bowen, & Pinckney, 2020). As Gordon (1998) explains, Aristotle and Plato believed that humor should be free of rage, noting that “ridicule, satire, or any other such form of humor characterized by anger is unacceptable” (p. 255). But Gordon (1998) argues that African American humor stems from terrible, odd, and entertaining situations that create laughter or tears. He notes that while slaves suffered, humorous folk tales and music offered relief from daily horror. Hoskins (1992) notes the xenophobic nature of constantly and consistently analyzing texts through a Eurocentric viewpoint. He writes that “Eurocentric ideology has refused to accept Africans on the basis of their humanity because of the color of their skin” (p. 248). Using a Eurocentric lens to analyze humor fail to acknowledge African American culture, and therefore, African American approaches to humor.

A recent study of Black internet culture offers an example of using an Afrocentric lens to interpret the use of humor. Outley, Bowen, and Pinckney (2020) investigate how Black Twitter actively deals with the present global crisis. First, however, Outley, Bowen, and Pinckney (2020) discuss humor itself. They acknowledge that many scholars initially turn to Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes (also known as a Eurocentric lens)-when investigating academic interest in humor. It is from these philosophers that we get the notion that laughter born from affliction can cleanse the soul (Outley, Bowen, and Pickney, 2020, p.2). In other words, it can be healing to use humor to deal with pain. James Baldwin once said, “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won’t destroy you” (Cohen, 1960). He is speaking of rage birthed from racist inequality and treatment. This historical rage includes the response to the police killing of Black men and women. In the time of COVID-19, the authors point to Twitter as an answer for where to put that rage. They argue that humor, specifically signification or “the verbal art of the insult,” is used to reclaim power (Outley, Bowen, and Pinckney, 2020, p. 4). Black Twitter makes fun of tragedy to cope with tragedy. Essentially pulling on the popular saying of laughing to keep from crying (Morgan, 2020). A Eurocentric lens takes a different approach to humor, one that does not benefit the African American experience. An Afrocentric approach to humor is imperative because this lens requires understanding of cultural beliefs and values. Understanding cultural beliefs and values means understanding affiliative groups.

Affiliative Groups

In this section, I discuss three ways humor operates and functions. A kinship is built when individuals share a common thread. This is also true for humor that can be affiliative. This

means that humor can build group cohesion when everyone in the group finds the joke funny, or at the very least, people recognize the language and contexts of that humor. For example, when a joke is translated from one language to another, the joke may fall flat because it relies on knowledge of language *and* culture. Thus, finding something humorous depends on whether you are in the in-group or the out-group (Early, Carpio, & Sollor, 2010). At its most simple, to laugh at the joke, you must get the joke. To get the joke, you must understand the group (Tyree & Krishnasamy, 2011). Consider the joke game of “the dozens.” The game is played by two competitors with the entire point being to come up with the best insult. They can include a sexual theme—claiming to have sex with another person’s female relatives or they can be as simple as a “yo mama” joke. Avoiding offense while playing “the dozens” requires cultural understanding between a legitimate insult and joking around (Abrahams, 1962).

Hall (1990) explains the important factors for understanding ideology. He identifies the fact that ideology exists in a chain of related meanings, that ideological statements might be made by a single person, but ideology is crafted by multiple, and lastly that ideology operates as authentic truths (Hall, 1990). What this means is that we craft messages and interpret those messages based on ideologies that have also been created and crafted, influenced by a variety of factors. He notes that before a message can “have an effect” it must be “meaningful discourse” and “meaningfully decoded” (Hall, 1977, p. 509). Similarly, a culture can create comedy and engage with humor based off these codes. For this reason, a certain culture, a set of codes, exist to help humor accomplish its job.

Understanding a group’s humor requires understanding that group. Understanding a specific group requires a knowledge of the cultural values and beliefs of said group. It is in this

understanding that employing an Afrocentric lens becomes extremely important. Adisa A. Alkebulan (2003) notes, “Any study that is concerned with the study of African phenomena should be examined from the perspective of the African person” (p. 23). He continues this thought by emphasizing that the African person and culture should be the *subject* of the discussion. This means emphasizing an understanding of how historical and cultural moments affect how an affiliative group communicates, and what that communication means. The affiliative group acts as active participants in meaning making.

Satire

Satire takes on the status quo, showing what life is versus what it ought to be. This view of life changes, depending on different cultures and affiliative groups. As more people gravitate toward satire, its definition becomes more obscure (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). We can start, however, from satire’s association with Grecian rhetoric. In this vein, satirical humor states “that laughter was ridicule of folly and wrongdoing” (Condren, 2012, p. 380). Humor, in general, contrasts how life is with how life is presented in the joke. Jean Weisgerber (1973) adds that satire’s goal is to persuade readers that their current society is “inferior” to what should be. We expect life to be one way, but then it is another. Satire points out the fault in that chasm. In other words, “If all humor plays with social norms, all humor carries the potential for reflection on, or even criticism of those norms” (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 9). Weisgerber (1973) continues that one of the main characteristics of satire is that despite pointing out where what should be does not meet up with what is, satire does not tell us how to close this gap (Weisgerber, 1973). Some argue that satire’s purpose is to punish while others argue that satire’s purpose is to expose (Condren, 2012). Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) further this idea by

adding satire takes the harshness of critique- what Condren (2012) also calls sarcasm, parody, irony, and ridicule- and softens it to be more palatable to the audience (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). This fulfills the goal of satire.

Just as we must look at humor, at large, through an Afrocentric lens we must do the same for satire. This begins with enslavement. Danielle Fuentes Morgan (2020) writes about the importance of beginning with the enslavement of African American's ancestors. She writes that it is with slavery that the African American identity begins. She notes, "The reality of Black life in the nation is marked explicitly by the history of slavery and the invention of race and racialization as its justification" (p.29). Critics of slavery utilized satire to highlight the hoops that slave masters and other supporters of slavery jumped through to justify enslavement. Morgan (2020) argues that the effects of slavery exist today, influencing how African Americans are treated in society and how they respond to that treatment using humor. African Americans use satire to acknowledge the "kaleidoscope of Blackness" or multiple veins of authenticity. "Racial saturation, found in literature, performance, and the seeming self-satirization of real-world contemporary events, reclaims and revises prevailing tropes of Blackness" (p. 5). Satire can function, and has functioned, as a weapon to paint African Americans in a negative light. Humor has reinforced a status quo of inferiority. Humor has also functioned as a balm. While it is undeniable that Black Americans have suffered since we were brought to America, it is important to study how we have coped and resisted. It is through rhetorical concepts, such as the ones listed above, that African Americans have utilized comedy to cope with and protest racism.

Sometimes humor in the vein of satire can be aggressive, self-deprecating, and degrading. Aggressive humor is akin to laughing at others, also known as boasting, signifying, and playing

joke games like “the dozens” (Early, Carpio, & Sollors, 2010). It can be used aggressively such as through ridicule or satire. This type of humor is often used in protest. Although sometimes making fun of political figures and leaders can be detrimental, other times it has spurred others to action (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). That is not the only use for humor in protest. Making fun of those that oppress can bring protestors together as they fight for their common goal, as well as give laughter in a potentially bleak situation (Goodhall, Cheong, Fleischer, & Corman, 2012). Aggressive humor might seem like making fun of others on the surface but can inspire change and motivate.

Structures and Tropes for Representations

Whether the goal of entertainment is amusement or educational, something can be learned from it. What message is taught, however, depends on who is controlling the narrative. As a result, African American life is presented in varying and conflicting ways. An actor’s portrayal of what it is like to be Black in America depends entirely on who created the content and what the motivation behind that content is. The following section presents how various forms of entertainment including minstrel and vaudeville shows, radio, and television have presented Black people and Black culture.

From the moment Africans were stolen from Africa and brought to the United States, they were not seen as human beings. Slaves were the property of their White masters. Dexter B. Gordon (1998) writes that “American slavery provides the backdrop of tragedy against which African Americans developed their distinct form of humor, in which the material of tragedy was converted into comedy, including the absurd” (p. 256). I begin at slavery because it informs so much of African American comedy. The use of viewing life through a comedic lens stems from

the injustices African Americans face and Black humor's birth from contradictory experiences. (Watkins, 1994).

To justify barbaric treatment, slave-owning society deemed slaves to be more unintelligent than White people. Africans were viewed as indolent, mindlessly enjoying the work given to them by their masters. Stripped of their given names, even their new monikers- like "Sambo" (Maydosz, 2000)- held a comedic tone. Of course, Africans were not the only minority group oppressed by White settlers. Native Americans were also enslaved. The difference, however, was that Europeans believed Native Americans had more "desirable traits" (Maydosz, 2000). Essentially, Africans did not even make it onto the bottom rung of the ladder as far as the chain of humanity went. They were less than and not human. Timeka N. Tounsel (2019) notes:

Narratives of Black womanhood are even more vulnerable to distortion due to the intersecting forces of racism and sexism which cast them as particularly inferior subjects. The perverse American mythology established during the slave economy framed Black women as either mammy, sapphire, or jezebel. (p. 305)

How Black women are treated in contemporary times is linked to how Black women were treated and viewed during slavery. Stolen African women had labels like mammy thrust upon them. These labels continue to persist due to racist and sexist structures in society. One such example of this is exemplified by Patricia Hill Collins' idea of controlling images. These images work as rationalization for enforcing racist and sexist notions. She writes, "The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black woman- hood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (p. 72). Collins notes that one of the first controlling

images is mammy. What both women are recognizing is that slavery laid a foundation for how Black women are represented that persists in how Black women are represented in contemporary times.

Minstrelsy and Vaudeville

J. Stanley Lemons (1977) declares that “the minstrel show was America’s first national, popular entertainment form” (p. 102). He continues that that minstrel show was influenced by Zip Coon, a showboating character known for loud and wild dress, and Jim Crow, a character known for rags and being dim-witted. Other stereotypes, or tropes, that populated minstrel shows include Uncle Tom/Uncle Remus, Aunt Jemima, Sambo, and mammy (Lemons, 1977).

Blackface and minstrel shows were popular entertainment that “expressed class identification and hostility” satirizing African American looks and lives (Saxton, 1975, p. 4). TD Rice popularized a black face Uncle Sam character. Dressed in the red, white, and blue of the United States of America flag and wearing a mask, Rice took his show on the road. Eventually his unscripted show would transcend into a popular phenomenon (Richards, 2006). The nineteenth century was filled with “White performers pretending to be ‘comically’ stereotyped versions of Blacks” while time after the Civil War featured Black people performing “coon roles” (Early, Carpio, & Sollors, 2010, p. 29). The negative tropes and coon roles played by both White and Black performers went on to influence how African Americans were perceived in real life. The Jim Crow era continued the trend of mocking African Americans. Michele Wallace (2000) writes that during this era “racial segregation and apartheid became both custom and law in the US” (p. 137). While her work focuses on films of the era, it is no less applicable to this subject because it relates to African American portrayal in entertainment. She highlights *Birth of a*

Nation (1915) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1925) as examples about how African Americans are portrayed as animals and lazy, both racist stereotypes. Wallace (2000) conveys frustration at sexism with the portrayal of Uncle Tom taking precedence over Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), as Topsy is the main character of more key scenes (p. 150). This example illustrates society favoring men and forgetting African American woman. Afi Samella Abdulla (1998) writes on Black women adopting the mammy role outside of entertainment and how the caricature depicts Black women putting the care of the master's family above others (Abdulla, 1998). Through the mammy role, Black women's mothering attitude became a defining characteristic.

That defining characteristic, however, could be flipped. Moms Mabley is a revolutionary comic who combined her civil rights work and humor. She dug into African American culture for her jokes, creating a bridge of understanding with her audience (p. 147). Adopting the "Moms" persona during her Vaudeville days, Mabley was able to give societal critique as a "revisionist mammy" persona (, p. 48) with which she found mainstream success. Haggins (2007) notes that a perfect storm of the White audience comfort in the mammy character allowed them to be open to her more revolutionary and critical act. Her work was an attempt to subvert a harmful trope and for some it was successful. Entertainment and comedy were working to fight back.

Network Television Production

Television's origin as a commercial system is important because television was and still is an advertising-supported medium (Kellner, 1981). To make money, programs must draw large-scale viewership, and the shows that succeed must appeal to audiences. And the shows that

are popular are made are determined by the status quo. The introduction of television and targeted advertisements featured on popular shows drove the power of choice for television shows (Lipsitz, 1986). Popular shows meant more views for the program, and more views for the program meant more views for the ads. This would, hopefully, for the company, translate to a bigger profit. This connectedness means that who runs the networks and who decides what shows are greenlit can be based on monetary value. This affects the power dynamic of how Black people are seen.

From the moment kidnapped Africans were brought as slaves, stereotype after stereotype described them to justify inhumane treatment and denial of civil rights. To maintain a status quo, to maintain certain values and beliefs, the general audience had to believe specific things about African Americans. This is what was popular. This is what drove a narrative that found its way on television. That narrative, however, is evolving. Herman Gray (2000) epitomizes popular shows *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *227* that showed African Americans in front of the screen but were spearheaded by White creatives behind the screen. Thus, the representation of African Americans was born from how White Americans believed African Americans would act. When “Black humor [historically] was necessary for the amusement of Whites” and when “culturally Blackness serves Whiteness” (Gray, 2000, p. 286) that comfort level and perception seeps into even the most well-meaning programs. It’s no surprise, then, that these sitcoms depicted African Americans as poor yet content. The late 1970s/early 1980s brought a level of change. Comedies like *The Jeffersons* and *Diff’rent Strokes* also portrayed African American life but with a degree of upward mobility (Gray, 2000). As *The Jeffersons* theme song so elegantly

put it, television shows were “movin’ on up,” at least in socioeconomic status. Part of that evolution came as Black creatives began to tell their own stories.

