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Love, Drama, and Tears: Hip Hop Feminism, Blackness, and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta

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LOVE, DRAMA, AND TEARS:
HIP HOP FEMINISM, BLACKNESS, AND LOVE AND HIP HOP ATLANTA

by

Patrick Bennett

B. S. Georgia Southern University, 2012

A Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Masters of Arts Degree

Department of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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RESEARCH REPORT APPROVAL

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Introduction

In recent years, scripted television has been joined by a more “realistic” look into peoples’ lives, namely, reality television. This genre of television supposedly gives viewers an unmediated glimpse into how real people live. The “realness” of reality television invokes controversy by providing a voyeuristic look into people’s lives at the risk of exploitation (Murray & Ouellette, 2009). For example *Kid Nation* (Foreman, 2007), a show about children living without parents, was quickly condemned by critics and viewers for potential child abuse (Grossman, 2007). Similarly, the beauty competition *The Swan* (2004) ignited controversy by turning “ugly ducklings” into “beautiful women” (Ponzer, 2010, p. 93) and reinforcing hegemonic notions of beauty. Amid such controversy, reality television’s popularity has been argued to be a result of its reinforcement of dominant beliefs about race, class, beauty, and love that are presented on shows such as *The Bachelor* (Fleiss, 2002-present), *The Real Housewives* (Dunlap, 2006-present), and *America’s Next Top Model* (Banks, Mok, & Dominici, 2003-present) (Ponzer, 2010). Furthermore, the controversy surrounding reality television helps drive interest and the continued production of reality television shows.

As the genre has matured, shows that offer insight into communities that are underrepresented have become common. From my perspective, shows that depict the lives of African Americans are indicative of this trend and offer opportunities to exploit marginalized communities for ratings and drama. One network that has taken considerable advantage of this is VH1; first, with the success of *Flavor of Love* (Abrego, 2006-2008) and its spinoffs, and more recently with shows such as *Basketball Wives* (Emerson & O’Neal, 2010-present) and *Love and Hip Hop* (Arahamson & Scott-Young, 2011-present). With these shows in mind, I believe that VH1 intentionally ignites controversy to increase ratings and profit. For instance, the excessive

amount of fighting on *Basketball Wives* among Black women led to a boycott of the show, which prompted creator Shaunie O'Neal to promise less violence in its next season (Gregory, 2012; McCorquodale, 2012). This use of violence among women of color serves as a formula for success for the network that problematically reinforces the stereotype of the angry Black woman (Goff, 2012). Like *Basketball Wives*, *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* (Arahamson & Scott-Young, 2012-present) also highlights this trend and serves as the topic of my project. *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* has become more popular than the original *Love and Hip Hop*, garnering an average rating of 3.3 million viewers per episode compared to the 2.2 million viewers of its predecessor (Landrum, 2013). Its most recent season ended as the number one basic cable summer series among adults and women 18-49 (Futoncritic, 2013).

Love and Hip Hop Atlanta is an important reality television show to deconstruct because it brings representations of Black femininity and Black masculinity together under the umbrella of Hip Hop. Each cast member is either an aspiring Hip Hop or R&B artist, an established veteran of the Hip Hop industry, or a key person that influences the lives of the main characters. The significance of Hip Hop to the show cannot be underestimated since Hip Hop has become one of the central means to deconstruct socio-political issues in Black America, such as gang violence and the crack epidemic (Dyson, 2007). However, within both communication and Hip Hop studies, there has been little critical examination of the merger between Hip Hop and reality television, or what those merged representations mean for the Black community. Furthermore, the popularity of *Love Hip and Atlanta* among African American viewers (Abrams, 2012) highlights the importance of critiquing the show to analyze representations of Blackness and theorize how such representations impact perceptions of the Black community. Thus, how Hip Hop and Black culture are represented in reality television is significant in relation to larger

conversations addressing how Black people are represented via media at large. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to further discourse on Hip Hop, media representation, and how Hip Hop can paradoxically represent, influence, and transform Black culture.

As an avid viewer of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, I am complicit in the success and continuation of the negative stereotypes of the Black community trumpeted on the show. I find such imagery troubling. Yet, there is an escapist element in my compulsion to watch the show. For example, the antics of Stevie J in his relationships with Joseline and Mimi provide a primer on how not to treat women, while laughing at the cluelessness of the two women is entertaining. I laugh and enjoy the drama that is presented on screen, as a form of escape from everyday life. Therefore, I am drawn to critique the show because of its popularity within the Black community, but I also want to understand my own enjoyment. However, as a Black man, what *Love and Hip Atlanta* represents also concerns me in regards to how the show portrays Black femininity, Black masculinity, and Black relationships.

The research questions guiding my study are:

1. What does Hip Hop feminism reveal about representations of Black females and males on reality television?
2. How do Black men exert their male privilege in the Hip Hop reality television sphere?
3. How do Black women subvert male privilege in the Hip Hop reality television sphere?

To answer these questions, I use Hip Hop feminism (Morgan, 1999; Pough, 2003) as theory to dissect the portrayals of the characters on the show using textual analysis (Brennen, 2013).

Generally speaking, Hip Hop is a space where male privilege is dominant and women are objectified in videos and lyrics (Fitts, 2008; Oware, 2009). Since I identify as a Black male Hip Hop fan, Hip Hop feminism exposes my complicity in the objectification of Black females and

offers a theoretical means to explore how Hip Hop shapes representations of Black identities and relationships. Thus, this project is personal as a way to self-reflexively examine myself as a complicit viewer. This project is also political as a way to explore how Black females can access agency in the realm of Hip Hop which I feel has largely been robbed from them by Hip Hop. In this context, I align my views with Peoples (2008) and Morgan (1999) who discuss how Hip Hop can be a political, social, and cultural tool to reclaim Black women's and men's voices.

The overarching purpose of this project is to mobilize Hip Hop feminism (HHF) to deconstruct how *Love and Hip Atlanta* paradoxically reinforces misogynistic and stereotypical understandings of Black males and females. First, I examine the historical and contemporary representations of Black females and males in film and television. Next, I summarize the plotline of season one of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* and briefly introduce the characters. Then, I define Hip Hop feminism as theory in relation to Black feminist thought and situate textual analysis as my method. Utilizing Hip Hop feminism, I then deconstruct *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* to expose how the show privileges Black males in Hip Hop and reinforces stereotypical caricatures of Black women while simultaneously offering a site of agency for Black women in Hip Hop. Finally, I offer suggestions for progressive representations of Black people in Hip Hop reality television shows and process through my complicity as an avid fan of the show.

Critical Intercultural Communication and Critical Media Studies

Critical Intercultural Paradigm

Situated in the critical intercultural paradigm, this project examines identity and power in regards to media representation. Halualani, Mendoza, and Drzewiecka (2009), drawing from Martin and Nakayama (2000), define a critical perspective “as one that addresses issues of macro contexts (historical, social, and political levels), power, relevance, and the hidden and

destabilizing aspects of culture” (p. 18). Additionally, a critical perspective “views culture as a site of struggle for various meanings . . . where competing groups have competing meanings and in those competitions the boundaries of culture are negotiated” (Martin, Nakayama, & Flores, 2002, p. 10). Furthermore, according to Martin and Nakayama (2010), critical scholars view culture as “a battleground- a plan where multiple interpretations come together, but a dominant force always prevails” (p. 66). Jointly, these commitments lend themselves to critical scholars studying subjective, material reality and emphasizing the contextual elements of communication and representation (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Critical intercultural scholarship interrupts and interrogates domination by fostering resistance to oppressive power structures (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). Thus, critical scholars aim to make the invisible, visible, which entails revealing the hidden power structures that exist in culture (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). To do so, deconstruction is often the centerpiece of critical intercultural scholarship. Communication, mediated or otherwise, is a space that is not ideologically neutral and therefore is worthy of deconstruction. As such, critical scholars often center ideological struggles, and the media is a main distributor and producer of ideology, particularly dominant ideology (Hall, 2003; Ott & Mack, 2010). Via media, dominant ideologies are oftentimes reproduced, processed unconsciously, and typically frame our understandings of how the world works (Hall, 2003); therefore, media and popular culture are quite worthy of critical intercultural critique.