Another show is 1950s *Beulah*. This show serves as an example of a taking a harmful trope but reinventing it, just as Moms Mabley did. For a time, Black women’s representation consisted of the Mammy character, a caretaker and maternal figure. Mack Scott (2014) explains how the radio show *Beulah*, with a close up of the titular character. The focus on her features served as a call back to the over characterized features of African Americans drawn on for black face and reminiscent of a mammy. *Beulah*, however, was anything but stereotypical. Instead, she was depicted as confident and strong. TV viewers were not only left visual cues, but her speech patterns and confidence showed the audience she was anything but a parody (Scott, 2014). Eventually, comedians like Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor burst onto the scene. While both began with “clean” and political free comedy, Cosby eventually turned to a dramatic role in *I, Spy* becoming the first African American male lead. Dick Gregory utilized the power of the suit and tie, his dress reminiscent of Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee protestors. He was active politically, both speaking at protests and including racial discourse in his material. He was different from other comedians because he was popular, and he refused to separate himself from civil rights issues. *The Flip Wilson Show* succeeded on prime-time television for both Black and White audiences. In fact, he was so popular that *Time* declared him “the first Black television superstar” (Haggins, 2007, p.16).

Herman Gray (2000) uses Bill Cosby as an example of a Black man getting to tell his own, Black, story. *The Cosby Show* focused on Heathcliff and his wife Claire as the parents of the Cosby family. The show offered a look at Black middle class living. It showed Black

audiences the possibilities for success and showed White audiences that they did not need to feel threatened. She notes that the show's popularity and reach allowed the space to breakdown stereotypes and discuss race (Collins, 2005). It should be noted, however, that Bill Cosby's conviction on three counts of sexual assault does differ wildly from the character he portrayed . It is with this change that the debate on what is authentic began. This conversation continues today with Shonda Rhimes. Known for television shows *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*, she is credited with a new wave of diversity (Joseph, 2016). Her television shows feature high-powered Black women who lead successful careers, have messy interpersonal lives, and do not often associate with other Black women. Assatu N. Wisseh (2018) also uses *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* as examples of Black female-led programs both in front of and behind the scenes. She also includes the late 1990s *Girlfriends* on UPN and the early 2000s *Living Single* on ABC as portraying Black women who are existing as fully existing and complex people. HBO's *Insecure* falls into this same category. It exists in a post-racial world where a career-driven woman is attempting to succeed. The difference between Shondaland protagonists and the character Issa is that creator, writer, and star Issa Rae has her main character surrounded by people who look like her. It is here Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's "respectability of politics" rears its head again (Joseph, 2016). Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) writes about the politics of respectability and its denial of various expressions including dress, music, speech, and sexual behavior In short, these things are being policed or they are swept under the rug because they are not deemed respectable enough in polite society. Are the women of the aforementioned shows authentic, or do they represent a post-racial world that does not actually exist?

HBO

Black women have been working to dispel and shake off these labels. HBO has been instrumental to implement some structural shifts in the industry to have more Black voices. While HBO exists in the private sector (the channel requires a paid subscription), it does not rely on commercialism to generate revenue (Dates, 2005). Thus, HBO can air uncensored, and potentially more authentic, stories.

Timeka N. Tounsel (2019) continues, “cable television, especially premium networks like HBO, defines itself as an alternative space equipped to produce race and gendered “counterprogramming” otherwise non-existent in network series” (p. 308). Janette L. Dates (2005) adds more on the importance of HBO and the channel’s role in telling authentic Black stories from Black creators. Dates notes HBO’s mission to tell authentic stories. This mission led to the company turning toward neglected stories from the African American community. Shows like the 1990’s *Comedy Def Jam* began and launched the successful comedy careers of multiple Black comics such as Chris Rock (Dates, 2005). HBO’s work with Black creatives extends to present time, exemplified by the *Watchmen* limited series, *Lovecraft County*, and *Insecure*. It is notable that HBO did not just pepper in brown faces in their already existing programming. The sought-after authenticity of HBO programming comes from the behind-the-scenes creators. Olivia Shushman became the executive vice president of affiliate marketing, the highest-ranking African American in the company in 2004. There she contributed with the role between filmmakers and film festivals. Dates (2005) notes their collaboration with the American Black Film Festival to get filmmakers into festivals which launched careers. Film rights were auctioned to HBO, Cinemax, and other distribution corporations.

Hall's (1989) work concerns otherness and the difference of identity, how those who suffer under the triangle trade are represented and how that identity is shown to others. Hall's (1989) conclusions are important because they relate to Dates' (2005) highlighting of the importance of authentic representation. The idea of cultural identity relates to if a story is authentically told, which depends on who is telling that story. To critique the issues of television belonging to the private sector and ignoring authentic voices, we must understand how voices are silenced. The critique of otherness must be acknowledged to have this conversation.

Conclusion

Humor was a weapon that painted African Americans in a negative light. Humor reinforced a status quo of inferiority. Black comedians, however, actively fought that portrayal demonstrating that we do, in fact, contain multitudes. That is the outermost layers. Continuing to pull the thread, humor is working harder- operating as more than just providing laughs but to persuade.

We know that there are various facets to humor. It can be positive, inclusive of everyone in the room, or it can be aggressive. Humor has deep ties to how African Americans have been portrayed from the moment they arrived in slave ships. From slavery to Jim Crow to now, African Americans' work ethic and physical features have been taken and twisted into stereotypes used to damage and demean. Still, humor is cultural. In-groups and out-groups are created where a certain group can understand a facet of humor. Part of how this is created is through rhetorical concepts. It is for this reason we must adopt an Afrocentric view when analyzing *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and any other works created by African Americans. The unique history of African Americans shapes many of the diaspora's reality and therefore shapes

how we use and accept humor. Haggins (2007) puts forth the idea that the “Black comedy, in its literal and literary construction, has always overtly and covertly explored the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of African American communities” (Haggins, 2007 p. 2). This means that, although we can question intention, we cannot deny that Black comedy is saying something about what it means to be Black in America. Thus, we can posit that *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is giving commentary concerning what it is like to be a Black lady in the United States.

In Bambi Haggins’s (2007) *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, she writes about various comedians, such as Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle, who have had their own television sitcoms or stand-up specials. She notes these male comedians’ ability to stretch their comedy, ranging from “sexually explicit and socially irrelevant” to “scathing comedic critique” (p. 11). In this moment, Haggins (2007) decides to give her own critique. While she mentions female comedians like Whoopie Goldberg, she also notes that “no Black female comics have been able to gain the access and success in the entertainment mainstream that Whoopie Goldberg has attained” (Haggins, 2007, p. 11). So, where are the woman and why has their journey not been documented as well as their male counterparts?

Addressing this question, the goal of this thesis is to bring African American women back into the conversation concerning humor. In general, Black women have been neglected both in media and in research. The creation and success of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* allows the opportunity to shift our focus to the forgotten narratives of Black women. Specifically, an analysis of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* provides the opportunity to study and understand the environment in which Black women birth and create their humor, based on interpreting their

comedy as an outlet to cope with and protest the racism and sexism that they experience daily in the United States.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

The purpose of this section is to introduce and explain my method for analyzing *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and provide a rationale for why I chose my methods. After I explain my methods and rationale, I introduce the artifact and justify the selection of episodes. This section also features an explanation regarding how I analyze the episodes to arrive at themes informed by the literature review and method.

Rhetorical Analysis

Thurmon Garner and Carolyn Calloway-Thomas acknowledge a Black presence in in rhetorical work as “a culturally bound way of practicing and framing language, discourse, and patterns of behavior” (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003, p. 44). It is in this definition that the importance of Afrocentricity becomes apparent again. Framing African Americans as the acting participants in and subjects of rhetorical functions acknowledges hegemonic ideologies that persist in the United States. Focusing on how Africans and African Americans use language and engage in discourse focuses on and acknowledges the existence of issues like White supremacy and other dominating belief systems that affect Black Americans daily. The authors continue that “in African American rhetoric, a Black presence is generated when we find in the text cultural combinations of African American rhetorical patterns of sufficient frequency and intensity” (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003, p. 45). This means that the rhetorical patterns happen often and are significantly measurable. It is with this addition to African American rhetoric that we gain another argument for why we cannot just overlay a Eurocentric lens over Black discourse. Different cultures have different “value systems, language patterns, ideologies, and experiences”

(p. 246). This means that cultural approaches give more insight. Not only do worldview and framing affect lens, but as does how rhetoric is employed.

That is not to say that a Eurocentric lens does not have merit. Sonja K. Foss (2018) defines rhetorical criticism as “thinking about symbols, discovering how they work, and trying to figure out why they affect us” (Foss, 2018, p. 3). She continues that this investigation requires questioning the meaning of symbols presented more than our interpretation of the symbols presented. This means that sometimes we can draw meaning from something that the author did not intend for us to draw meaning from. Essentially, we elevate something as an important symbol when that was not the original goal. A rhetorical analysis gives validity to the idea that the humor has deeper layers and works to do more than make others laugh. I chose to engage in a rhetorical analysis because it focuses more on *how* the writers, director, and cast say their message. My focus is on how Black women’s voices are centered in *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and how is African American rhetoric infused into the sketches. I apply the Afrocentric lens to the sketches featured in the show, as they are the text where functions of humor and African American rhetoric are employed.

Signification investigates the denotation and connotation, which means the literal meaning of a word and a feeling that the word invokes. This, though, has its limitations as it is rooted in a Eurocentric rhetorical tradition. To study an African American group an Afrocentric lens is required. Felicia R. Walker (2003) applies the notion of signification to Johnnie Cochran’s closing argument of the O.J. Simpson trial. She defines signifying as “a tactic” and “verbal dueling” (p. 250). Signifying involves offending others using humor but “also functions to make a specific point” (p. 250).

How Walker (2003) defines signification aligns with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s approach (1988). Gates begins by acknowledging that "Saussure defines the signifier [as a] "sound-image" sans the sound" (Gates, 1988, 50). This is the "Standard English" definition, that relates the image, or the signifier, and what is associated with that image, or the signified. Gates (1988) compares this definition and puts it through a mirror to "double" the word to address African American vernacular and signification's use in African American culture. This is where he moves to a more Afrocentric approach. Comparing the work of these words to the Signifying Monkey, a trickster in African folklore, Gates (1988) explains that signifying is related to double word choice (Gates, 1988). Gates (1988) calls this double meaning "decolonizing" for a Black purpose "by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has- and retains- its own orientation" (Gates, 1988, p. 55). Examples include "down," "nigger," "baby," and "cool" (Gates, 1988, p. 52). Each of these words can have a variety of meanings depending on their context. "Down" can mean the physical direction or it can mean you agree with something. "Baby" can refer to either a child or be a term of endearment. "Cool" is a description for temperature or can reference social status. "Nigger," however, is more controversial. While there are some who do not believe the word should be used at all, others claim that they have taken the power the word holds back--essentially, that nigger is no longer a derogatory word meant to dehumanize. Signification leans on understanding the denotative and connotative meaning of words and understanding the verbal play of insult to drive the speaker's point home.

Indirection, important to understanding African American rhetoric, utilizes elements of signification. Garner and Calloway-Thomas (2003) write that indirection is a rhetorical strategy that avoids "direct confrontation", and they list "bragging, boasting, and loud talking" as having

elements of indirection (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003, p. 49). Indirection builds from the African tradition of using multiple and vague words instead of getting straight to the point. The purpose is to give space to avoid confrontation. The use of indirection allows users a strategy to comment on what is appropriate in daily communication (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003). In addition to her work with signification, Felicia R. Walker (2003) also addresses rhythm. She comments on how with rhythm, speech takes on a musical quality. Pitch, tone, repetition, sounds, pauses, and how words are pronounced all affect a speech's rhythm (Walker, 2003). A speech's rhythm can be an indicator of Black presence. This relates to *Ntu*, or "universal rhythm of life" (Woodard, 2003, p. 137). Explicitly, Woodard (2003) states that, "*Ntu* is the rhythmic space in which rhetorical communities derive available means for negotiating meaning and achieving social understandings" (p.137). Rhetorically, *Ntu* acknowledges a space where social values and beliefs can be investigated and understood, so when rhythm is used in speech patterns a space is also opened to understand meaning and social understanding.

Walker (2003) discusses visual and auditory stylin' and call and response. Stylin' is a "stylistic feature" that "attempts to make words reality and engage in expressive communication" (p. 248). The speaker can either be aware of unaware of their mannerisms, facial expressions, body language, and gestures. Still, all these factors influence the delivery of a message. Lastly, she discusses the use of call and response. It can be used in a variety of settings, although it is most identified in religious settings. Call and response takes place between a speaker and their audience. The speaker gives a call while the audience's response is either a repetition of that call or an affirmation of the words spoken.

Double-Consciousness and Antithesis

The concept of “double-consciousness” is an effective rhetorical concept and one of the reasons for spoken “eloquence” (Leeman, 2018, p. 283). This double-consciousness is maintaining the identities of being both American and Black. W.E.B. Du Bois (1897) called the same concept “twoness”: “One ever feels his twoness- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois, 1897, par 3). African Americans must reconcile two interacting aspects of their identity, and they must do this within few views of individuals who will no doubt judge them. Other African Americans might not reconcile the aspects the same way, and out-groups might not understand the need for reconciliation in the first place.

Another aspect of this double-consciousness or twoness is antithesis. This is “the use of parallel structure to juxtapose contrasting ideas. It is most used trope for constructing what *should be* [versus] what *is* (Leeman, 2018, p. 283). Sullivan (1993) explains antithesis as “a particularly significant trope for African Americans because of its ability to sharply contrast what America promises her citizens of color and how the nation has not only fallen short, but often delivered the very opposite of the ideas it professes” (p. 284). Fredrick Douglass used antithesis specifically when criticizing President Abraham Lincoln and his response to inequality concerning African Americans. He would place his use of antitheses in the middle of his speech as a bridge (Sullivan, 1993).

Frances M. Beal (2008) writes about how society defines manhood and womanhood. She emphasizes that men tend to be defined by their jobs while women tend to be defined by the home. This way of thinking deserves criticism on its own, but it also deserves criticism because

that is not how Black womanhood is defined either. The definition of womanhood for Black women, however, is muddied by accusations of “who is oppressing who.” Beal (2008) argues that a capitalism works as a system of oppression against Black men, and that Black women have been unjustly blamed. In fact, she goes so far to say that the salary disparity, body regulation like birth control and sterilization factors women. All these factors influence how Black women are oppressed and influence the “double jeopardy” of being both Black and a female. Dual jeopardy acknowledges the racism and sexism that Black women face.

Deborah K. King (1988) also offers scholarship, calling the phenomenon multiple jeopardy, and critiquing Frances M. Beal. King (1988) begins with the race-sex analogy cataloging different ways that Black people and women are similar. It is from these relations, and from participating in movements for racial equality that informed the movement for gender equality. These analogies, however, offer little thought about Black women (Beal, 2008). This renders Black women as essentially invisible. She notes that nothing explicitly is stated concerning Black women and that it is assumed that they either fall in line with factors affecting Black men or White women. This idea is also represented by misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey. The term was adopted and utilized in Black feminist spheres due to specifically pointing out misogynist, racist, and sexist behavior and speech directed at Black women. (Bailey, 2013). King (1988) critiques only acknowledging factors of race and gender. She brings in class, heterosexism, homophobia as oppressive forces that can also affect Black women (King, 1988). These are the multiple jeopardies that must be acknowledged. This is one place that the theory of intersectionality can be applied and work well.

Black Feminist Standpoint

White voices are often framed at the center of discussion. Essentially, Standpoint is a structure acknowledges the fact that some voices are at the center and some are in the margin giving different points of reality. Patricia Hill Collins (1989) adds that not only must a White lens be rejected, but an Afrocentric lens is needed. “As a result of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid, and other systems of racial domination, Blacks share a common experience of oppression” (p. 755). It is this common experience of oppression that unites and links us, giving us a world view that no other can understand. Not only, however, have we collectively experienced a linking trauma, but it permeates our way of living. Collins (1989) continues that “Afrocentric values permeate the family structure, religious institutions, culture, and community life of Blacks in varying parts of Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and North America” (p. 755). This results in a specific way that African Americans both approach and interact with life. Black women can stand on the knowledge that their reality can exist simultaneously as someone else’s while also being valid and true. In this case, that reality is Black women’s experiences. Black feminism acts as a framework for coping and resistance. As a marginalized and Othered group, Black women create safe spaces for themselves in their speech codes and styles. Among other Black women, women who understand, they can empower one another (Davis, 2018).

Artifact

A Black Lady Sketch Show is a sketch and variety program that currently airs on HBO. Premiering on August 2, 2019, the first season broadcasted until September 6, 2019. The season featured six episodes lasting approximately thirty minutes in length. The narrative show features various sketches, all presented by a main cast of Black women. The program was created by

Robin Thede, who was the first African American woman to be head writer on a late-night talk show, and executive produced by Issa Rae (Okwodu, 2019). The show features an all-Black writer's room, cast, and director, Dime Davis (Jackson, 2019) making its name- *A Black Lady Sketch Show*- all too applicable.

A Black Lady Sketch Show was nominated for three Emmy awards in 2020: outstanding variety sketch series, Angela Bassett for outstanding guest actress in a comedy series, and Dime Davis for outstanding directing for a variety series. Davis is the first Black woman to be nominated in this category (White, 2020). With the program's launch and second season renewal (Okwodu, 2019), the program continues to break down barriers for Black women in the comedy field.

The show also has success in its depiction of underrepresented groups. According to the Think Tank for Inclusion and Equity, 16.9% people of color and 6.3% of women reported representation in the writer's room, while some acknowledged the tokenism they felt (Carswell, 2020, p. 21). Furthermore, 46.2% of those hired simply to fill diversity quotas do not continue with the show past the first season (p.15), and 33.9% of writers reported that they were asked to alter their characters to better appeal to white audiences (p. 29). These are general statistics, but they note how people of color and women are challenged in the writer's room. The all-Black and female writer's room and cast of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* bucks this trend because they created a space for themselves.

I begin my analysis with a selection of press coverage and interviews with Robin Thede. This choice is informed by Black Feminist Standpoint because the interviews are one way to highlight the knowledge that Black women offer due to their unique position in the world. The

real-life motivations and experiences of the show's Black female creators greatly informs the choices made for on screen representation. The interviews also reveal the inherent politics implications of casting four Black women as the show's main characters. Black women are an in-group that experience life a particular way. This, in turn, forms a specific and unique culture. Thus, the Black female creators of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* are operating out of that culture for other Black women. Additionally, the interviews reveal insights concerning the television industry. There are moments when Thede discusses HBO proposing White writers and her ability to hire talented, qualified Black women. The interviews offer an unspoken commentary about HBO's jump to hire White men, the availability of these qualified Black women, and HBO's willingness to trust Thede.

I selected six interviews that are representative of the motivations and intent in crafting the show. Five of the interviews were published in magazines or trade press source: *Indiewire*, *Oprah Magazine*, *Deadline*, *Variety*, and *Vogue*. I picked these because interviews because they succinctly summarize the copious information given during *A Black Lady Sketch Show*'s press tour. Another reason I picked these interviews is because they were conducted with either women or people of color. I leaned heavily on the podcast interview with Larry Wilmore as Robin Thede previously worked as a writer on his late-night show. This resulted in an established rapport before the interview began. Including an audio interview was also important because it allowed me to hear tone and feeling behind statements. These six interviews are representative of the cast and crews' motivations and intent in crafting each episode and sketch. Black Feminist Standpoint highlights why I begin my analysis with interviews. The real-life motivations and experience of the show's Black female creators greatly informs the choices

made on screen. Black women are an in-group that experience life a particular way. This, in turn, forms a specific and unique culture. Thus, the Black female creators of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* are operating out of that culture for other Black women.

Each episode features Robin Thede, Ashley Nicole Black, Quinta Brunson, and Gabrielle Dennis as fictionalized versions of themselves conversing in Robin's living room, which is a storyline throughout the first season but broken into short segments in between sketches. This is what I will refer to as the *living room segments*. Then, each actor takes part in various sketches as other characters and guest stars. There are thirty-one sketches in total over six episodes.

In each sketch, I focus on dialogue, setting, and costumes to determine how each sketch offers resistance against or coping with systemic racism and sexism. While analyzing dialogue, setting, and costumes, I pay specific attention to how affiliate groups, satire, double-consciousness and antithesis, signification, indirection, rhythm, stylin', and call and response are utilized to advance the sketches' humor. I watched the whole series XXX times, each time refining what I noticed as themes dealing with dimensions about the treatment of Black women and how the show is space to resist against or cope with racism and sexism. After repeated viewings, I noticed the repetition of trauma, support, and sex and romantic love as themes in about half of all the sketches. Racism and sexism cause trauma, and they also affect Black women's expectations for giving and receiving support and engaging in sex and romantic love. In total, then, my analysis primarily focuses on fourteen sketches (Appendix). Other sketches touch on these themes, but the sketches and humor set up different commentary.

To summarize, the goal of this rhetorical analysis is to examine how the sketches use of functions of humor, employment of concepts from African American, and applying Black Feminist Standpoint to resist against and cope with systemic racism and sexism.

Part one of my analysis will focus on the interviews conducted to support and advertise *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. Part two of my analysis will cover the sketches presented during season one of the sketch show.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

The following chapter is an analysis of HBO's *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. I begin by analyzing several interviews conducted by Robin Thede to promote the series. I look at these to gain a better perspective of the motivations behind choices made regarding the program itself. I break down Thede's answers into three distinct sections: production, narrative, and audience. Centering African Americans as subjects and active participants is one aspect of Afrocentricity. Acknowledging the specific, cultural ways that African Americans interact with the world is key in understanding African American traditions. That means that how the show is produced, the narrative the show chooses to tell, and the audience this show is for must also be viewed through an Afrocentric lens. These three sections address the intent and motivation that make *A Black Lady Sketch Show* into the final product aired on HBO.

I then transition to my analysis of the sketches featured in season one. First, I define the different type of sketches presented. I note the difference between the standalone sketches, the recurring sketches, and the living room segments to recognize the built into structure of the show. I argue that the living room segments tie the show together, offering a moment the audience can come back to. The living room segments also allow the audience a glimpse of Black female friendship, creating rapport. The recurring sketches invite comparison and offer deeper insight into specific characters, inviting further study. The standalone sketches, though, still offer important information just in one singular setting. From there, I transition to three predominant themes in the sketches: trauma, support, and romantic love and sexuality. Each of these themes is a major component of the following sketches that I will discuss. The use of African American rhetoric in each sketch lends credibility to the fact that *A Black Lady Sketch*

Show is centering Black voices and Black culture. In order to drive this point home I specifically call out the Invisible Spy Part 1 and 2, Purgatory Soul Food, and Rome & Julissa sketches. I specifically call out these sketches and highlight specific instances of African American Rhetoric at work. My choice in themes reflects my Black Feminist Standpoint Framework and the uplifting of Black female voices.

Interviews

My analysis begins with an examination of various interviews with Robin Thede concerning the development of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. I begin with these six interviews to gain insight about the development of and choices about the show. These interviews are the collective knowledge that can empower Black women. This knowledge is important because it has a direct affect concerning power relations. Race, class, sexual orientation, and gender all affect power dynamics in the United States. There is a hierarchy and queer Black women, and Black women are at the bottom (Collins, 1990). Three things place Black women at the top of the power dynamic in this show, challenging where Black women typically fall in the social hierarchy : the placement of Black women in charge of the production as writers and a director, the crafting of a narrative that keeps Black women at the center of the narrative, and the acknowledgement of the Black women of the audience.

Overall, these interviews reveal the political nature that shrouds the show's environment. Entertainment like minstrelsy and vaudeville created dangerous and ignorant tropes about Black women that permeate society. Both are factors that contribute to the rise of misogynoir and the need for intersectionality. The interviews reveal how Thede deals with these implications, specifically related to three facets of the show: its production, its narrative, and its audience.

Production

An important and historical aspect of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* that is often highlighted during the press tour is the makeup of the cast and crew. Thede, herself, made history before joining HBO. She was the first Black woman to be a head writer for a late-night program and the first Black woman to write for the White House Correspondents Dinner, both of which tend to be dominated by male white comedians. She continued her groundbreaking career by creating the first sketch show where the entire main cast and crew are composed of Black women. What Thede calls her “badge of honor” she also notes are “The industry’s shame” (Obenson, 2020). It is a shame that it has taken this long, in the vast history of entertainment and television for Black women to secure coveted positions. While talking with friend, and former mentor, Larry Wilmore, Thede noted that once she left BET’s *The Rundown*, the only follow-up call she received was from Issa Rae. The call from Rae was significant because she had a production deal with HBO. After pitching the series, they were able to secure a series order (Copeland, 2020). After this, Thede got to work. She was intentional about who she hired, pointing out in one interview that HBO initially recommended White men as writers and directors before she rejected them. She noted that many members of her cast and crew held various accolades for their work and/or studied in well-known comedy circles like Second City. Despite these notable achievements, each woman’s calendar was available (Wilmore, 2019). The issue is present between the lines of Thede’s comments. These talented and hilarious women were afforded the same opportunities as their White and male counterparts.

Narrative

Another discussed aspect of the show is the show's narrative, or rather, how Thede describes the show's overarching philosophy. Throughout various interviews, Thede touts *A Black Lady Sketch Show* as a "narrative sketch series where Black women get to do regular things like shopping at the grocery store, but the checkout person could be a unicorn" (Wilmore, 2019). This is something she echoes in a roundtable interview with *Variety* adding more context. Shopping at the grocery store is a grounded reality while a unicorn operating as the checkout person is the magical reality (Countryman, 2020). In the case of the actual show, skits occur in everyday places like a club or a living room while magical things exist simultaneously like aliens or an apocalypse. The existence of a grounded reality with magical happenstances serves as commentary that Black women get to do more, have more opportunities or simply be themselves, when a magic world exists. In a society without the magical, there is an expectation placed on Black women, birthed from their historic treatment and tropes portrayed in the media, such as the controlling images of the mammy, jezebel, welfare mother, and so on (Collins, 2005). *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is an environment where Black women, despite their varied backgrounds, are simply allowed to *be*.

Thede notes to *Deadline* that while the show did not intend to be inherently political, it nevertheless is by casting four Black women as the main characters and by hiring a crew of Black women from various backgrounds. From behind the scenes to in front of the camera, Black women of all shades, backgrounds, sizes, beliefs, and spectrums are represented. *A Black Lady Sketch* show is about comedy, but also exemplifies that Black women are not monolithic (Ramos, 2020). This show touts a message that contrasts the worldview and expectations given by history and

inaccurate representations. On this set and in the sketches, Black women do not have to repeat the same inauthentic tropes that permeate media. Black women do not have to be the sassy best friend or mammy. They can simply be friends or even hold a caretaker role. They can be themselves.

Audience

Thede reveals the intended audience of the show saying that while she made the show for Black ladies, it is also for those in the know. If you get the situations presented in the sketch then the show is for you, but she also acknowledges that she hopes those who do not understand will stick around and find out (Wilmore, 2019). Thede acknowledges the existence of an ingroup that operates with encoded language and situations. Some audiences may watch the show and immediately understand the cultural moments and reasonings behind certain jokes, while others will have to decode the language, dress, and situations so that they can understand. It's comedy for everyone but it is still comedy told through Black women's viewpoints. To engage with this show means adopting an Afrocentric lens, which means centering African Americans as active participants in discourse and acknowledging cultural values and beliefs.

Thede and this show are examples of how African American women are holding the reigns and are driving the conversation about who Black women are and what they are capable of. Thede and her show are using their platforms to say, this is our experience, come and learn from it. There is a power dynamic that exists in television concerning who gets to tell what stories and how those stories are told. The strategy and insight that went into hiring *A Black Lady Sketch Show's* cast and crew will hopefully pave the way for the moment that hiring talented and qualified Black women will be less of a political statement.

Sketch Analysis

My main rhetorical analysis focus on the sketches because they are the substance that makes up each episode of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. It is the sketches that I argue feature functions of humor and African American rhetorical strategies. I discuss the sketch types because I contend that the writers purposely segmented sketches as standalone and recurring. I also believe that writers deliberately discuss different ideas in traditional sketches versus the living room segments. Next, I explain my themes of trauma, support, and sex and romantic love. I then describe the sketches that illustrate these themes and analyze how the humor and African American rhetoric used in each sketch to support how the sketches act as resistance against and coping with systemic racism and sexism.