Critical media scholars’ particular goals include examining how media and popular culture construct and maintain relationships of power (Ott & Mack, 2010). As such, critical media scholars often focus on power and representation in relation to gender, class, race, etc. (Dines & Humez, 2003; Ott & Mack, 2010). Media representations are unique spaces for

analysis because dominant ideologies are presented and reinforced while framed as mere entertainment (Moon, 1996; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). Working against discourses that frame media and popular culture as mere entertainment, the next section discusses representations of race in television and film from a critical standpoint.

Representations of Race in Media and Popular Culture

For this study, I confine my review of literature to television and film because both reach wide audiences and are salient in the everyday lives of most people. In addition, there is a considerable amount of research that addresses representations of Blackness in television and film that serves as the foundation of my study. Focusing on race, Hall (2003) addresses the role of media in his discussion of how race relations are depicted on television shows. Hall reveals how shows that highlight the “race problem” (p. 91) engage in unconscious racism via their unquestioned assumptions that Black people are the source of race relation problems. Similarly, Hunt (2005) discusses the role of television in the meaning-making process of our ideas about race and argues that mediated representations of race are central to how Americans view race. It should be noted that race in U.S. American society is often presented along the Black-White binary, which further marginalizes other racial groups in conversations addressing race and ideology (Hunt, 2005).

In the last decade, media scholarship has become increasingly more critical by focusing on how media and popular culture reproduce dominant racial ideologies. Critical media scholars have examined media, specifically film and television, to expose how representations reaffirm notions of Whiteness and post-race discourse (Chidester, 2008; Espisto, 2009; Joseph, 2009). For example, Joseph (2009) and Thornton (2011) discuss colorblindness in *America's Next Top Model* and *Psyche* respectively. Joseph (2009) argues that Tyra Banks' use of a colorblind

philosophy fosters her success as a Black female in a White-dominated industry. Thornton (2011) explains how comedy shows such as *Psyche*, reinforce colorblindness through the comedic friendship of a Black and a White male. Chidester (2008) also discusses race and representation in *Friends*, and argues that the show keeps Whiteness at the center by excluding characters of color from the circle of friends. These examples illustrate how representations of race are used to privilege Whiteness and how dominant ideologies of race and racism are consciously and/or unconsciously reproduced in media texts. Juxtaposed against the overarching normalization of Whiteness in media, the portrayals of Black culture and Black males and females in particular are highlighted in the following sections.

Black Culture in the Media

Black people have been on television and movie screens since the inception of both forms of media. Gray (1995) explains how representations of Blacks on television are located within relations of power that limit the realm of possibilities for Black people. For example, Black people are often limited to stereotypical representations such as being angry, lazy, and materialistic (Tyree, 2011). Similarly, Bogle (2001) maps how negative racial stereotypes have permeated media since the inception of film and television. Certainly, both have been vehicles that propagated negative minstrel representations of Black people (Feagin, 2000). An early television show, *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1953), was popular among White audiences for its depiction of “Black talk” and the portrayal of an Uncle Tom character (Hunt, 2005). However, *Amos 'n' Andy* was largely offensive to Black people because it reinforced White American stereotypes of Blacks as unintelligent, lazy, crooks, and/or clowns (Hunt, 2005).

Similarly, since the advent of film, Black people have been characterized negatively in relation to White people as the dominant racial group. Historically, the available scripts for Black

people in film were the tom, coon, mammy, tragic mulatto, and Black brute (Bogle, 2001). These scripts still resonate in contemporary representations of Blackness in updated, more sophisticated, ways. For example, Jackson (2006) describes the tragic mulatto script present in *School Daze* (1988) in relation to colorism. Colorism refers to the privileging of lighter skin and positions lighter individuals with White, European features as superior to their darker counterparts (Hunter, 2005). Mapping the complexity of media representation, Jackson (2006) explains, “*School Daze* suggests that ‘jigaboos’ (dark-skinned Blacks) are those who feel the strongest connection to African ancestral roots or at least strong Black cultural consciousness, while the ‘wanna-bes’ (light-skinned) Blacks just want to be White” (p. 35).

It was not until the 1970s, when shows such as *The Jeffersons* (Duchelon & Leavitt, 1975-1985) and *Good Times* (Lear, 1974-1979) aired, that primarily Black casts emerged on screen. In film, the 1970s were known for Black exploitation films, named for Hollywood’s attempt to profit off of Black audiences (Maynard, 2000). These movies, rather than functioning as an empowering tool for African Americans to fight “The Man,” served to undermine radical individuals and/or disenfranchised groups of African Americans through stereotypical characterizations of urban life.¹ For example, *Shaft* (1971) reinforces stereotypes of Black males as hypersexual and represents Shaft as a sex machine that engages in sexual acts with several Black and White women (Henry, 2002). Such depictions, still present today, reinforce historical scripts of Black males as brutes who are unable to control their sexuality.

Taking film and television into account *The Cosby Show* (Carsey & Warner, 1984-1992), unlike the Black shows of the seventies, sparked a great deal of public discourse addressing the representation of Black people and Blackness (Gray, 1995; Jhally & Lewis, 2005). *The Cosby*

¹Articulated in Black culture, “The Man” refers to an omnipresent group of Whites who prevent Black Americans from achieving success in U.S. American society.

Show positioned Blackness in a new capacity that cut across various lines of race, gender, and class (Gray, 1995). For instance, despite accolades including three Golden Globes and six Primetime Emmy awards (IDMb, 2013), criticism has been directed at the show for not representing actual Black people, for promoting colorblindness among White people, and ultimately encouraging “enlightened racism” (Jhally & Lewis, 2005, p. 74). With a similar outlook, Bogle (2001) describes the 1980s as the “era of Tan” (p. 286) in which Black identities were manipulated to appeal to White audiences. For example, interracial buddy films *Lethal Weapon* (Silver & Donner, 1987), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (Efland & Hackford, 1981), and *48 Hours* (Conte, Gordon, Silver, & Hill, 1982) engaged in the erasure of Blackness by ignoring cultural identity to appeal to White audiences (Bogle, 2001).

In the early 1990s, there was an explosion of Black television shows and movies. Street films such as *New Jack City* (McHenry, Jackson, & Peebles, 1991), *Juice* (Heyman & Dickerson, 1992), and *Boyz in the Hood* (Nicolaidis & Singleton, 1991) depicted the dangers of urban life while speaking to the relevance and struggle of Black lives. Meanwhile, though *The Cosby Show* was still popular, shows such as *A Different World* (Carsey & Warner, 1987-1993), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Quincy & Borowitz, 1990-1996), and *Family Matters* (Miller & Boyett, 1989-1998) debuted and became mainstays on network television. For instance, FOX used Black shows such as *Martin* (Bowman, 1992-1997), *Living Single* (Bower, 1993-1998), *New York Undercover* (Harrell & Kern, 1994-1998), and *Roc* (Fisch, 1991-1994) to help substantiate the network as a legitimate contender with CBS, NBC, and ABC for ratings and Black viewership (Zook, 2003). Yet these shows were eventually cancelled and replaced, as the network moved toward attracting a White audience (Zook, 2003). New networks such as UPN

and WB repeated this process of centering and then canceling predominantly Black shows, leaving few television shows in the 2000s with predominantly Black casts (Zook, 2003).

Today's fragmented television landscape has invited more Black characters on reality television and daytime television, but less on primetime television, with few Blacks in starring roles (Braxton & James, 2013). The absence of Black shows on broadcast networks speaks to how Black shows have been pushed to the genre of reality television, where I believe negative stereotypes of Black culture are exploited for ratings. I argue in alignment with Ponzer (2010) that Black males and females are abused in reality television productions by way of the casting and editing control that producers and creators have, in combination with the small number of Black people employed as directors and producers (McCoy, 2011; Thompson, 2011). The next section explores how Black males in particular are represented, dehumanized, and exploited in media productions.

Representations of Black Masculinity

As previously discussed, Black people have historically been dehumanized by White stakeholders in the media (Hall, 2003; Gray, 1995). Traditionally, representations of Black masculinity have been offered by White observers of urban life who have characterized "black men as failures who are psychologically dangerous, violent, sex maniacs" (hooks, 1992, p. 89). Problematic representations of Black masculinity that speak to hooks' (1992) concern include the previously mentioned Black exploitation films such as *Shaft* (Freeman & Parks, 1971), *The Mack* (Bernhard & Campus, 1973), and *Superfly* (Shore & Parks, 1972), alongside more recent films such as *The Green Mile* (Darabont & Valdes, 1999), *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (Lovine & Sherdian, 2005) and *Django Unchained* (Sher & Tarantino, 2012). Take for example, Glenn and Cunningham's (2009) critique of Black masculinity in *The Green Mile* (1999). Glenn and

Cunningham (2009) argue that Coffey, the main character in the film, reinforces the Uncle Tom caricature by soothing Whites' feelings about his dire situation, instead of focusing his energy on himself. They also argue that Coffey typifies the magical Negro who uses his resources to help his White counterparts at his own expense (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009).

For Black males, film generally caters to three primary representations: the tom, the coon, and the Black brute (Bogle, 2001). As previously noted in *The Green Mile* (1999) (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009), the tom is a deferential man who remains submissive and cheery in front of White people (Jackson, 2006). By comparison, the coon is a comedic, loyal character who offers entertainment to Whites (Jackson, 2006). Lastly, the Black brute is a savage character, who is violent and targets White women in particular (Jackson, 2006). These characters still hold sway on both Black and White consciousness and are still drawn upon to victimize Black males (hooks, 1992; Jackson, 2006). Jackson (2006) elaborates further on the continuation of these historical caricatures in his description of the Black scripts that overwhelmingly characterize today's popular media. According to Jackson (2006), Black scripts reflect ideological, unnatural ideas about Black masculinity that permeate contemporary understandings of who Black men are. The six primary scripts for the Black masculine body are: 1) exotic and strange, 2) sexual, 3) violent, 4) incompetent and uneducated, 5) exploitable, and 6) innately incapacitated (Jackson, 2006).

Addressing Jackson's (2006) Black masculine scripts in more detail, the exotic and strange script presents Black masculine bodies as foreign. The sexual script presents Black males as hypersexual freaks with high sexual prowess. The violent script presents Black males as a site of innate criminality. The incompetent and uneducated script presents Black males as incapable of success and providing for their families. The exploitable script presents Black males as abused

for monetary and cultural gain by dominant institutions. Lastly, the innately incapacitated script presents Black males as perpetually stigmatized in U.S. American society. Jointly, all of these scripts juxtapose Black masculinity against White masculinity which is consistently scripted as virtuous, safe, educated, and successful (Jackson, 2006).

Overall, the negative caricatures and scripts imposed on representations of Black masculinity limit what Black males can envision their lives to be and who audiences imagine them to be. Likewise, negative representations of Black masculinity position the Black male body as Other which does not allow for the fluidity of identities or characteristics (Jackson, 2006). Taylor and Johnson (2011), using Jackson's (2006) scripts, call for new scripts that allow for less monolithic representations and more fluid, holistic representations of Black masculinity. Focusing on the movie *Stomp the Yard* (2007), Taylor and Johnson (2011) discover three additional scripts used to frame Black males at the intersections of race, gender, and class: the ghetto protagonist, bourgeois protagonist, and the bourgeois antagonist (Taylor & Johnson, 2011). Instead of serving as potentially liberating scripts for Black males, these added scripts continue to undermine the complexity of Black manhood through an either/or framework (Taylor & Johnson, 2011).

Negative caricatures and scripts pertaining to Black masculinity cut across all forms of media. However, the primary focus in this paper is television. In the early 1950s, Nat King Cole became the first Black person and Black male to host his own show (McDonald, 1992 as cited in Petin, 2011). However, his show was cancelled despite having high ratings because sponsors would not support a Black man's show (McDonald, 1992 as cited in Petin, 2011). As previously mentioned, it was not until the 1970s that Black males appeared in prominent lead roles in shows such as James Evans in *Good Times* (1974-1979) and George Jefferson in *The Jeffersons* (1975-

1985). However, these comedies were arguably just updated versions of the historically rooted caricatures that Bogle (2001) describes. For example, actors such as J.J. Walker and Sherman Hemsley were often regarded more highly for their comedic timing than their intellectual ability (Berry, 1992).

Perhaps, no larger figure shaped perceptions of Black masculinity on television than Bill Cosby on *The Cosby Show*. As previously noted, *The Cosby Show* has been critiqued for various issues (Collins, 2004; Jhally & Lewis, 2005; Gray, 1995). For example, Gray (1995) explains that *The Cosby Show* “often failed even to comment on the economic and social disparities and constraints facing millions of African Americans outside the middle class” (p. 81). While such criticisms diminished some of *The Cosby Show*’s positive impact, the show did open doors for other African American shows situated around middle-class families, such as *Family Matters* (& Boyett, 1989-1998) and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Quincy & Borowitz, 1990-1996). However, these shows were ensemble casts, meaning that multiple actors shared screen time, and they reinforced patriarchal norms of the Black man as the head of the family (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Therefore, such shows emphasized singular notions of Black male identity at the expense of Black women (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Other shows created by Black producers such as Steve Harvey, Jamie Foxx, and the Wayans brothers dealt little with Black issues such as racial profiling and, therefore as Zook (2003) explains, had “black-looking shows without the hassle of black complexity” (p. 592). Furthermore, these shows followed mainstream themes such as family or marital issues that were typical of sitcoms, and ignored issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality (Zook, 2003).

In today’s contemporary television landscape, Black male characters are often at the margins of broadcast television, relegated to cable TV, or confined within reality TV (Consoli,

2010; Ponzer, 2010). These outlets for entertainment are where Bogle's (2001) historical caricatures and Jackson's (2006) scripts emerge readily. Speaking to the omnipresence of such imagery is Collins (2004) who explains that images of Black males as pimps and hustlers reduce them to physical beasts that are inherently promiscuous and violent. For example, films such as *Hustle and Flow* (Allain, Singleton, & Brewer, 2005) and *Idlewild* (Roven & Barber, 2006) and shows such as *Flavor of Love* (Abrego, 2006-2008) and *From G's to Gents* (King & Foxx, 2008-2009) speak to Collins' (2004) assertion via their Black male characters. However, stereotypical representations of Black masculinity have also been challenged in television shows such as *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), where gay Black characters star in prominent roles (Collins, 2004). This seems to indicate, to a certain degree, that the absence of Black males in broadcast television is being addressed by more nuanced portrayals on cable television. From my perspective, the same resistant presence of Black male characters is not true for reality TV shows, which overwhelmingly use negative caricatures, scripts, and stereotypes pertaining to Black masculinity to attract viewers and heighten ratings. Similar to Black males, Black women have also been marginalized and ridiculed in media.

Representations of Black Femininity

Likened to the maltreatment and misrepresentation of Black males in media, Black females have often been ignored or relegated to the background (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Goff, 2012). Historically, Black females have been conceptualized in film and television as the: mammy, tragic mulatto, or jezebel (Bogle, 2001). The mammy is presented as an obedient servant, who cheerfully takes care of White children at the expense of her own children (Jackson, 2006). The tragic mulatto is a biracial Black and White woman caught in and troubled by the Black-White binary (Bogle, 2001). The jezebel is presented as a sexual, seductive temptress who

uses her looks and sex appeal to get what she wants (Jackson, 2006). More contemporary scripts such as the welfare mother, freak, gold digger, diva, and dyke also negatively permeate representations of Black women's lives (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The welfare mother presents Black women as breeders who have children for economic gain (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The freak is a hypersexual Black woman who has little emotional attachment to her sexual partners (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The gold digger uses sex to gain material and social status. The diva is presented as a high maintenance, independent woman with an attitude (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The dyke is presented as a woman who dislikes men and competes with men for power (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). These contemporary scripts that control representations of Black womanhood are readily found in film and television today.