Types of Sketches

There are a few different types of sketches presented throughout season one of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. There are the stand-alone sketches, the recurring sketches, and the living room segments. The standalone sketches and recurring sketches are similar in content. Both sketch types feature a contained storyline with characters played by either all, one, or a few of the main cast members. During the standalone and recurring sketches Robin, Quinta, Ashley, and Gabrielle play various characters in various situations. As stated by Thede during multiple interviews, narrative sketches tend to be more grounded, based on a familiar situation before the sketches give way to a magical reality. This, however, is not the case for all sketches. The difference between the standalone and recurring sketches, however, is that the standalone sketches occur once. The recurring sketches happen more than once throughout the season, allowing for greater insight into characters and scenarios. Seeing Trinity twice in the Invisibly

Spy sketches or Dr. Ali-Youngman in the Hotep sketches gives the chance to compare how characters act, situations, and speech patterns in various situations. Seeing Robin, Quinta, Ashley, and Gabrielle multiple times in the living room segments means witnessing different facets of their personalities.

The living room segments stand apart from the aforementioned traditional sketches. They do have similar traits, however. The living room sketches are recurring, though they happen more frequently than other sketches. Living Room segments occur frequently and sporadically throughout the first season and they also feature Robin, Quinta, Ashley, and Gabrielle. The difference, though, is that the living room segments feature our main cast as heightened, parodied, versions of themselves. Their “characters” have the same names as their portrayers. By containing this segment to the living room, the grounded reality aspect of the show shines through. Each of the living room segments also acts as a rest point between each sketch. It is each of these segments that the audience bonds with the four main cast members, thus strengthening any feelings felt during the traditional sketches. This bonding is orchestrated through the conversation between the women. They are, for the most part, relaxed. They eat, play Uno, and Jenga, and they engage in everyday conversation. While not everyone may engage in the same conversations with friends, they can invoke similar feelings of friendship.

The living room sketches, in general, feature the main cast dressed in everyday clothes like flannels, blouses, and jeans. Ashley and Quinta are wearing their curls, reflecting a natural style, while Robin and Gabrielle are wearing their hair straight, as if relaxed. Here are four women who have various styles of dress, differing hair styles, and differing body sizes. They are the stereotypical diverse photo presented in classroom textbooks; except they are all

Black women. Their appearance is not the only piece of their personality that the audience gets to see, however.

Specifically, during the 8 AM sketch, each woman goes through the suitcases they brought to stay at Robin's house. It's revealed that Gabrielle brought alcohol and dildos, Ashley brought clothes, Robin brought medical supplies, and Quinta brought drugs. The women are playing heightened versions, parodies, of themselves. This is exemplified in what they choose to bring. The real Robin might not necessarily bring medical supplies, the real Ashley might not be sensible in packing, and so on. What these specific choices do is create a picture in the audience's mind of the type of person each woman is. Gabrielle and Quinta are the party friends. Ashley and Robin are more level-headed, although Ashley has the most stereotypically expected bag. As already stated by Robin, in her interview with Larry Wilmore, this show is for Black ladies, but anyone can watch it.

Before each living room segment a black screen with white texts tells the audience both the time and the amount of time either before or after an event. Eventually, it is revealed that this event is the end of the world. Our four main Black women are thought to be the only survivors. The traditional recurring and standalone sketches range in about three to six minutes while the recurring living room segments range from about one to three minutes. It is the living room segments that act as a thread, weaving each story together into one cohesive episode.

Themes

After repeated viewings, I identified three themes: trauma, support, and sex and romantic love. The trauma and support themes are informed by Black Feminist Standpoint and the fact of why Moya Bailey (2013) needed to coin the term Misogynoir (Bailey, 2013). The focus on Black

women's point of view and the fact that neither racism nor sexism always address the intersectional identity of Black women means that Black women are not often given the support they need. This lack of support leaves a potential opportunity for Black women to experience painfully traumatic situations. I chose sex and romantic love as a theme as an answer to what happens when Black women receive support and are given room to explore sexual and romantic feelings without penalty. Multiple sketches satirize the stereotypes concerning Black love, each highlighting that when Black women are not solely defined by trauma or harmful tropes then they thrive and are no longer hurt by trauma. When Black women can explore their sexuality and ideas on love, then they can prosper.

The presented themes are not mutually exclusive. One sketch does not hold a monopoly on one theme, just as one theme does not represent the entirety of one sketch. For sketches that can fit into multiple themes, my criteria for deciding the predominant themes were based on whether the conflicting theme was the main point of the sketch or if it served as narrative exposition. For example, if a sketch features both trauma and support, I asked if the trauma was the set up to highlight the importance of support between the characters or if the trauma was the focus. In each section, I explain the theme before discussing how the sketches use elements of African American rhetoric and humor to illustrate resisting against or coping with systemic racism and sexism.

Trauma

Black women often find themselves in situations that leave painful, long-lasting effects. Whether the situation is an off-handed comment that acts as a microaggression or navigating explicitly racist situations, Black women must navigate her response to each circumstance. As

already stated, Moya Bailey (2013) coined Misogynoir to put a term to the misogynistic anti-Blackness that Black women face. Sexism is the term used to address the disparity between sex while racism is the term used to address the disparity between races. Bailey deemed a new word worthy of Black women when neither sexism nor racism acknowledge the hurt that Black women feel. I apply Black Feminist Standpoint as a framework that addresses this ignorance and highlights the importance of Black women's experiences and points of view. This is crucial when looking at trauma, which has varied definitions. Megan R. Gerber and Emily B. Gerber (2019) begin their definition of trauma by noting how the initial medical definition of trauma evolved around a physical injury. The definition, however, has expanded to include both physical (such as a car accident) and emotional trauma (such as the death of a loved one) (Gerber & Gerber, 2019). Enslavement was a traumatic event that affected Africans physically, mentally, and emotionally. Emphasis should be put on each of these aspects, not only for slavery, but all traumatic events. The theft of a Black woman's identity, her personality, or her happiness should receive the same amount of focus. Trauma, specific to *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, is best exemplified in the following sketches: Invisible Spy: Part 1, Invisible Spy: Part 2, Dance Biter and Cool Handshake, and Teacher Needs a Win. The goal of these sketches is to make sure the pain that Black women experience is not ignored. If these transgressions remain highlighted, then they can always be combated.

Invisible Spy: Part 1 and Invisible Spy: Part 2 feature Ashley Nicole Black as the titular invisible spy, named Trinity. She is dubbed an invisible spy because of, what the sketch deems, her average features. Her average looks have earned her the title of the CIA's best; however, this is at the cost of her identity. This is evident by the fact that Trinity's own co-workers do not

know who she is. One co-worker, played by Quinta, believes Trinity to her son's kindergarten teacher; while the other, played by Robin, has Trinity sign her own birthday card. In the first sketch, Trinity is given the assignment of tracking down a hard drive from the office of Reynaldo Artiste (aka Larceny-O Hall) office. To accomplish this mission, Trinity must confront his private security guard known only as the Invisible Man. During her mission, Trinity discovers that the Invisible Man is a Black woman who greatly resembles her. They wear the same curly, short hair. They also wear the same black, leather jacket, jeans, and t-shirt. While Trinity's looks have allowed her to complete missions for the CIA, the Invisible Man's looks have allowed her to work as Reynaldo's guard in a similar manner. Feeling empathy for the Invisible Man, Trinity allows her to escape on the condition that she get the hard drive.

When we meet Trinity in Part 2, she is after The Recluse, played by Aja Naomi King. After a lengthy chase, Trinity finally catches up to and is incapacitated by The Recluse. During her villain monologue, The Recluse reveals that she just had a baby, to which Trinity remarks how good she looks, before she reveals herself as the Invisible Man in disguise. The Invisible Man is angry at Trinity for destroying her life and forcing her to hide. The sketch ends with them fighting before the Invisible Man is mistaken for a janitor and escapes

Invisible Spy is the first sketch that I want to highlight to point out specific uses of functions of humor and African American rhetoric. This sketch is features in the trauma theme. Part one of this sketch opens in an office. Text on the screen lets the audience know that the location is the briefing room, CIA Headquarters. The American Flag in the corner and table also signal professional room. The characters are dressed professionally. Quinta is wearing a light blue-collared shirt and a dark blue blazer. Her hair is pulled into a bun. Kelly Rowland is

wearing a dark blue dress, and her long curly hair is down. Gina Torres is wearing a light grey blazer and a white shirt. Her hair is long and slightly curly. Robin's character is wearing a dark blue blazer and a light blue button up shirt. Her hair is long and straight, with curls at the end. They are all different versions of professional dress, another signal for their job. This is opposite of Trinity, and The Invisible Man's, black leather jacket, dark shirts, and dark jeans. They both also have short curly hair. Their appearance is part of what lends to their availability.

Trinity uses multiple tones and facial expressions throughout both parts one and two. When Gina Torres' character informs Quinta about Trinity's "regular looking face" her eyes grow wide. When she announces to the briefing room, "I'm Trinity, so yeah" her eyebrow goes up in a cocky manner. Her facial expressions are examples of stylin' as her facial expressions add to her meaning and conversation. Quinta uses hand motions to emphasize the Invisible Man's name when Gina reveals it. This acts as drama but also a comedic moment. Stylin' can be more than just facial expressions but also body gestures. Rhythm is employed throughout both part one and two. The name of Reynaldo's cover is We Do International Crimes Records Pew Pew Pew. Gina Torres' character initially pronounces this as written. Trinity interrupts her to correct that the "pew pew pew" sound is more like an air horn sound. When discussing Reynaldo's accomplishment, Gina acknowledges that "he invented going skrrt on records" before growing serious and adding that "he also runs the international crime ring." Their use of not just saying the sounds and making them, as well as their change in tone switching between serious and comical are all examples of rhythm at work.

Elements of signification come into play during The Invisible Man and Trinity's banner. Upon meeting Trinity adopts a disgusted tone before asking, "Ugh, what are you supposed to be,

my evil twin or something?” The Invisible Man retorts, “Don’t flatter yourself. I actually have a face shape that can carry off this haircut.” Trinity then cocks her head to the side before replying, “Do you though?” Despite having similar outfits, hairstyles, and skin tones, they insult one another’s looks. They offend one another in a humor manner, engaging in verbal dueling. This continues in part two when the Invisibly Man is disguised as The Recluse. The Recluse mocks Trinity in a condensing tone.

The Recluse: “Oh, that the best you can do? And I’d heard such good things about your CIA training (here she pauses dramatically) Trinity. Now putting a bullet through your brain so I can see through it like a peep hole won’t be as fun. Knock Knock.”

Trinity: “Who’s there?”

The Recluse “No one because you’re dead.”

The tension of their conversation is then cut by a tonal shift. Trinity stops the conversation to admire The Recluse’s beauty. Her tone then shifts to confusion as her distraction due to beauty has never happened before. Their continual insults and use of jokes are all examples of tactical verbal dueling. Their tone shifts help bring about the humor the sketch.

It is important to note that this sketch never demonizes Trinity or the Invisible Man’s looks. They are not the only dark women, they are not the only women with curly hair, although they are the only physically large women. They are not called ugly, rather they are described as invisible because they are regular. In fact, Trinity is celebrated for her regular looks as evidenced by the praise given to her by her co-workers at the beginning the sketch. She is hailed for her work, to her face because they do not understand that she is in front of them. Every aspect of their physical appearance from their weight to their skin tone, to their hair, to the way they dress

all work together to contribute to their invisible nature. Aloud Trinity is praised for her exceptional spy skills, yet the world constantly forgets who she is. This is a real trauma that Black women must deal with.

Even in this carefully and purposely crafted world filled with Black women, and a few Black men, a Black woman is still forgotten and rendered invisible based on how she physically looks. Through the humorous moments of playing double-dutch with infrared lasers and The Recluse baby-centric villain monologue, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* presents a humorous situation that allows a reexamination of who is deemed important and why. A safe space is created where no one is demonized for their looks, and long-standing societal beliefs can still be confronted. This space is safe because no one is put down by their looks, and this space is revolutionary because it still allows for a conversation about power imbalance to take place. By not pressuring Trinity or The Invisible Man to change how they look, the show is presenting the message that there is nothing wrong with them. The sketch does not ask them to go through a makeover in order to be noticed. Rather, the sketch points out what society chooses to notice and then makes the comment that what is noticed is what is deemed important.

While both parts of Invisible Spy illustrate that trauma that comes with being forgotten, Dance Biter highlights the trauma of theft, as both characters lose a physical ability. This sketch features both Quinta and Robin as unnamed characters. The sketch takes place in a lesbian club, with Robin attempting to woo her ex-girlfriend back. Quinta is dressed in completely buttoned up, loose shirt while Robin is dressed in a tight tank top and short shorts. While Robin is attempting to woo her ex, Quinta notices another patron copying her moves. This unknown person has long dreadlocks and is wearing loose fitting jeans, t-shirt, and jacket. As “My Neck, My

Back” by Khia plays in the background, Quinta’s character battles this unknown stranger who is copying her moves. This battle eventually leads them to the alley, where the music turns sinister, and Quinta’s character passes out. Eventually, Robin’s character seeks out Quinta and finds her in the alley. There the unknown stranger appears to Robin. Two minutes later, both women are back in the club and discover that the mysterious stranger stole their dance moves. The sketch ends with a quick scene in a spaceship, where the stranger is revealed to be an alien in their true form. The alien can now dance while Robin and Quinta’s characters do not. The initial take-away from this sketch is that Robin and Quinta’s dance moves are copied and then stolen from them. The second take away from this sketch is that Robin and Quinta are playing two queer Black women who have their dance moves copied and then stolen from them. The writers of the sketch could have set this sketch in an abundance of settings, but they chose a lesbian club. This affects their Robin and Quinta’s identity as queer, Black, and women. This also highlights the cultural theft, or appropriation, that occurs against women, queer people, and Black people.