One show that highlights these contemporary scripts is *Girlfriends* (Akil & Grammer, 2000-2008). For example, Toni's character is described as a "woman who seeks men to take care of her financially," while Joan is a "successful but unmarried lawyer" (Boylorn, 2008, p. 418). These two characters represent the scripts of the gold digger and diva. Films have also profited off the vast proliferation of these scripts. Take for example *Losing Isaiah* (1995), where the Black mother abandons her child for the allure of crack cocaine (Collins, 2004). Similarly in *Daddy's Little Girls* (Perry & Cannon, 2007), the Black mother is portrayed as a drug addicted, welfare mother who beats her children and views them as her meal ticket. Speaking to the gold digger script, in *Why Did I Get Married* (2007), Keisha's character uses her pregnancy via a professional football player as a means for material success (Files-Thompson, 2014). Taken together, these contemporary scripts plague representations of Black femininity and influence perceptions of Black womanhood.

According to Smith-Shomade (2002), the most salient of these scripts has been the mammy caricature. From *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick & Fleming, 1939) to *The Help* (2011), mammies have been visible on television and in film. 1970s shows such as *Good Times* (1974-1979), *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), and *Gimme a Break!* (Cooper, Lachman, & Parker, 1981-1987), all have examples of the mammy (Smith-Shomade, 2002). For example, Nell in *Gimme a Break!* plays a housekeeper who serves as a mother figure for White children whose mom has died. Such representations present Black women in servitude (i.e., as maids and/or nannies) which limits the possibilities of who and what Black women can be (Smith-Shomade, 2002). More recently, Tyler Perry's Madea character has brought the mammy into the 21st century combining maternal characteristics with an edge for violence (Merrit & Cummings, 2014).

Film franchises, such as Tyler Perry's Madea, script Black women in stereotypical characters and objectify Black female bodies for the pleasure of Black men and White audiences (Merrit & Cummings, 2014). This objectification of Black women is embodied in White, patriarchal ideology and discourse that serve to mute Black female voices and undermine Black female agency (Collins, 2004). Boylorn (2008) describes the current representations of Black femininity as being situated on binaries in which Black women are highly educated or uneducated, sexy or ugly, and ambitious or listless. Moreover, negative stereotypes such as gold diggers and modern jezebels are more visible in contemporary media and popular culture than positive representations such as community heroines (Walton, 2013). Overall, the lack of positive representations leaves little space to examine the complexities of Black women's lives.

Despite the shortcomings of media and popular culture, television and film can serve as spaces for agency for Black females to express their own Black consciousness (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Agency offers Black females avenues to positively embody Black womanhood in film

and television. For example, characters such as Dr. Miranda Bailey on *Grey's Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005-present) and Olivia Pope as a crisis manager on *Scandal* (Rhimes, 2012-present) present Black women in positions of power. These shows, created by a Black woman named Shonda Rhimes, demonstrate how Black women and their experiences as mothers, lovers, and professionals can be centered in broadcast television. Speaking to the importance of Bailey's character, Malomo (2011) explains that Bailey's representation as a single mother and successful doctor is complex, rather than her having been reduced to negative stereotypes like most Black female roles. From my perspective, Olivia Pope presents a similar complex representation of Black femininity that is rarely portrayed on network television. Highlighting the significance of her character, she is the first Black female character to lead a network drama in 40 years (Lee, 2013). Taken together, Miranda Bailey and Olivia Pope trouble traditional representations of Black femininity on television and offer more nuanced depictions of Black femininity.

Outside of film and television, the internet has become an avenue for Black women to explore Black femininity and resist dominant caricatures of Black womanhood. For example, Black actresses such as Issa Rae on *Awkward Black Girl* and Amani Starnes on *The United Colors of Amani* are challenging traditional Black female stereotypes to elevate Black women as full human beings (McDonald, 2013). Unfortunately, very few filmmakers and television producers have made room for characters similar to those on the internet, and the few Black women with access to some power and control in the predominately White and/or male industry leave Black women with mostly stereotypical representations on television and in film. From my perspective, stereotypes of Black women are used more egregiously in reality television, where Black women are often dehumanized for ratings and popularity. The next section highlights the intersections of race and gender in reality television.

Racialized and Gendered Representations in Reality Television

In the 1990s, a new television model emerged: reality television. This new medium of television has ushered in new, more “realistic” portrayals of individuals’ everyday lives. Smith and Wood (2003) define reality TV “as a genre that involves placing ordinary people before the camera and deriving some entertainment value from the perception of their activities being perceived as unscripted” (p. 2). The proliferation of reality television is due in large part to its inexpensive production costs, popularity among large audiences, and use of non-unionized actors and writers (Orbe, 2008). The “reality” aspect of reality television has been questioned, as these shows have “story editors” that have similar tasks as writers on TV dramas and comedies (Orbe, 2008, p. 346). As such, the validity of reality television remains in doubt. Equally as suspect, these shows often depict marginalized groups such as people of color and women in dehumanizing, stereotypical ways. For example, Tyree (2011) examined ten reality television shows and discovered that at least one negative stereotype of Black Americans was present in each show. Similarly, shows such as *The Bachelor* (2002-present), *Joe Millionaire* (2003), and *Flavor of Love* (2006-2008) stereotype women as “bad” versus “good” girls which reinforces century old stereotypes of “good” women being concerned with “feminine” issues such as marriage and courtship (Johnston, 2006). Moreover, makeover shows explicitly objectify female bodies as objects of commerce that are shaped in the eyes of male beholders (Heinricy, 2006).

People of color have also been commoditized on reality television in service to dominant ideologies. Dubrofsky (2006) explores this by analyzing the patriarchal and racist discourse in *The Bachelor*. Dubrofsky’s (2006) analysis emphasizes how women of color are marginalized in the show and positions Whiteness as paramount to finding romance. For example, in *The Bachelor*’s fourth season the only Black female contestant was never shown interacting with Bob

(the bachelor), despite making it to the fourth elimination ceremony, and she was rarely seen speaking on camera (Dubrofsky, 2006). Similarly, Schroeder (2006) explores White male privilege in her examination of *The Real World: Philadelphia* and exposes how men of color are pushed to the margins due to the centering of White privilege and heterosexism. A useful example of this is Karamo, a gay Black man, whose coming out story is obscured in favor of positioning him as an angry Black man (Schroeder, 2006). Moreover, MTV shows such as *Road Rules* perpetuate the stereotype of the angry Black woman to boost ratings and attract viewers (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006). For instance Gladys, a participant on the 1999 season of *Road Rules*, was cast because of her strong willed, inner city personality and then eventually kicked out after a fight with a fellow White female cast member, which provided the highest ratings ever for a *Road Rules* episode (Andrejevic & Colby, 2006). Taken collectively from a critical perspective, these shows center intersecting privileged and marginalized identities to promote conflict surrounding Black cast members at the expense of offering humanizing representations of Black culture.

Focusing on Black masculinity, Orbe (1998) and Orbe and Hopson (2002) identify multiple examples of Black male representations in their examination of several seasons of *The Real World*. They argue that *The Real World* regularly displays: 1) Black men as inherently angry, 2) Black men as a violent threat, and 3) Black men as sexually aggressive (Orbe & Hopson, 2002). These negative representations strengthen and justify negative scripts, via the pretense of representing real life, and reinforce historical fears of Black men (Orbe, 1998, 2008). Similarly, Bell-Jordon's (2008) analysis of *The Real World Denver* (2006-2007) reveals that Black males are positioned on a binary where they are either "hood" or "integrated" which eliminates (or undermines) more complex representations of Black masculinity. Moreover Bell-

Jordon (2008), like Orbe (1998), reveals how Black males are being edited to appear hypersexual, deviant, and/or ignorant. For instance, a reality television show such as *Flavor of Love* (2006-2008) reinforces the coon stereotype, which underscores Black males as buffoons (Campbell & Giannino, 2011). Campbell and Giannino (2011) argue that positioning Flavor Flav under the illusion of having power and wealth “reiterates black male success as absurd” (p.111).