This sketch does well to continually point out various identities and how not all Black women and queer Black women are the same. How Quinta and Robin, as well as the extras, are dressed is important because it speaks to the show’s attempt to encompass everyone. This sketch demonstrates well that the title of the show is not about *the* Black lady but *a* Black lady. By displaying different manners of dress and style as a symbol, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is declaring that not only are Black women not monolithic, but neither is the queer community. While a lesbian bar and the two main characters identified as Black lesbians are important to the sketch, neither is the focal point. Rather, this sketch asks viewers to acknowledge the multiple jeopardies of their identities but does not let them dictate how you view the narrative presented.

This sketch also greatly utilizes double choice words with phrases like “do me dirty,” “is this nigga copying me,” and “I’m Gucci.” Through language, this sketch continues to center African American culture. It does not change or translate phrases or words, rather the sketch asks the reader to use context clues and keep up. Dance Biter also features the combined realities These mentioned in her interview with Larry Wilmore.

The beginning of this sketch is grounded in an everyday situation that will be familiar to many viewers, taking place in a club that could exist in the real world. The tonal shift, almost akin to a horror movie, introduces the mysterious stranger as more than someone copying moves. The introduction of aliens parallels the unicorn as the checkout person. This magical reality, however, allows for a deeper layer of theft. When the mysterious stranger was just another person in the club, they were figuratively stealing dance moves, by copying. Both Quinta and Robin’s character could still dance. The sketch, however, ends with their moves literally stolen. This is the moment of trauma for Robin and Quinta’s characters in the sketch. The theft of dance moves echoes the theft of autonomy presented during the earlier discussions of slavery and segregation. It’s a comedic moment because of the absurdity of aliens existing, but it also holds the deeper meaning that even in a fictional world Black woman still cannot have something for themselves.

Add in the layer of the alien disguising themselves as a Black woman, and the antithesis of the situation becomes evident. In this magical reality, what should be is that Black women can dance in peace and attempt to get back together with their exes. This satirical take, once again, points out the disparity between heterosexual and homosexual relationships Thus, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* presents a world where we can acknowledge the theft without a graphic outcome.

So far, the sketches that focus on trauma have explored how society robs and ignores Black women. The last sketch, “Cool Teacher Needs a Win,” explores the trauma when being forgotten and theft occur all at once. Gabrielle plays Ms. Miller, a teacher for a group of ten-year-old girls. Every class they begin with the affirmation, “I am smart, I am tough, I will always be enough” before engaging in a handshake. This abruptly ends when the girls declare that they do not like the handshakes or the affirmation. The class then begins to point out that Ms. Miller seemingly needs the affirmations more than they do. They point out that she can no longer afford to go to a salon, no longer wears highlighter, and no longer goes by Miller-Hicks. As sad piano music plays in the background, Ms. Miller breaks down and reveals that her husband cheated on her with an Applebee’s waitress. Inspirational music plays as a student stands on her desk, reminiscent of Todd and Mr. Keating in *Dead Poet’s Society*, and proclaims the affirmation. Ms. Miller joins in and they engage in the handshake before a voice over recites that the California Lottery is for when you really need a win.

This sketch plays with the familiar narrative of the cool teacher by playing with expectations. Instead, of the students, it is the teacher who needs affirmation. The musical cues act as guides throughout the sketch allowing us to sympathize with Ms. Miller’s disastrous romantic situation. Her joy is stolen, taken by an unfaithful husband, and her pain is seemingly ignored. This affects Ms. Miller’s appearance and actions until her students acknowledge her feelings. Then her joy is restored. Despite the students initial showing a lackluster reception to her handshakes and affirmations, they engage again because they know that this cool teacher needs a win. By ending this sketch as a California Lottery commercial, we are introduced to humor. Such a serious concept in comparison to something as trivial seems odd but is exactly

what invokes laughter. This humor is what presents a situation that allows *A Black Lady Sketch Show* to resist.

Instances of trauma are also introduced throughout the conversations that Robin, Quinta, Gabrielle, and Ashley have during the living room segments. At 7:12 pm, 11 hours and 22 minutes after The Event, the friends discuss cancel culture and whether they are willing to let go of OJ Simpson, Mike Tyson, and R. Kelly. At 8:00 am, 10 minutes after The Event, they discuss how, with the world ending, they no longer must deal with jobs, taxes, Sallie Mae, mediocre White men succeeding over them, or police. At 7:15 pm, 11 hours and 25 minutes after The Event, the women finally snap, acknowledging that they are not living *Girls Trip 2* but are experiencing the end of the world. These conversations are presented as talk amongst friends, but they also highlight very real trauma that Black women face. They address a variety of subjects in each conversation. One example is their discussion of cancel culture. They acknowledge that R. Kelly made good music despite allegations of sexual abuse. The friend discuss how they would still watch *Lethal Weapon* for Danny Glover despite Mel Gibson. They also note Bill Cosby's influence in contrast with his crimes against women. Their discussions give way to the bigger picture of whether separation of art and artist is possible. Does making good music, being a staple of someone's childhood, or creating funny content negate criminal allegations? The fact that two Black women are discussing Bill Cosby and R. Kelly, both once important figures in the Black community who committed crimes against other women, should not go unnoticed. They are discussing crimes against women just like them. While the end of the world brings grief, the friends are happy because they no longer have to deal with White men and police. There is trauma tied to these crimes committed by notable male celebrities and real-life situation. Finally,

there is trauma tied to being supposedly, the only survivors of the end of the world. The aspects of trauma presented in both the living room segments and the sketches have aspects of relatability. They differ, however, in the way each narrative is laid out. Examples of trauma laid out in sketches are layered in the nuance of location, actor, situation, and costume. They require investigation. The trauma laid out in the living room segments is presented through conversation amongst friend. It's the conversation that reflects the real world that must be analyzed.

Invisible Spy Parts 1 and 2 focus on how Trinity's looks are declared average, thus she is physically ignored despite her accomplishments receiving praise. I decoded this message as Black women putting in work (whether in their professional, social, or political lives) but often being forgotten. Dance Biter shows Robin and Quinta's characters having their dance moves copied and then stolen. This sketch alludes to the theft, or appropriation, of Black and queer culture. Cool Handshake Teacher Needs a Win is more straightforward, showing what happens when a Black woman loses her joy and how that affects every aspect of her life—the feeling of being forgotten or ignored and having something important stolen from you. When Black women are acknowledged and validated, then they can begin to heal.

Support

The following sketches fits into two streams of support. In this case, support means either giving emotional or financial assistance to someone. The first level of support is between Black women and their communities, these communities being local business, friends, or family. The second level of support is among Black women. Understanding a Black Feminist Standpoint is crucial when examining how Black women give support to both one another and the community because it centers the unique experience of Black women. Black Feminist Standpoint Theory

notes that Black women share a link from collectively experiencing a unique trauma created from the common experience of oppression. That is not to say that all Black women experience the same levels of oppression, or even oppression in the same way. Essentially, being oppressed is a relatable experience amongst Black women. This creates a unique bonding experience for the Black women who can relate to each other. Who better to lend support than someone who understands? Support, specific to *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, is best exemplified in the recurring sketches Hotep Masterclass and Hotep Homecoming, and the standalone sketches Purgatory Soul Food, Bad Bitch Support Group, Courtroom Kiki, and The Joy. Displays of support and solidarity expertly illustrate the lengths that Black women go through to support both those in their communities as well as among themselves. Purgatory Soul Food, Hotep Masterclass, and Hotep Homecoming exemplify the support that Black women give to their community, that is their friends and family, while Bad Bitch Support Group, Courtroom Kiki, and The Joy demonstrate the support and solidarity that Black women extend to one another, as other Black women.

Both Hotep Masterclass and Hotep Homecoming feature Robin Thede as Dr. Haddassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman, Pre-PhD. These sketches fully center an Afrocentric lens by offering a comedic take on Hotep thinking. This focus is evident by subject matter, dress, and the surrounding background. This is not a bad thing, as I call for the adoption of an Afrocentric lens. The Egyptian word, however, has evolved into describing an individual who are not often actually connected to Afrocentric views, who cluelessly rants ideals and ideology that they do not understand yet revere themselves as deep (Young, 2016). Based on Young's (2016) standards, Ali-Youngman fits many of the descriptions for engaging in Hotep thinking. She

admittedly believes in conspiracy and she has unwavering commitment to Black men. She differs, however, in her addition of women. Young (2016) notes that sexism is also a hallmark of Hotep thinking, yet Ali-Youngman includes women. She jokes that women belong in the kitchen, but she also names her class Hertep instead of Hotep. There are symbols of Dr. Ali-Youngman's Afrocentric ways in both her background and her dress. African masks and the Pan-African flag are heavily featured in the background. She wears her hair in dreadlocks and kept in a headwrap. Her outfit is heavily beaded, and everything heavily features the colors black, red, yellow, and green. All are symbols of the importance of centering Black people and Black thoughts in her mind. She often repeats the word "see" before speaking, a mode of repetition meant to grab one's attention. For example, "See, See, White people will have you believe that our Original Sin is our existence, but their Original Sin is putting raisins in food where it doesn't belong." It is almost as if she is preaching, leaning into the vocal mannerisms.

Dr. Ali-Youngman's conspiracies illustrate the world in terms of how she thinks it should be. She gives advice to free your mind, to address the Double-Consciousness that African Americans might feel when rectifying both their Black and American identities. She works hard to reclaim several pieces of jargon, engaging in double choice word. She proclaims that if a White woman is accused of a crime, then she did it, but if a Black woman is accused then she did not. Dr. Ali-Youngman goes as far as to say, "And another time, I saw a sister holding a bloody knife, standing over a dead body yelling, "I merked this nigga." But as far as I'm concerned, on that day not nary a nigga was merked." She also proclaims that although this is her masterclass, she rejects the term master as she will not be enslaved, "mentally, physically, nor spiritually, metaphysically, biologically, specifically, pacifically, Michael Ealy, Robert E. Lee, none of the

Lees.” Ali-Youngman rejects of the word master yet reclaims nigga, making an important language choice and demonstrating her power of language. Particularly, she notes her power of deciding the meaning of words that once held her ancestors enslaved. This idea continues in Hotep Homecoming at her sister Hannah’s wedding. Dr. Ali-Youngman continues to spout her beliefs to the wedding party going as far as giving Hanna the Igbo name Nkechi Diallo, also known as Rachel Dolezal’s counterfeit African name. She also claims that her own love with Supreme *Rahmeek* transcends the earthly plane, existing in the ancestral plane of Wakanda. She continues until her father reveals her name to be Hailey and commands that if she doesn’t, “sit yo 5% ass 100% down” that he will cut off her inheritance.

Each of these situations and can bring laughter, but they also show the importance of support. We adopt certain codes and filter them through our life experience and world view to create meaning. When your reality is oppression and microaggressions, then individuals can form a group out of solidarity and understanding. This affiliative group understands, what Hall deemed as, naturally despite these codes being built. Ali-Youngman’s ideology and purpose were built in response to the oppression that African Americans face. Because, however, Hotep ideas elevate conspiracy and sexism they often miss the mark. By having a character that legitimately believes these ideas, but adds women, the sketch can note the outlandish nature of many of Dr. Ali-Youngman’s ideals while also noting the importance of still centering Black voice and Black women’s voices. How Dr. Ali-Youngman’s office is decorated, how she is dressed, and her hair are all symbols. She uses specific word choice and situations to highlight the importance of how White people have portrayed the world to be versus how it should be. The goal behind her class and lecturing the wedding party is to inspire support amongst the African

American community. This sketch gives a moment of levity, where African Americans can recognize shared culture, make fun of ourselves, and understand that when we support one another we are that much stronger.

Purgatory Soul Food is the next sketch that looks at the effects of the Black community supporting the Black community. In this sketch Gabrielle and Quinta play two friends who are excited to support a Black- owned business in the Hood.

Purgatory Soul Food is the second sketch that I want to highlight to point out specific uses of functions of humor and African American rhetoric. This sketch is featured in the support theme. Purgatory Soul Food opens with Gabrielle and Quinta's characters entering Eat-All Nite. The restaurant is well lit and bright, as sunlight reflects the pink and white walls. Quinta is dressed in striped, yellow, and white pants and a blue top. Gabrielle is dressed in jeans and a purple top. Both outfits give off the impression of a casual day. They are not dressed in business attire or evening attire. When Quinta initially arrives, she is singing, "soul food Saturday, Saturday for soul food." Gabrielle replies, "Finally [she drags out this word [we have a place in the hood that is actually [she places emphasis on the following words] by Black folks." She then uses hand motions to emphasize that she heard the "oxtails are to die for" and that they are looking for "a table for two." Both Quinta and Gabrielle's voices are in a higher pitch. They are excited to be at and support a Black-owned business. Throughout all their conversations they use hand motions to emphasize how excited they are to eat the food and support this establishment. These body gestures and mannerisms are all expressive communication or stylin'.

Both Quinta and Gabrielle's characters engage in repetition and call and response to signal their excitement and support. At one point Gabrielle notes that they are going to tip nearly half their ticket and give a high review, to which Quinta gives an enthusiastic okay. When it comes time to order Quinta tells their waitress, dressed in a blue-collared shirt and khaki pants to signal her employment: "Let's see what the oxtails are talkin' about." Gabrielle repeats "talkin' about" to signal her agreement. There is a dramatic pause when the waitress informs them that the left side of the menu is unavailable. As the day continues and Quinta and Gabrielle's characters encounter more hardship, their tones become less cheery. Their pitch lowers and they speak faster. Once again, rhythm is at play. Their level of happiness with their service is reflected in their pitch and tone. They engage in sounds and hand gestures to signal their excitement and willingness to support. At one moment, Gabrielle claps along with her speech noting that if they frequent the establishment 57 more times more servers can be hired.