However, the existence of negative scripts, while problematic, is not the whole problem. Rather, Campbell and Giannino (2011) assert that the lack of alternative depictions gives the coon script, in specific reference to *Flavor of Love*, more power than it should have. Extending their reasoning to the multitude of negative scripts pertaining to Black men and women, the shortage of diverse, complex representations gives negative scripts extensive power in film and television. This is the absence that I feel plagues media, and reality television in particular, as a whole.

In alignment with the misrepresentations of Black males, Black females are also dehumanized in reality television productions and such representations certainly influence negative perceptions of Black femininity. For example, a show such as *Flavor of Love* (2006-2008), which swapped contestants’ real names for fake names, robs Black females of the chance to fully express their personhood, forever associating them with nicknames such as Bootz and New York (Boylorn, 2008). The removal and replacement of names also signifies the powerlessness that women have on the show and reflects a site of oppressive objectification (Campbell & Giannino, 2011).

Flavor of Love also enumerates the idea of “authentic” Blackness in reality television, centering the ghetto Black girl stereotype as “real” (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008). The ghetto Black girl stereotype refers to the Black girl who keeps it “real,” talks loud, and will fight for her

man (Goff, 2012). Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) argue that reality television provides a space, where alternative performances of Black female identity are performed but also edited to maintain Blackness as Other. For example, the erasure of racial identity as presented on *America's Next Top Model* sexualizes Black women while centering Whiteness (Hasinoff, 2008). The centering of Whiteness pushes Black females to the margins, othering their thoughts and ideas. Thus, historical caricatures of Black women such as the jezebel are repurposed on reality television to reaffirm Whiteness, White bodies, and masculinity at the expense of Black female identity. Since *Love and Hip Atlanta* (2012-present) is the reality television show explored in this project, I summarize season one and the characters in the next section.

Viewing Love and Hip Atlanta

Set in Atlanta, Georgia, *Love and Hip Atlanta* revolves around several women who are connected to the Hip Hop industry through an affiliation with artists and singers. The show has been critiqued for negatively representing Black culture and being unrealistic, since it does not show the everyday lives of everyday Black people outside the industry (Seward, 2012; Smith-Beaty, 2012). The executive producer and creator of the show is Mona Scott-Young, a Black woman, who owns Monami Entertainment. Overall, the main characters of the show are: Mimi, Stevie J, Joseline, K. Michelle, Karlie, Benzino, Erica, Lil Scrappy, Rasheeda, and Kirk. All characters of the show identify as Black American, with the exception of Joseline, who is Puerto Rican but easily read as Black. Mimi is the mother of one of Stevie J's children and sometimes his girlfriend. Stevie J is a Grammy award winning record producer for Bad Boy Records and is arguably the main antagonist throughout the season. Joseline, a former exotic dancer, aspires to be a reggaeton rapper and has asked Stevie J to produce her music. Joseline is also Stevie J's mistress. K. Michele is an R & B singer who is searching for a new record deal with a major

record label and dealing with the effects of an abusive relationship. Karlie is an aspiring rapper/singer who is also trying to get a record deal and is in a relationship with Benzino. Benzino is a rapper, Hip Hop editor, and former owner of *The Source* magazine. Erica is the former fiancé of Atlanta rapper Lil Scrappy and is the mother of his daughter. Lil Scrappy appears throughout the season as Erica and Lil Scrappy try to mend their relationship despite his mother's (Mama Dee) objections and the distracting presence of his friend Shay. Finally Rasheeda, an independent rap artist, appears on the show with her husband Kirk as they deal with being partners in life and business.

Throughout the first season, the characters interact at various locations, such as restaurants and apartments, in an assortment of ways. For example, Stevie J interacts with Mimi at her house and with Joseline at a photo shoot and in the studio. Other interactions take place at industry events such as listening parties for albums and solo performances. The season begins with Mimi's discovery of Stevie J's infidelity with Joseline, which leads to problems in their relationship. Stevie J attempts to have both women as sexual and life partners during this season. Stevie J argues that Joseline needs him for her career, while Mimi is the mother of his child so he should stay with her as well. At one point in the season, Joseline becomes pregnant and has an abortion for Stevie J, despite her misgivings. After Joseline's abortion and her continued threats toward Mimi, Stevie J, Joseline, and Mimi all go to therapy, which leads to Joseline slapping Stevie J for lying to her about continuing to live with Mimi. By the end of the season, their love triangle remains unsettled.

Meanwhile, Erica and Lil Scrappy continue to try to rebuild their relationship, but are conflicted about past issues and the negative influence of Mama Dee on their relationship. Mama Dee thinks Erica is bad for her son and prefers him to be with Shay. Eventually, Lil Scrappy

proposes to Erica after the conclusion of season one to the dismay of Mama Dee and the shock of Shay. K. Michelle is trying to restart her career, but gets in a conflict with Karlie that almost leads to a physical altercation. She also becomes upset with Rasheeda when she questions the validity of the abuse K. Michelle suffered from a previous partner. Karlie leaves her relationship with her boyfriend Antonio and starts dating Benzino. For the majority of the season their relationship goes well, until she finds out he cheated and ends their relationship.

By comparison to the other couples on the show, Rasheeda and Kirk appear to be the quintessential couple. However, Rasheeda's status as an independent artist, with Kirk as her manager opposed to having label representation and management, wears on their marriage. Rasheeda considers leaving Kirk's management for a mainstream management company to further her career but decides the business and her marriage are more important than being managed by a label. At the end of the season, Rasheeda and Kirk decide to renew their marriage vows; which makes them the only couple with a happy ending at the end of the first season. The next section examines the origins and commitments of Hip Hop feminism (HHF) followed by an explanation of how I will use HHF to theorize *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*.

Hip Hop Feminism: A Theoretical Framework

Hip Hop feminism can be situated in relation to third wave feminism and Black feminist thought (BFT). The origins of third wave feminism are traced back to the first and second wave feminist movements. Generally speaking, first wave feminism focused on legal rights such as the right to vote, while second wave feminism focused on human rights and equal opportunities (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). By comparison, third wave feminism largely focuses on the complexities of feminist women who seek "to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and multiple postionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining" (Walker,

1995, p. xxxiii). Additionally, third wave feminism continues the labor of second wave feminists by highlighting the continued exclusion of women of color and advocating for intersectional analysis (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). Third wave feminists also draw attention to the perception of victimhood in second wave feminist ideology and the diversity of women's lived experiences (Lotz, 2003).

Situating BFT in relation to the waves of feminism, BFT emerged during the second wave, and remains exceptionally relevant to conversations concerning identity politics, power, privilege, oppression, and media representation. Take for example the works of third wave feminists such as Abner (1995) who examines the politics of motherhood, Griffin (2012) who examines the everyday identity politics of being a biracial Black woman, and Coleman (2011) who critiques Black men's representations of Black women and the relative silence in response among Black women scholars. In the paragraphs that follow, BFT is situated as a backdrop for Hip Hop feminism since it strongly influences conversations among Hip Hop feminists. I then discuss the origins of BFT and its tenets followed by a discussion of how Hip Hop feminism is both similar to and different from BFT.

Black feminist thought was coined by Collins (1986) as a response to her perception that Black women were largely missing among the theorizations of second wave feminists. Black feminist thought reflects a culmination of Black women's activist voices spanning several centuries ranging from slavery to club movements to the Civil Rights Movement to present day organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women and the National Coalition of 100 Black Women. Throughout U.S. American history, Black women have been prominent in fighting oppressive conditions in the United States (McGuire, 2010; Waters, 2007; Zook, 1995). Therefore, Black feminist thought responds to White, middle class women who often excluded

the significance of race and class, and Black men who ignored the epistemologies of Black women and embraced their male privilege (Collins, 2013). It was in this space that Black feminists emerged to highlight issues that Black females struggle with in their everyday experiences. Generally speaking, the goal of BFT is to center Black women's voices and raise critical consciousness about the experiences of Black women (Collins, 2009).