The bad service continues in Quinta and Gabrielle's interaction with the drink counter attendant and the fake manager. The drink attendant, played by Robin Thede, uses stilted and halted speech, "cost a quarter to get in, quarter to get out" as opposed to the full sentences of the waitress and our main characters. This causes confusion for Quinta and Gabrielle but humor for the audience. Lil Rel Howery plays the fake manager. He offers to box up their food and they let him, assuming he is the manager. Instead, he steals their leftovers. When Gabrielle and Quinta realize this Gabrielle exclaims, "I thought that nigga was the manager." She then repeats, "I thought that nigga was the manager." Quinta then adds, in an angry tone, "That nigga acted like the manager." Their high-pitched voices and happiness are gone. Their voices are lower, and

they are angry. Once again, the grounded has given away to the magical. While the Hotep sketches hilariously encourage Black women to support the Black community, this sketch adds a warning. Both characters are ultimately punished for trying to do right by the community. This reflects the spurning that Black women feel in real life. The fact that Moya Bailey (2013) needed a term like Misogynoir or that we study intersectionality is proof. If Black women were not treated harshly then activists and scholars would not need to address their pain. This sketch illustrates that just because Black women support others does not mean that support will return or be treated appropriately. This sketch offers a space of grieving and coping for when Black women give and receive nothing in return. It offers a space to vent the frustrations of feeling as if you are stuck in purgatory.

While the Hotep and Purgatory sketches discuss Black women supporting the Black community, Bad Bitch Support Group looks at Black women supporting other Black women. Bad Bitch Support Group is exactly what it sounds like, a support group for women who are bad bitches. From the beginning, this sketch embraces double choice word using bitch as a positive affirmation. This sketch features Amara La Negra as Sydney, Robin as Tina, Laverne Cox as Kiana, Gabrielle as Mya, and Angela Bassett as the leader of the group Mo. The women are dressed to the nines. Each has their hair, makeup, and clothes presented expertly. The support group begins by discussing how they wake up early to apply their Fenty highlighter, noting that their men have never seen them with a flat face. When Mo joins, she urges the group to question whether their men are worth the effort. After this, Mya reveals, to the group's horror, that sometimes she wants to be an okay bitch instead of a bad one. She reveals that she saw a woman walking without eyelashes and she did not seem as burdened. Mo then declares that it is okay to

want to be an okay bitch if you are not a basic bitch. This is the grounded reality that soon gives way to the magical one. Scientists, played by Quinta and Ashley, are behind a mirror wondering why Mya has become immune to *Foxyzodone*. They double her dosage so that she continues embrace impossible beauty standards, keeping them in business. It is also revealed that Mo is in on the scientists plan all along.

The women describe a world where beauty standards are too high and they can, seemingly, commiserate about it together in this room. That, however, is a betrayal as the room keeps them shackled to those same impossible standards. This sketch points to the importance of reaching out to friends and having a support group when dealing with the hard factors of life. The ultimate message of the text is to find individuals whom you can trust to carry you at your low moments.

Courtroom Kiki features Yvette Nicole Brown as a judge, Bresha Webb as the court reporter, Gabrielle as the bailiff, Quinta is a lawyer representing Sweet Song Restaurant, Robin is lawyer representing Issa, and Issa Rae as a client. As each enters the courtroom, they are surprised to see one another remarking, that “it’s a Black lady courtroom,” using the call and response of “God is good, all the time” and “what in the baby hairs.” The women exhibit a different hairstyle. Quinta’s hair is straight and long while Robin’s is short and wavy. Issa’s hair is braided and in a bun. Gabrielle’s hair is in finger waves, Bresha’s hair is in goddess locs, and Yvette’s is up. Despite their differences in style and profession they also have similarities. They all attended, or are attending, the University of Southern California and are members of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Everyone is in awe of this historic moment, except Issa's character who simply wants to win her case. Still, the other women do not let Issa's characters bring them down. The women complete the evidentiary hearing and Issa wins her case, but the women do not let this hinder their celebrations. They make plans to eat together, take selfies, and discuss their hair. The women are extremely supported of one another, even as they argue their cases. This sketch is an excellent example of satire. People in an actual courtroom would not behave that way, but that is not the point. The point is to highlight the shock each woman feels upon seeing another Black woman as a judge, lawyer, bailiff, and court reporter. The surprise points out the way the world is and the fact that these women hold these positions shows how the world should be. This sketch offers resistance against racism as it provides positive and authentic representation of all that a Black woman can be. This sketch also offers coping as it provides four minutes and thirty-four seconds of a world where Black women are successful and can hold a variety of jobs. The court report's importance is not put above the judges and neither is the lawyers over the bailiff.

The last and final sketch for support and solidarity is *The Joy*. This is the first sketch of the fifth episode. In it all four of our main cast members are hiking and camping together. They are happy in this sketch. Even when their tent collapses or bugs show up, these women are expressing unbridled joy. When they make it to their destination, they proudly proclaim that they "made it to the top" before dancing with one another. The sketch progresses when they see a cartoon chipmunk fall. They even find joy in this moment, laughing, until Quinta's character falls down the hill. Still, they all manage to laugh. Guest Khandi Alexander then steps in as a narrator and explains how the world would have you think that Black women are angry all the time. She counters this by saying that Black women's joy is so powerful that it can be dangerous

or deadly. This sketch is a hug to any Black women watching. Despite setbacks, each character continues to show joy, pressing on in her circumstance. The tent collapsing in the sketch is representative of microaggressions in real life. The tent falling represents the unconscious or conscious negative attitudes Black women face. Instead of forcing the audience to witness a the frustration of a character experience a microaggression, however, the audience witnesses a tent collapsing. This sketch is the cast members supporting one another and in turn supporting the African American watching, saying that they understand that Black women are more than angry. We are in the know, we understand how the world sees and treats you. We know that the world erases aspects of your identity and labels you as angry. We are here to say that is not who you have to be or even who you are.

The declaration that Black women are not angry and have other emotions of joy is crucial. This is the ultimate declaration of looking into the Black women's mind and understanding who we are. It almost acts as the thesis statement for the entirety of the show. Each choice of language, dress, and the actors themselves is a testament to the fact that Black women are often asked to either be Black or women. Each choice of language, dress, and the actors themselves is a testament to the fact that Black women's viewpoints are often ignored and that is a tragedy. When Black women are only allowed to operate in their space of mammy, best friend, or any other inauthentic portrayal then everyone suffers. When Black women can have joy, when we can love one another and ourselves then everyone is all the better for it.

Examples of Black women supporting other Black women also features in the living room segments. This should come as no surprise, as part of these segment's purpose is to introduce a group of relatable friends. The segment at 8:03 am, 13 minutes after The Event,

begins with everyone initially judging Ashley for not wearing a scarf at night, “like a Black chick on a TV show written by White people.” When Ashley explains this is because she gets headaches, Gabrielle retorts that “unnecessary pain is an important part of being a Black woman. Everybody knows that.” Eventually it is revealed that Ashley carries “an entire Salley’s Beauty Supply store” to make up for not wearing a scarf or using a satin pillowcase. In the next living room sketch, at 8:10 am and 20 minutes after The Event, the women have tied Ashley’s hair up. They quickly acquiesce with Quinta noting that, “just because wearing a scarf is their idea of Blackness does not mean it has to be Ashley’s.” Both segments highlight everything that can go into taking care of a Black woman’s hair. Although Ashley is not initially supported, her friends come around to her ideas and validate her.

Sex and Romantic Love

The sketches that feature sex and romantic love highlight the various obstacles or hinderances, as well as steps, that Black women take themselves to meet their physical and emotional needs. The motivation behind who a Black woman chooses to give either her romantic love to or engage in sexual acts with is similar behind the motivation behind who Black women choose to lend their support to. African American women must deal with the years of mistreatment and abuse from the moment African women arrived in America all the way to the violence perpetrated today. All these incidents, recent and historical, color how a Black woman sees love and sexuality. It is irresponsible to analyze current choices without the knowledge of what informs those choices.

Sex and romantic love, specific to *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, are best exemplified in the recurring sketches *Inside a Black Lady’s Mind: Catcalling* and *Inside a Black Lady’s Mind:*

Hot Air Balloon, the standalone sketches, Negro League Groupies, Rome and Julissa, and On My Own (please note table 1.1). Love and sexuality in these sketches show the wide spectrum that both love and sexuality can encompass. Catcalling, and Negro League Groupies illustrate some of the sexual situations that Black women navigate. While Hot Air Balloon, Rome and Julissa, and On My Own feature some of the romantic situations that Black women navigate. Of course, these are not the only situations Black women traverse in this world, but it is a strong theme in some of them.

Inside a Black Lady's Mind: Catcalling features Gabrielle as Krystal. She is walking home when she finds a man waiting on her front stoop. Immediately she panics and we are introduced to the inside of her mind. Ashley plays the Taskmaster and dresses in a pink business suit with short, straight hair. Quinta plays Insecurity and dresses in a pink hoodie and sweats with unbrushed, long, and straight hair. Robin plays Turnt and dresses in a tight pink dress with curly pink hair. Krystal's insecurity immediately believes this man is a catcaller while her Taskmaster reminds her not to assume the worst of Black men like everyone else. Meanwhile, her Turnt feelings assumes that "we bad and niggas want to get at us." Each of her feelings waffle back and forth between not wanting to be catcalled and wanting to be noticed. Eventually, Krystal is worked into such a frenzy that she needs to go to the bathroom. Resolving to walk by the man she only makes it so far before he announces, "I see that ass." Krystal builds an argument in her head to retort to the man before he announces that her skirt is caught in her drawers.

Each of Kystal's feelings is depicted by both their names and their outfits. The Taskmaster is the leader of the group, dressed in a business suit because she is the most goal

oriented. Insecurity's appearance is disheveled, reflecting her frantic state. Turnt's appearance is as if she's going to a party ready to, well, turn up. This sketch also utilizes double-choice words like Turnt and nigga to describe one of Krystal's feelings and her catcaller. This is a tool to keep the sketch grounded in African American culture, thus continuing the Afrocentric lens. Looking into this Black woman's mind, this sketch is essentially antithesis. What should be is that if a woman wants to be noticed, she can put herself out there for potential reception. She should not be, however, harassed through catcalling. It is evident from the moment Krystal sees the man that this is a fear. Krystal's desire to be noticed but not harassed is a line that women walk daily when exploring their potential sex lives.

The next sketch that deals with sex is Negro League Groupies. This sketch is presented in black and white with a distorted film over it, signaling that it takes place in the past. Feather Atwood, played by Robin Thede is attempting to seduce Satchel Paige, "the woild's best pitcha." She reveals to him that she disguised herself as a waiter only for him to not order room service. She also urges him to drink from the coloreds only fountain. When Paige goes to retrieve the cup, her finds a photo of Feather in it. She declares this the world's first "thoist trap." Feather then introduces her friends Daffodil Dunham and Pearlina Teatree, played by Issa Rae and Natasha Rothwell. They ask him to take them to the Cotton Club on his dime, to which he eventually agrees. The sketch then fades in and out to reveal color. A title card reveals that we are at The National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2019. The exhibit is the Hall of Hustlery and Scamitude, where portraits of the first Negro League Groupies are displayed. A voice over then asks visiting patrons to leave their checking account number, routing number, and the last four digits of their social security numbers.

The use of color, the outfits, speech affects, and signs declaring colored spaces are all symbols that guide watchers through the two different timelines presented in this sketch. It becomes evident that this sketch is celebrating the women who are using this man for their own personal desires. They are put into a national museum with large portraits boasting of their achievement. This sketch could have ended in the past, but it purposely brought us to present time. This is to show an alternate reality than one we are often used to in real life. In real life, groupies, hustlers, and scammers are demonized. Here, Daffodil, Pearlina, and Feather are celebrated. Never mind that Satchel asks what he will tell his wife if she finds out.

Inside a Black Lady's Mind: Hot Air Balloon brings back Krystal, the Taskmaster, Insecurity, and Turnt. Her inner emotions are wearing the same outfits as before, although this time they all have long, straight hair and bangs. Krystal is also with a different man, Mark. He brings her to a hot air balloon which immediately causes her inner mind to panic. They believe hot air balloons are dangerous in general. They also then worry about Krystal's hair as she did not buy human hair for her wig. As the Taskmaster, Turnt, and Insecurity argue they realize that Mark has taken them to the botanical gardens, to the restaurant where they had their first date, and go get their nails done. With this information they realize that he is going to propose. Outside of Krystal's mind, Mark has gotten down on one knee but instead of a ring he presents her with a wig made by Beyonce's wig wizard to protect her hair. Krystal becomes so emotional that she proposes to Mark.

The second part of the Inside of Inside a Black Lady's Mind shows Krystal's growth through the three emotions presented in her mind. Their hair is styled and the same, noting that they are on the same page. Insecurity is not as insecure and Turnt has called down. They still

retain their same outfits noting that they still have their core character traits. If the Catcall sketch is what is when looking at antithesis, then Hot Air Balloon is what should be. The addition of Mark as a loving and caring partner has changed Krystal for the better. Taskmaster, Insecurity, and Turnt still worry but not about whether they will be noticed or accosted. Instead, they worry about falling out of an air balloon or their hair being set on fire. While these are legitimate worries, the difference is staggering. While Catcall's worries are alleviated by the catcaller noticing an embarrassing moment Krystal has, Hot Air Balloon's worries are alleviated by Mark demonstrating his love. In comparison, Krystal seems lighter and better when she is in the sketch with good romantic love versus a negative sexual experience. This does not mean a sexual encounter is more important than a romantic one. Rather, it notes that when a Black woman is treated in accordance with her wishes then her situation vastly improves.

Rome & Julissa is the next sketch that examines love. To do this, the sketch plays off Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and rap beef.

Rome & Julissa is the last sketch that I want to highlight to point out specific uses of functions of humor and African American rhetoric. This sketch is featured in the sex and romantic love theme. The sketch opens with a ping pong ball splashing into brown liquid filling a red solo cup. This immediately invokes party scenes from teen movies. The sketch continues this notion. We next see Robin Thede playing DJ Lawrence, the counterpart for Friar Laurence. Text on the screen lets us know that one side of the party has fans of Cardi B, while the other side of the party has fans of Nicki Minaj. The Bardigang are the Capulets, and the Barbz are the Montagues.

The room is bathed in strobing lights turning yellow, green and red. Everyone is dressed in casual attire. DJ Lawrence is wearing a black and yellow shirt, jacket, and bucket hat. When we meet Julissa, the counterpart for Juliet, she is wearing long, pink, wavy hair, and a cat-ears headband. She is also wearing a camo dress and carrying a book bag. She begins dancing to Cardi B's *Money* when she sees Rome walking down the stairs. The music fades for them and they move in slow motion, although partygoers move in regular speed in the background. Rome, the counterpart for Romeo, is wearing a white baseball cap backwards and a blue, green, and yellow block print hoodie. They kiss and everything speeds up again.