Drawing from key Black feminist scholars, BFT is situated around four tenets which include: 1) theorizing Black women's unique experiences and perceptions, 2) accounting for intersectionality and the matrices of domination, 3) increasing agency for Black women, and 4) building space for coalitions among Black women and other marginalized groups (Collins, 1986, 1989, 2009; Lorde, 1984; Waters, 2007). These foundational tenets provide a useful framework to understand the lived experiences of Black women. First, a key contribution of BFT is to elevate Black women's voices at micro and macro levels to "talk back" (hooks, 1989, p. 9) to domination. Historically, Black women's experiences have been oppressed and remain marginalized by dominant groups (Collins, 1989, 2013; hooks, 1981). Collins' (2009) term "matrix of domination" (p. 21) refers to how different isms such as racism, classism, and sexism work in tandem to layer the systemic oppression endured by Black women. The emphasis on agency for Black women underscores that Black women should be heard via their own liberated voices, rather than constrained or silenced by the imposition of power (hooks, 1981). Calls for coalition by Black feminists reflect the need to find groups who can speak with and alongside Black women to advocate for change within our society. Taken together, the tenets of BFT allow Black women to speak for themselves against institutional and cultural oppression.

Though BFT forefronts the experiences of Black women, it does not always speak to the lives of contemporary Black women and their paradoxical love/hate relationships with

institutions and cultural phenomenon, such as media, Hip Hop, and reality television. Writers and scholars such as Rebecca Walker, Allison Abner, Kristal Brent Zook, and Joan Morgan, among others, have troubled the rigid either/or dichotomy that often frames contemporary Black women's engagement with feminism. This dichotomy does not always work when Black women engage with and enjoy paradoxical popular culture such as Hip Hop. For example, Morgan (1999) speaks of her love for Hip Hop despite its destructive maltreatment of Black women. Similarly, Wilson (2007) discusses the complex motives of Hip Hop video vixens that are positioned provocatively in videos, but can be understood as Black women who are empowered to make their own financial choices with their bodies. Collectively, third wave feminists push BFT to further examine the complexities of and contradictions within Black women's lived experiences.

The origins of second wave BFT coincide with the emergence and maturation of the Hip Hop genre in the 1970s and 1980s. Hip Hop has been described as being the voice of the post-civil rights generation and a genre that binds people of all ethnicities and nationalities (Chang, 2005). As such, Hip Hop has become an influential force in both Black and White cultures, but is centralized in Black culture due to its origins in the Black inner city (Chang, 2005). The emergence of Hip Hop made visible a host of issues impacting to the Black community including but not limited to materialism, misogyny, the glorification of violence, and the proliferation of drugs. Yet, Hip Hop also serves as place of Black empowerment where artists can incite social and political change, while addressing moral and intellectual issues (Dyson, 2007). The paradoxical nature of contemporary Hip Hop is further illustrated in the treatment of Black women in lyrics and videos. Rappers such as Nas and LL Cool J discuss Black queens and the need for respectful romantic love; however, Black women are also subjected to dehumanization

and objectification in Hip Hop lyrics and music videos (Fitts, 2008; Oware, 2009). Likewise, Black women have little executive representation in the industry (Phillips, Reddick-Morgan, & Stephens, 2008). Additionally female rappers, such as Jean Gray and Amanda Diva, are regulated to independent or underground Hip Hop where their music is unlikely to be played on mainstream radio (Jones, 2013). The maltreatment of women in Hip Hop contributed to the emergence of a theoretical framework known as Hip Hop feminism.

Hip Hop feminism emerged among third wave Black feminists in the late 1990s to highlight the turn within Black feminist writings to include critiques of singular definitions of “women” and “feminism” (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003; Lotz, 2003). Black third wave feminists and Hip Hop feminists emphasize difference, diversity, multiplicities of feminism, and the paradoxical relationships women have with culture (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003; Walker, 1995) alongside second wave concerns. Rather than being at odds, the relationship between BFT and HHF has been characterized as a dialogue in which each framework mutually speaks to and builds off the other (Peoples, 2008). While BFT often conceptualizes Hip Hop as misogynist and derogatory toward Black women (Peoples, 2008), HHF conceptualizes Hip Hop as a political space to “talk back” (hooks, 1989, p. 9) to dominant political, cultural, and social institutions. In alignment with BFT, enacting social change is at the heart of HHF, which underscores how Hip Hop can act as a tool of resistance to spread messages of empowerment and self-love (Peoples, 2008).

Hip Hop feminism is largely concerned with how Hip Hop represents Black femininity, deploys Black female bodies, and serves as a tool to empower Black women (Durham, Cooper, & Morris, 2013; Peoples, 2009; Pough, 2004). Hip Hop feminism seeks to “keep it real” (p. 62) by utilizing Hip Hop as the defining force of the current generation of Black women to address

the political, cultural, and social complexities of the Hip Hop generation (Morgan, 1999). This framework enters the feminist and Black feminist conversation through Hip Hop and represents the multiple truths and realities of Black women who simultaneously critique and enjoy Hip Hop culture. Durham (2010) defines HHF as a “field of study forged from the symbolic annihilation of young women and girls of color in popular media” (p. 117). Hip Hop feminism uses “the language and oppositional consciousness of hip hop to craft a culturally relevant, gender-specific creative, intellectual movement” (p. 117). Jeffries (2007) defines a Hip Hop feminist as “someone who locates herself historically as member of the Hip Hop generation and lays claim to knowledge of Hip Hop as a cultural phenomenon” (p. 215). As such, HHF is not a theory only applicable within the ivory tower of academia, but also serves as a movement for everyday people interested in social justice.

A survey of key HHF works including Morgan (1999), Pough et. al (2007), and Peoples (2008) reveals four defining tenets of Hip Hop feminism that include: 1) the critique of misogyny and Black female exploitation in the Hip Hop industry, 2) increasing self-definition and agency among Black women, 3) providing room for Black men in feminist conversations, and 4) leveraging Hip Hop’s potential to address contemporary social issues such as Black sexual politics, heterosexism, and class oppression (Durham et. al, 2013; Morgan, 1999; Peoples, 2008; Pough et. al, 2007). First, the critique of misogyny is focused on Black male Hip Hop artists and male industry executives who reduce Black females to mere eye candy and objects of male pleasure, especially in music videos (Railton & Watson, 2005). This tenet also examines the imposition of male privilege in the everyday lives of Black women and the prevalence of sexism in the Black community. According to Durham (2007), negative images and maltreatment of Black women should be unacceptable in the Black community.

Secondly, Hip Hop feminism allows for women of color to redefine themselves apart from dominant scripts by advocating for female empowerment (Peoples, 2008). Thus, HHF as theory provides a space for women of color to exercise their agency and advocate against systems of oppression. More specifically, Hip Hop feminism centers Black women's voices via Hip Hop as a means to increase agency, self-definition, and self-determination. Self-definition refers to how Black women express their identities and experiences for themselves, while self-determination allows for Black women to choose who or what they want to be (Collins, 2009).

Agency, self-definition, and self-determination for Black women through Hip Hop is essential in HHF work. Hip Hop feminists demand independence, as Durham (2010) explains, "to advocate for ourselves in shared struggles for self-determination" (p. 118) which is key for securing Black women's agency. Ulen (2007) advocates for change within the Hip Hop industry by claiming "we could agitate from all sides and slice into the system. . .we could give voice to power against the normalization of negative behavior, of attitudes, so dangerous to us all in our communities" (p. 146). Black female rappers, such as Missy Elliot and Nicki Minaj, embody self-definition and self-determination through lyrics, dress, and sexual expression (White, 2013). White (2013) argues that both women counter preconceived roles of women in Hip Hop and serve as examples of empowerment for Black women.