Ashley's character, unnamed, plays Rome's cousin the counterpart for Benvolio. Gabrielle's character, also unnamed, plays Julissa's cousin the counterpart for Tybalt. Gabrielle is dressed in overalls and a neon hoodie and bucket hat while Ashley is dressed in a striped t-shirt. The characters' outfits and the party atmosphere call forth stereotypical house party scenes. Other attendees are also wearing shorts, jeans, overalls, t-shirts, and other similar contemporary clothes. The choice to have Rome and Julissa's characters meet at a house party, be fans of current popular music, and wear modern clothes situates the sketch in the present-day. This choice is a direct contrast to the Shakespeare influences.

Setting is not the only blended aspect of this sketch. Language is blended as well. The characters engage in double choice words while also utilizing Shakespearean language. DJ Lawrence opens the sketch by proclaiming, "What ho fair nigga! Yo make merry go ham. If thou takest pics tag me on the gram. Me thinks I throwest the hardest parties. This next dope track goes out to gang Bardi." He then plays *Money*. This song is met with various agreeing calls such as "aye" and "oh." Throughout the sketch DJ Lawrence plays music and talks to the

partygoers. In this way, he becomes the caller, and they give the responses. Call and response is especially evident when DJ Lawrence, attempting to break up a fight between the cousins declares that to compromise he'll play Time's Greatest Female Rapper Iggy Azaela. This is met with a chorus of boos, the audience voicing their displeasure at Iggy.

The fight that DJ Lawrence breaks up, however, is between Gabrielle and Ashley's characters, also known as the cousins. This fight brings in verbal dueling, also known as signification and indirection.

Ashley: "Rome dear cuz have thy lost thy natural mind. She reps for she who writes not her own rhymes."

Gabrielle: "Cousin Julissa, what is this treasonous act? His fave, Onika simply does not slap.

Ashley: "House Bardi and Minaj on this concur. You got us fucked all the way up."

Gabrielle: "Okurrr."

Ashley: "Co-sign me not with that foul sound, I'll fight niggas. Don't end up in the ground."

This argument greatly utilizes indirection as the characters use vague words and dance around their point. Ashley calls out that Cardi B does not write her own music, taking shots at her credibility as a rapper. Gabrielle returns this jab by using African American Vernacular English, claiming that Nicki Minaj does not slap, or does not make good music. They emphasize their points through stylin' or their gestures. Ashley delivers her insults while rolling her neck and shaking her head. When she says "on this" she points to the ground signaling emphasis. Gabrielle also engages in body language pointing at Ashley as she says "okurrr." This sound made popular by Cardi B, and her hand gesture drive home the point that she agrees with Ashley.

Later, Rome and Julissa meet in a garage lit only by the stained-glass window of the garage door. They discuss their desire to be together, but how their “standoms” keep them apart. Rhyming schemes are used in every sentence in this sketch in order to reflect that this is a Shakespeare parody. I pay particular attention to the lines where Rome and Julissa decide to turn their backs on their families and be together. Rome tells Julissa, “So if we can’t be together alive, then,” Rome pauses dramatically before continuing” let’s get it poppin’ in death.” Julissa then replies, “Wait a minute, a suicide pact?” breaking the rhyme until Rome, after another pause, replies “something like that.” Throughout their conversation they engage in strategic pauses, rush particular moments of speech, and adjust their tone all to emphasize their points. Committing social suicide is a big deal and Rome pauses so that the gravity of their decision is affected. Julissa breaks the rhyme scheme out of shock, but Rome finishes it because he loves her. When Julissa admits that she loves him, “Fuck. I love thee. Okurrr” she is not rhyming. She is choosing something important and her tone and decision to not rhyme signals something important.

The last sketch for romantic love is On My Own. This sketch features Ashley as Denise and Patti LaBelle as herself. When we meet her, she is going through a breakup. Unbeknownst to the man, whenever Ashley goes through a breakup Patti LaBelle appears and sings her song, On My Own. Her ex-boyfriend is excited by the fact that Patti LaBelle has appeared, but Denise is annoyed. Patti continues to sing, summoning background singers and even taking a selfie with the ex-boyfriend. Eventually it is revealed that Patti will not leave until Denise accepts the breakup and sings along with her. Once Denise has accepted that she is on her own, Patti disappears. When her ex tries to get back with her, she rejects him and the sketch ends. This is a sketch that preaches the importance of self-love after the end of the romantic love. Not once do

we see Denise's ex-boyfriend do anything overtly malicious or mean. We are not meant to hate him. Still, we are meant to go on a journey with Denise as she learns to accept that a relationship is over and to love herself. This is exemplified by the fact that even when he wants to get back with her, she still rejects him because she knows that she is better on her own. Despite this being one sketch, it's healthy to see a Black woman be able to go through this cycle.

Examples of sex and romantic love also features in the living room segments. 12:00 pm, 4 hours and 10 minutes after *The Event*, features Gabrielle, Quinta, Ashley, and Robin discussing love. Gabrielle admits that she misses her ex-boyfriend Kevin even though he stole her car once. Robin reveals that she likes to date tall and confident men because they do not cheat, to which everyone responds that NBA players exist. Quinta also responds that she likes short kings, like men 5'6", while Ashley likes men with big feet not for dick reasons but so they can share shoes. This conversation continues at 2:10 pm, 4 hours and 20 minutes after *The Event*, where they discuss first dates. Ashley notes that married men like to hit on date "fat chicks," Gabrielle likes mature men, Robin likes dumb men, and Quinta likes her men home trained. The friends tease one another about their preferences but it is not malicious. Once again, these living room segments give us a moment of quiet, as opposed to the hectic nature of sketches, that still interacts with the themes. It also continues to push the idea that not all Black women are monolithic. Each friend has different taste in men, different ideas concerning sex and romantic love, and different motivations for why they pursue their desires.

A Black Lady Sketch Show uses Black Feminist Standpoint as a framework to center Black female voices. It also takes various functions of humor like satire, signification, double choice word, double consciousness, and antithesis to highlight instances of misogynoir and the

importance of intersectionality. This work yields three specific themes of trauma, support, and sex and romantic love. Each of these themes are present in the sketches and help provide a tool of resistance and coping for Black women to deal with racism in the present day. *A Black Lady Sketch Show* works through the intentional choices made regarding production and narrative to create an atmosphere that can affect the audience. This malleable text, then, can provide an outlet or solution to the discrepancies of how the world is versus how it is presented.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This was a rhetorical analysis that examined HBO's *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. I analyzed interviews to gain insight about the show's production and the intent of the messages encoded into each sketch. I then analyzed sketches, keeping in mind functions of humor and a Black Feminist Standpoint framework, to decode the meanings in the text. Three themes emerged after examination: trauma, support, and sex and romantic love. Ultimately, my analysis shows that *A Black Lady Sketch Show* uses functions of humor to create sketches that resist against and offer coping with systematic racism and sexism in the United States of America. The notion of using entertainment to get through negative actions and feelings is not new. Many sketches use humor amongst an affiliative group which is exemplified by recognizing double-consciousness and antithesis as rhetorical devices by making fun of themselves with parody, the writers and actors engage in self-deprecating humor to point out and frequently critique the status quo. There are encoded meanings in the sketches that are specific to experiences of systemic racism and sexism as seen through perspectives of Black women. Each sketch is also evidence why it is important to recognize Misogynoir, that Black women are forgotten in common discourse of both sexism and racism. They are asked to ignore their intersectional identities and operate as just a Black person or a woman. Overall, this show takes on subject matter in a satirical light. It takes tropes often associated with Black people in dominant (White) media, as well as touchstone moments often associated with African American culture and presents them in an authentic light. This authenticity is born from writers and actors who have lived these moments and who care about how Black women are depicted crafting each narrative with care

and doing their best to avoid insult. This depiction then calls into question the stereotypical depiction of African American life in other media throughout time.

A Black Lady Sketch Show is different from previous comedy sitcoms and sketch shows because it features the first all-Black writers' room and cast. I have already noted the importance of this fact in terms of representation. The diversity behind the camera allows the diversity in front of the camera to shine through, illustrated by the multifaceted lives that Black women lead throughout the course of the first season. Crafting authentic representation, not rooted in negative and harmful tropes, however, is not the only reason why hiring a Black director and writer's room is important. Black writers and Dime Davis, a Black director, draw on their own experiences to craft a narrative that is not offensive to what it means to be a Black woman in America. They can write from experience and treat each subject with care instead of as a gross stereotype. This allows any sketch that makes fun of their own culture to feel authentic, not cheap like someone laughing at us. Instead, we are laughing together.

Comedians like Moms Mabley and sketch shows like *In Living Color* broke significant ground in the world of comedy and for equality. *A Black Lady Sketch Show* builds off that ground by taking the next step in their hiring process to create a diverse writer's room and strive for representation behind the camera. This next step is crucial because it also affects the power dynamics between the cast and the writers. The writers have the power and vision to create the story that they deem worthy, and the actor's carry out that vision. The writers of each sketch can draw from their own lives and experiences for each sketch, which aligns with the same tenets of my framework that employs Black Feminist Standpoint about the validity and importance of Black women's experience. They parody groupies, Shakespeare plays, work experiences, and

other moments to point out the way life is versus how it should be. By bringing the affiliative group of Black women into the mainstream and the focus of the conversation, each sketch uses satire to note what the status quo. Each sketch then challenges those dynamics by subverting expectations. Humor is employed to present a “normal” situation, but each situation teaches a lesson. Rap culture is on par with Shakespeare, Black women must navigate sexual and romantic relationships while dealing with controlling images forced upon them and creating expectations. Black women live in a world where they are ignored, yet people benefit from their hard work. These are just a few examples of how each sketch creates a funny moment using African American rhetoric and functions of humor while also pointing out the racist and sexist situations that Black women must navigate. Essentially, the cast and crew can craft more authentic representations of African American women’s experiences because they have lived it and they oversee creating scenes, from set design to costumes to lighting and so on. The people who write sketches can handle issues of trauma, supporting your fellow African American community, sex, and romantic love with the care because the writers also exist in and live Black culture. The writers and crew are also on a more equal footing with the actors creating an atmosphere of comfortability.

Reflection About the Process

This thesis began with the self-reflexive statement acknowledging my own bias concerning *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. My enjoyment of the show’s humor is what led me to want to view it under a critical and scholarly eye. This became especially true with the news of Breonna Taylor’s murder, Megan Thee Stallion’s shooting, and other acts of violence committed against Black women. I knew that racism, sexism, and the violence existed. During a finite

amount of time, however, a spotlight also illuminated that the response to this violence does not always feel like justice. Current world events plus my own viewing pleasure crafted a question in my mind concerning how humor is used as a coping mechanism. The historic nature of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*'s all Black female cast and crew added to my assertion that this show's humor is also used as a tool of resistance.

Danielle Fuentes Morgan (2020) notes the importance of this power dynamic by pointing out that having a “writer” and “performer” in control of the joke changes their laughter to “revolutionary laughter.” This laughter becomes revolutionary because it “inhabits a tricky space of simultaneous delight and sorrow to inspire justice” (p. 9). This brand of humor works together to resist against systemic racism. Black women have control and power. They control the narrative and how they are portrayed. Black women's trauma is not fetishized during the first season. For example, consider how Trinity in *Invisible Spy*, Quinta's and Robin's characters in *Dance Biter*, and Ms. Miller in *Cool Handshake Teacher Needs a Win* never experience gruesome or excessive violence to convey each sketch's themes about trauma. Not putting the audience in positions to witness *graphic* trauma is the show's resistance against racism and sexism, while highlighting women's issues is the show's method of coping.

This point about portraying trauma is especially important to note when remembering that the sketch show airs on HBO, which has many shows featuring graphic imagery and language. More broadly, HBO is important to highlight for two reasons related to how the channel continues to champion authentic storytelling that has the potential to deviate from historical patterns of inauthentic and narrow representations. First, HBO already had established relationships with Black creators who had successful shows. For *The*, this meant that previous

attempts to pitch her show to networks did not go well until call with Issa Rae, who already had a working deal with HBO for *Insecure*. Theede pitched her vision to Rae and an HBO executive over an informal lunch and the series was immediately ordered (Copeland, 2020). This is significant because HBO is available through paid subscription, meaning that shows are not beholden to advertisers.

Second, HBO does not have to censor content like traditional network television has to. This means that *A Black Lady Sketch Show* could have leaned into grisly images. For example, Trinity is ignored, but she also could have been mistreated to her face to show that she was ignored. When Quinta and Robin lose their dance moves, the music becomes intense and the camera cuts away instead of allowing the audience to watch the women lose a part of themselves. We do not see Ms. Miller's ex-husband cheat on her. The writers and Dime Davis, director, made the conscious choice to get their points concerning trauma across in a way that did not belittle Black women.

Courtroom Kiki and The Joy are two examples of sketches that exemplify resistance and coping. Both sketches depict a group of Black women as happily existing in their lives. The inclusion of sketches where Black women are not the best friend, mammy figures, or other hurtful caricatures is authentic. Both sketches break the stereotypical box that Black women can be put in and provide a coping mechanism because of their hopeful nature. Both sketches offer a moment to imagine a world where Black women can revel in the revolutionary acts of being themselves and happy.

The inclusion of sketches like Purgatory Soul Food and Bad Bitch Support Group both act as a warning against Black women giving their support away blindly. In Purgatory Soul

Food's case, Gabrielle's and Quinta's characters are ultimately punished for trying to support a Black owned restaurant. They ignore all the warning signs of a long wait, half the menu being unavailable, and even their food being stolen, writing each off as the struggle that comes with supporting Black business. Their desire to support fellow community members is admirable. Through their conversation, Gabrielle and Quinta's characters acknowledge the difficulties Black business' face. Both characters talk about leaving a Yelp review and tip to contribute to the restaurant's success. They insist on looking past the various red signs of bad business practices because they feel responsible for helping the diner. This, however, ultimately backfires as they both are punished with purgatory.