Thirdly, HHF purposefully creates a space for Black men in feminist discourse. Though HHF critiques sexism in Hip Hop, it goes beyond a surface interpretation of Hip Hop as only problematic to look for the ways that men and women can and do progressively engage Hip Hop (Durham, 2007). Hip Hop feminist scholars view Hip Hop as a healing space where males can discuss systemic oppression and the effects of racism alongside sexism and misogyny. Morgan (1999) echoes this sentiment explaining "we're all winners when a space exists for brothers to

honestly state and explore the roots of their pain and subsequently their misogyny, sans judgment” (p. 80). In this space, HHF helps Black males embark on a path of self-reflexivity to explore their relationships with Hip Hop, Black women, and society.

Finally, the leveraging of Hip Hop to address social, political, and cultural issues is the centerpiece of HHF work. Hip Hop feminists believe that rappers are uniquely positioned to address larger groups of women at a younger age, when compared to feminist icons such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde (Peoples, 2008). In essence, Hip Hop artists are more accessible and visible than Black feminist icons. For example, artists such as Queen Latifah and MC Lyte have spoken against the male dominated music industry and highlighted the issues young Black women often encounter (Muhammad, 2007). Furthermore, female rap artists also discuss issues that male artists typically do not discuss, such as domestic violence, which at times places them as de facto advisors for Black women (Muhammad, 2007). Utilizing Hip Hop in this way leverages Hip Hop as a mobilizing tool to help young women engage in political activism (Pough, 2004).

Along with political and cultural issues, the influence that Hip Hop has on Black social issues such as women’s self-esteem and Black love is important as well. Pough (2003) explains this further saying “Hip Hop feminism can give young women the tools . . . needed to realize self-love” (p. 241). Also speaking to love, Utley (2010) says the Hip Hop “industry must place a higher value on love. . . reeducate them [Black girls] about the liberatory erotic potential of true love” (p. 305). An example of a Hip Hop artist who does this is Me’Shell Ndegeocello whose music resistantly explores issues of sexuality and Black love (Clay, 2008). Collectively, the critique of misogyny in Hip Hop, increasing self- definition and agency for Black women,

providing space for men in feminist conversations, and Hip Hop's liberatory potential form the foundational tenets of Hip Hop feminism.

For this project, I use HHF to analyze representations of Black men and women in the reality television show *Love and Hip Atlanta*. From my perspective, HHF is a more fitting framework than BFT because it underscores the transformative and paradoxical presence of Black people in Hip Hop. In alignment with Jackson (2006), analyzing *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* with HHF will connect the show to larger historical and contemporary scripts commonly applied to Black people. The two tenets that will be key for deconstructing the show are the: misogyny toward and exploitation of Black women and the significance of self-definition and agency for Black women. However the remaining tenets, i.e., concerns related to Black men and feminism and social justice in Hip Hop, will be useful to examine identity politics and address larger societal and cultural issues that affect reality television shows such as *Love and Hip Atlanta*. The research questions guiding this report are:

1. What does HHF reveal about Hip Hop in relation to representations of Black males and females on reality television?
2. How do Black men exert male privilege in the Hip Hop reality television sphere?
3. How do Black women subvert male privilege in the Hip Hop reality television sphere?

Having discussed the theoretical framework, I now turn to textual analysis as the method I will use to deconstruct *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*.

Textual Analysis

To deconstruct *Love and Hip Atlanta*, I employ textual analysis guided by Hip Hop feminism to expose how Hip Hop informs representations of Black people on reality television. Textual analysis allows for deep critique that goes beyond a surface reading to offer a more

nuanced interpretation (McKee, 2003). In the following paragraphs, I provide a description of what textual analysis is, offer examples of how it has been used, and explain my step by step process of deconstructing *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*.

Scholars across multiple disciplines, such as sociology and philosophy, have offered several different definitions of textual analysis as a qualitative means to explore sense making (Brennen, 2013). Fürsich (2009) describes textual analysis as “a type of qualitative analysis that...focuses on the underlying ideology and cultural assumptions of the text” (p. 240). McKee (2003) explains it as how “we interpret texts in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (p. 1). Finally, Brennen (2013) defines it as “evaluating the many meanings found in texts and trying to understand how written, visual, and spoken language helps us to create our social realities” (p. 193). Taken together, these descriptions articulate textual analysis as a method used to deconstruct texts to evaluate how they signify culture and influence thoughts and perceptions.

Although broadly defined by scholars, textual analysis does have defining features such as “total immersion” (Brennen, 2013, p. 196) and “implicit reading” (Leff, 1986, p. 378) of the text. Total immersion requires the researcher to closely read a text to discover the hidden meanings and ideologies within. Brennen (2013) elaborates further by explaining that “textual analysis is all about language, what it represents, and how we use it to make sense of our lives” (p. 192). In this sense, textual analysis explores the constitutive nature of language to reveal how language shapes and constructs our realities. Total immersion in a text’s language and imagery allows the text to be “read” for emergent themes and reoccurring patterns (Fürsich, 2009). The themes and patterns that emerge through the reading of a text are related to the ideologies contained within the text.

Researchers using textual analysis must move from implicit to explicit readings (Leff, 1986). Implicit readings refer to the underlying ideological assumptions of a text, while explicit readings refer to a surface level reading of the text (Fürsich, 2009). Texts that are read using textual analysis can be books, films, speeches, television, or anything that people derive meaning from (McKee, 2003). Mediated texts, such as films and television, transmit several ideologies and, as Larson (1992) states, “imply particular partial versions of social reality; they also address different audiences and presumably mean different things to different people” (p. 129). When researchers consider a text to be “rich” (p. 194) it means that the text can be deconstructed from various angles of interpretation (Brennen, 2013). Rich texts are valuable for analysis because researchers from multiple disciplines can offer different interpretations.

Critical media scholars often use textual analysis to deconstruct television shows. For example, Chidester (2012) and Thornton (2011) both utilized textual analysis to deconstruct *South Park* and *Psyche* to examine Whiteness and post-race ideology. Critical media scholars have also used textual analysis to examine reality television shows in particular. For instance, Dubrofsky (2006) explores the marginalization of Asian and Black women on *The Bachelor*, while Hasinoff (2008) discusses the commoditization of Black women on *America’s Next Top Model*. As examples for this study, the use of textual analysis by Bell-Jordon (2008) addressing *Survivor* and *The Real World* and Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) addressing *Flavor of Love* and *The Bachelor* are salient because they deconstruct representations of Black men and women in reality television. Bell-Jordon’s textual analysis (2008) reveals the framing of race and racial issues to create conflict. Dubrofsky and Hardy’s (2008) textual analysis exposes how Whiteness is privileged on *The Bachelor* and Blackness is performed on *Flavor of Love*.

My analysis of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* began with an initial viewing of six of the ten episodes from season one: episodes four, five, six, seven, eight, and nine. These episodes were chosen because they are past the introductory phase of the series and rich with content. During the initial viewing of these episodes, I did not take any notes. Rather I watched to get myself reacquainted with the characters and the storylines. The second time these episodes were viewed, I noted three surface level themes that the show presented with Hip Hop feminism in mind including: dysfunctional Black relationships, verbal and emotional abuse, and violence. In the third viewing of these episodes, I watched closely for how Black femininity and Black masculinity in particular were represented. Then, each episode was watched three times in a row with 10 minute intermissions in between each viewing. This process was repeated until all of the episodes had been viewed multiple times and there was enough data to thematize my findings. Larger themes that were apparent for Black men in these surface level readings, such as mistreatment of women and violence, were noted. Then, larger themes that were apparent for Black women such as emotional abuse, friendship, and love were noted. I also revisited specific episodes to examine how the themes intersected between the two groups. This process was repeated several times until I had enough data to articulate my findings.