The Bad Bitch Support Group is a front. Instead of being a space where Black women can vent about unrealistic beauty standards it is revealed to be a place where those impossible standards are thrust on Black women. The sketches' warnings can be read as resistance against racism and sexism because they are persuading Black women to protect their time, money, and investments. They are a testament to the value of Black women and the danger of believing in racist and sexist situations and ideology that cause Black women to forget their value. Lastly, Hotep Masterclass and Homecoming are also evidence of coping and resistance due to their willingness to engage in self-deprecating humor. Both sketches give space to laugh at the absurdity of Dr. Ali-Youngman's statements and beliefs. She believes things like the Original Sin is putting raisins in food and that Dyson vacuums are subliminally encouraging African Americans to kill their sons. Still, it is important to note that despite the silliness of her statements, Dr. Ali-Youngman, and therefore the sketch, still promote the importance of an Afrocentric lens. Despite her absurd and comical statements, Thede still uses Dr. Ali-Youngman

to center African American voices and the problems that the community faces. Despite joking that Original Sin is putting raisins in food, she also calls out that White people believe Original Sin is Black people's existence. This statement harkens back to the belief that Black people are not human or should be enslaved. The acknowledgement of these problems and the insistence of discussing them resists how the status quo labels Black people, and therefore, resists against systemic racism and sexism.

A Black Lady Sketch Show sketches that focus on sex and romantic love also work to demonstrate how humor can assist in resisting against systemic racism and sexism in the United States. The two sketches for *Inside a Black Lady's Mind*, *Catcalling* and *Hot Air Balloon*, work together to address the hard topic of sexual assault. These sketches act as resistance by not showing Krystal being harassed by the catcaller. Instead, the focus of the sketch is on Krystal, herself, and her emotions. The nature of HBO as a channel allows the space to show Krystal in a dangerous situation but the show does not take advantage of this. By having *Inside a Black Lady's Mind* as a recurring sketch, the cast and writers also invite comparison between the two sketches because Krystal does not have the same fears in each sketch. In the *Catcalling* sketch, she worries about being harassed and wanting to be noticed. In the *Hot Air Balloon* sketch, she worries about falling from a great height or having her hair caught on fire. Focusing on characters who are personifications of Krystal's internal emotions- *Turnt*, *Taskmaster*, and *Insecurity* – their outlandish reactions as Krystal's emotions allows for comedy while stressing the importance of wanting to be loved. Showing that Krystal's fears have changed in between sketches shows how much Black women's outlooks can be altered when they do not feel they are in danger of being sexually harassed. Sexual harassment is a traumatic topic. Thus, *Inside a*

Black Lady's Mind is an example of a sketch that fits into two themes. I, however, included this sketch in sex and romantic love because the trauma of harassment sets up the Catcalling sketch and is what helps the comparison to the Hot Air Balloon. In this case, the trauma acts as the exposition while the ideas concerning sex and romantic love are the focus.

The Negro League Groupies sketches offers evidence of resistance because it does not penalize or judge Feather, Daffodil, or Pearlina for being groupies or exploring their sex lives. This is evident by the second half of the sketch, when their photos are immortalized in a museum. Three Black women can flirt with a man and are not labeled as sluts. They make their intent clear that they want to go to New York, using Satchel for his money, but are not called gold diggers or welfare queens for taking advantage of someone wealthier than them. Just as having part of the sketch take place in the future is important for highlighting that they are not condemned, setting the beginning of the sketch in the past is also important. The writers could have set Pearlina's, Feather's, and Daffodil's story in any era of history but they chose during the Negro Leagues. The writer's chose to give these forward women the chance to explore what they wanted out of their sex lives during the past, and then use the present to celebrate them for it.

Lastly, Rome & Julissa are evidence of resisting against racism and sexism. The sketch is evidence of resistance because it blends the modern culture of rap beef and the Shakespearean world of Romeo and Juliet. The use of double-choice word and Shakespearean dialogue acts as world building and elevates Black culture to the reverence that Shakespeare is given. Racist stereotypes featuring violence and gangbanging surrounds rap culture. This sketch, however, depicts the rivalry between Cardi B and Nicki Minaj's fans without those associations. This sketch also acts as resistance because Rome and Julissa can be together. This story is not a

tragedy like Romeo and Juliet. Rome and Julissa do not commit physical suicide. Instead, to be together, they decide to commit social suicide. Both delete hashtags associated with Barbz and Bardigang from their Instagram bios and lose their followers. This, however, does not matter to them because their family's affiliations no longer matter to them. The sketch ends with them alive and together. Both Rome and Julissa can go through their relationship difficulties, survive their familial strife, and be in love.

The living room segments also offer evidence of resistance against and coping with systemic racism and sexism. *A Black Lady Sketch Show* uses functions of humor to craft the living room segments. The writers chose to have four Black women survive the end of the world. During one of their talks the friends discuss being free from White man getting ahead of them in the workplace, police brutality, and student loan debt. They discuss letting go of notable Black celebrities like Bill Cosby and R. Kelly because of their crimes. They survived adversity in their daily life and were also strong enough to survive the apocalypse. The living room segments also offers evidence of coping because the writers chose four Black women. They do not have to face the hardships alone. They are also given moments to break down. Ashley, Quinta, Robin, and Gabrielle do not have to be strong Black women the entire time. Towards the end of the sketch, they break down, worried about being alone, losing their loved ones, and running out of food. The living room segments present four different Black women as fully actualized human beings.

This conclusion stems from the Black Feminist Standpoint Framework. From the personal perspective, I am an African American woman. The purpose of Black Feminist Standpoint is to elevate the importance and validity of Black women's experiences. Thus, my personal experience navigating systemic racism in the United States of America is valid. *A Black*

Lady Sketch Show has been a balm during some of my most frustrating times. Each sketch and living room segment tapped into familiar memories and experiences I know well. As a member of the culture, I found a kinship with the information presented during each of the six episodes.

Various sketches left me feeling better about the violence that occurs in the world because they reminded me that I am not alone in feeling happy, sad, frustrated, or any other feeling I felt. The nature of production, as voiced through the interviews conducted with Robin Thede and the cast, made me feel hopeful. This show built on HBO's relationships with the Black community and established Black comedians to further opportunities afforded to Black people, but more specifically Black women. Seeing a show crafted by and for Black women that does not debase itself with harmful tropes and caricatures felt like a breath of fresh air. A door is opening that allows Black women to create whatever content they want that depicts the multi-faceted African American female experience.

Limitations and Further Research

Although my own insights served as a motivation and springboard for my research, I recognize the bias that exists. I did not come to this show with a clean slate, rather with opinions already formed about the four main actors and the sketches. I suggest that if anyone were to continue research into *A Black Lady Sketch Show* then someone who did not see the show as making space for Black women. The show's general rave reviews and Emmy nominations are examples of success. My use of Black Feminist Thought as a framework, however, acknowledges each Black woman's unique experience. It would be interesting to see an analysis of the sketches from the lens of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* reinforcing stereotypes or closing spaces. I approached my research under the mindset that I enjoyed the show and because it

worked well for me, a Black woman, then this was proof the show succeeded in its goal. As already stated, however, Black women are not monolithic. There might be a Black woman who this show did not successful prove that functions of humor can be used to resist and cope against systemic racism.

Another limitation is that I performed a rhetorical, textual analysis of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. While I did acknowledge interviews conducted by Robin Thede and the crew, I still might have missed the mark in interpreting their work. This also leads into the limitation of my themes. There are other avenues such as identity or crime and justice that I did not address as predominant themes. These themes that I did not choose existed in some of the sketches that I chose as well as some of the sketches that I did not choose. Some of my favorite sketches did not make the cut for analysis and some sketches were cut from my analysis. This was because, on further reflection, I felt the sketch did not utilized the aforementioned functions of humor or the themes that I chose were more expositional, just used to set up the sketch.

I did not choose to address some sketches because they seemed to be funny for the sake of being funny. An example of this is one of my favorite sketches, *The Basic Ball*. This sketch riffs on ball culture in the queer community to show stereotypical looks of grilling dads or those with clinical depression. Although clinical depression could fit into the theme of trauma, I did not decode a commentary on this message. *No Fun Threesome* deals heavily with sex, a theme I do discuss, but it also does not feature further commentary on how society treats Black women. Sketches like *Get the Belt*, also one of my favorites, concerns relationships between Black children and their parents. This relationship could foster an important theme but was not

reflected in other sketches. Ultimately, the sketches I chose to analyze fit my themes, and my themes were chosen in response to my method.

In the case of future research, I suggest either examining other sketches in season one, broadening themes, and examining season two. I did not explore every sketch and the potential for themes is boundless. I based each theme based on my method, noticing which answered the neglect of Black women in both sexism and racism. I picked each sketch from how prominent the theme played into the overall narrative of the sketch. That does not mean other sketches did not look at trauma, support, sex, or romantic love. It only means there are more themes to be looked at.

A comparison of sketches in season one and season two might also be beneficial for future research. This would include noting both in front and behind the camera changes, structural changes to sketches, and so on. This research would do well in determining whether *A Black Lady Sketch Show* sticks to the formula that attained acclaim and awards, improves the formula that attained acclaim or awards, or worsens the formula that attained acclaim or awards. A comparison of season one and two would also be useful in seeing if the goal behind the text of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* changes and how it interacts with more recent current events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic that interrupted season two's production. This could include interviews with the cast and crew about how they made the show and their motivations for each choice. The last idea for further study is a reception analysis. This could include a focus group to determine audience reception. A study on audience reaction could offer additional insight into *A Black Lady Sketch Show*'s success in using functions of humor to resist against and cope with systemic racism and sexism. Audience perception can add additional layers of what the audience is willing

to accept and if they decoded the same messages presented in each text. An audience analysis can also determine the success of using humor to cope with and resist against systemic racism and sexism depending on the ethnic makeup of those involved.

Conclusion

A Black Lady Sketch Show has incredible potential and could be on its way to cementing its place not only in sketch show history, but in Black culture. It provides hilarity in its absurd and quiet moments. It also works to provide moments of coping and resistance against systematic racism and sexism in the United States of America. The show, itself, is both historic and political in nature. By casting four Black women as the main characters, Dime Davis as the show's director, and other Black women as writers and secondary cast, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* makes various statements. The first of these statements concerns opportunity. Thede rejected HBO's suggestion of White, male creatives and chose to hire Black women who were not attached to projects.

The second statement the show makes concerns power. By having Black women write the sketches and pull from their lived experiences, the show changes everyday laughter to revolutionary laughter. The third statement the show makes concerns authentic representation. The show is called *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and not *the* Black lady sketch show purposefully. Hopefully, what Thede described as a "badge of honor" will become more commonplace. There should be more because Black women are not monolithic. Despite the intention of displaying various sexualities, socioeconomic statuses, beliefs, skin tones, etc. this show does not encompass everything Black women are and can be. As noted in her interview with *Variety*,

Thede wants everyone to feel supported not as if they are the butt of the joke (Countryman 2020). With luck, this goal was obtained.

This show is significant in a variety of ways. Concerning representation behind the camera, it allows the opportunity for Black girls and women to see themselves as writers, producers, and directors. Concerning representation in front of the camera, it allows the opportunity for Black girls and women to see moments of their lives displayed positively on screen, whether that is through size, outfits, career choices, familiar situations, or friendship. This show is also significant in that it allows a space for Black women to be themselves. We can fall in love or explore a sexual relationship like Krystal. We can break down and then be built back up like Ms. Miller. We can lament being ignored at work like Trinity and celebrate our sisterhood like in Courtroom Kiki. The show's use of humor gives space for the confrontation of painful tropes and historical experiences. It gives space for coping and resisting racism and sexism that Black women face. The last way *A Black Lady Sketch Show* is significant is because it shows the power of using an Afrocentric lens, focusing the Black woman's experience, and the importance of humor. Although this is one show with a specific focus, it is an example of how humor generally can be used to cope with and resist against systemic racism and sexism.

I hope that this show is successful in everything that the text is attempting to accomplish. I hope each sketch offers both quiet and loud moments that both illustrates and offers peace when confronting traumatic moments. I hope each sketch offers both quiet and loud moments that illustrates all the ways that Black women lend support to others and the importance of returning that support. I hope that each sketch offers both quiet and loud moments that does not demonize falling in love or having sex. Alternatively, I also hope that if someone did not see

themselves in this show or subscribe to the brand of satirical humor presented then there is another Black lady sketch show that will be for them. I do not want this to be the first and last of shows of this nature.

Regarding the production narrative, it would be good to see *A Black Lady Sketch Show* listed as good representation down the road. With its critiques acknowledged, this show could act as a steppingstone to continued improvement of how African American woman are portrayed in media. This in turn can affect how African American women are treated in real life, in their daily lives.

The last thing I want to point out in relation to the making of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* and its importance is the idea of power. Even if someone disagrees with the portrayal of African Americans on *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, I want to acknowledge the importance of who is crafting the stories in each sketch and segment on *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. Black women hold the power on this show. Black women are determining the content and pace of each story told. Black women are drawing on varied backgrounds and putting themselves into the work that they are creating. Black women are deciding which details are important and what they want to share. This revolutionary act is occurring all while trying to invoke joy through the medium of sketch comedy. This revolutionary act is letting African American women the space and opportunity to be free to tell their stories. Eventually, we may get to a place where African American depicted both on television and African American women in real life are not asked to choose between being Black and being women. Eventually, we may reach a time when African American women can be unapologetically and authentically themselves, and they are recognized for it.

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APPENDIX: TABLE

Table 1: Themes and Sketches

Trauma	Support	Sex and Romantic Love
Invisible Spy: Part 1	Hotep Masterclass	A Black Lady's Mind: Catcalling
Invisible Spy: Part 2	Hotep Homecoming	A Black Lady's Mind: Hot Air Balloon
Dance Biter	Purgatory Soul Food	Negro League Groupies
Cool Handshake Teacher Needs a Win	Bad Bitch Support Group	Rome & Julissa
	Courtroom Kiki	
	The Joy	