After multiple viewings of *Love and Hip Atlanta*, several examples emerged to frame my analysis in accordance with HHF. Given HHF's tenets, I felt drawn to interrogate the misogyny toward and exploitation of Black women coupled with how Black men capitalize on male privilege in the Hip Hop industry. I also felt drawn to critique how Black women exercise their agency in the male dominated industry as well as the use of Hip Hop to enact social justice efforts in the Black community. To discover examples of each working from the larger themes of the show, I focused on the characters interactions as well as confessional spaces. During the

confessions, cast members speak directly to the camera about their perceptions of and experiences with other cast members. The characters' interactions, relationships, and confessions are all useful in theorizing how the show represents Black culture via a HHF lens.

The analysis of Black women and men in reality television that follows provides a space for dialogue at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Some of the examples from the show reinforce historical caricatures, scripts, and stereotypes that have problematically confined Black people throughout the history of media and popular culture. However, other examples reveal the power of love among Black women and men and how Black women are empowered by and in Hip Hop. Having detailed my method, the next section offers a thematic analysis of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* guided by HHF.

Analyzing *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*

This section examines *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* through a Hip Hop feminist lens to trouble representations of Blackness on reality television. First, I examine misogyny and male privilege in Hip Hop through the characters of Stevie J, Benzino, and Kirk in their business and personal relationships with the women in their lives. I also look at the reproduction of male privilege via the character of Mama Dee. Next, I examine Mimi, Joseline, and K. Michelle on the show and their negative reinforcement of Black female scripts coupled with an exploration of their agency in relation to sexuality and language. The merger of social justice work and Hip Hop feminism is also explored specifically in the character of K. Michelle. Finally, I deconstruct Stevie J and Lil Scrappy to reveal their negative reinforcement of Black male scripts, while simultaneously presenting more progressive scripts for Black males related to love.

“Chalk it Up to Business”: Centering Male Privilege in Hip Hop

Stevie J and Joseline. The relationship between Stevie J and Joseline is characterized by sexual, physical, and emotional control which is reminiscent of Jackson's (2006) description of the pimp-whore complex. The pimp-whore complex refers to Black males controlling Black females' minds and bodies for economical gain (Jackson, 2006). Exemplifying this complex, Stevie J mentions that he will take Joseline back to where he found her in reference to a strip club. Stevie J explains in his response to Joseline threatening not to have sex, "I'm cool with that. I'm not thirsty for no pussy. I'm thirsty for that bread, know what I'm saying. I'm thirsty for her to make a way for herself, so she ain't gotta to hit the club no more and can have her own million dollars. So at the end of the day she'll respect me more and I'm sure I can do whatever I like after that bread come through" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). I interpret his comments as a reference to his belief that Joseline will willingly do whatever he pleases after she reaps the financial benefits of working with Stevie J. In response to Stevie J, Joseline remarks that he has no concern for her body or how she feels, but is only concerned with business.

From an HHF perspective, this scene illustrates the commodification of women of color's bodies for industry purposes and also signifies male gain. It is an equation in which money, plus power, equals access to and control over women's bodies. Stevie J's focus on money at the sacrifice of Joseline's needs demonstrates how Hip Hop can be a destructive space that robs agency from women of color. Similar to Fitts's (2008) examination of Black women in music videos, women of color are commodified and dehumanized on *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*.

Later in season one, as Karlie positions herself to work with Stevie J, the dynamic between Joseline and Stevie J continues to reflect the pimp-whore complex. Stevie J wants Karlie and Joseline to work together because it is good for business. Karlie wants Stevie J to produce her music because she needs a hit single and wants studio time with Stevie J. Stevie J

says he can do that for her and makes her perform on the stage to show him what she is working with. Stevie J wants Joseline and Karlie to record together, but Joseline does not want them to record together. When she refuses, he stands, looks at her with a serious grin, and tells her “I need you to do this” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Joseline responds by saying “No, I work too hard to get where I’m at to just do a song with her” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Stevie J continues his insistence on Joseline doing this for him; he says “This is about a business, so you put your emotions to the side” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Then, Joseline gives in saying, “I do a song with her because of you, but only one song... (looking toward Karlie) because I respect him and I’m loyal to him” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Joseline continues to protest to Stevie J but while she’s crying, he tells her to “chalk it up as business, let’s do what fuck we got to do, and keep it moving” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012).

Stevie J’s embodiment of Black masculinity in this scene aligns with Miller-Young’s (2008) discussion of Black males performing a pimp masculinity and Jackson’s (2006) script of Black males embodying the pimp-whore complex. Stevie J’s insistence on business first reinforces the pimp-whore dynamic that they share and serves to further mute Joseline’s voice and agency. In this context, he draws upon his male privilege and sexist ideology to control Joseline’s career and body. The relationship between Stevie J and Joseline highlights the hostility and exploitation that women of color can experience in Hip Hop.

Karlie and Benzino. In contrast to Stevie J and Joseline, Karlie and Benzino’s relationship appears to be characterized by outward displays of affection and love rather than manipulation and abuse. However, their relationship is marked by increasing disagreement over her career and the effect that Benzino has on her career. Karlie’s manager, Malcolm, believes her

relationship with Benzino is harmful to her career because he is not so “hot” right now. In response to this, Benzino arranges a meeting with Vincent Herbert, Lady Gaga’s manager, who agrees to put Karlie in the studio with his producers. In their continued alliance to build her career, Benzino also arranges for Karlie to be featured in his magazine *Hip Hop Weekly*. Karlie values Benzino’s support in getting her into the studio. Karlie remarks that “it’s hard for a man to actually help a woman’s career a 100 percent. I’m loving this right now” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Her appreciation speaks to and with Hip Hop feminism by positioning Black males as allies in the advancement of Black female artists’ careers.

Though they appear to be adept in handling their business and personal relationship, Benzino begins to feel that Karlie is too focused on her career at the expense of their relationship. After helping her career, he remarks that he believes everything revolves around Karlie. Karlie responds that she thinks it is about his ego and that her focus on her career is not a bad thing. She says, “You just want to get me home and me be barefoot and pregnant” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). This topic arises again when Benzino insists that all they talk about is her career, but Karlie remarks that taking care of Benzino’s children indicates her commitment to their relationship. Benzino explains that “love is a two-way street and right now Karlie’s career is taking up both lanes” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). From a Hip Hop feminist perspective, their relationship underscores the agency that women have to resist traditional definitions of womanhood, but also exposes sexism (Cooper, 2012). Karlie reveals how Black men are valued for doing whatever it takes for their career to achieve success, while Black women are ridiculed for being career driven and not housewives and mothers.

Through none of Karlie’s interactions with executives or producers do we see female executives or producers which reveals the predominance of men in positions of power in Hip

Hop. This highlights the control and power that males, specifically Black males, have over Black female artists in Hip Hop. Black men oftentimes control recording studios, producers, styling, marketing, financial support, etc. (Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012). However, Black female representation at the executive level would likely offer more understanding of what Black females experience navigating the male-owned and controlled industry. *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* highlights what female management and executive representation entails via Rasheeda and Kirk's changing business and personal relationship.

Rasheeda and Kirk. Rasheeda and Kirk have been married for twelve years, with Kirk serving as her manager for the duration of her career. However, since Rasheeda's career has stalled, she begins to question Kirk's management skills. Looking for a new direction, she meets with Deb Antney. Antney is the manager of popular rap artist Waka Flocka Flame and previously managed rap artist Nicki Minaj, as well as being the owner of Mizay Entertainment. In the meeting, Antney questions why Kirk's company D-Lo is still relevant despite her career stalling. Rasheeda explains that she does not want to blame Kirk for her career stagnation or lack of success. Antney states plainly that D-Lo is the common denominator in her failure and that her career should have been bigger. Rasheeda breaks down crying while explaining Kirk's role in her career, but Antney retorts with concern about what happened to Rasheeda's role in her career. Antney remarks "You're the talent. They wouldn't be in that room without you and that's what you have to understand" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Antney states that Rasheeda needs to reevaluate what she wants her life to be. Antney explains "I think this should not be what I really want to do as Rasheeda the artist,... it should be is it Rasheeda, the wife, the homemaker, playing grandma, is that who I really want to be?" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). This example highlights how female executives present a unique perspective in the male

dominated Hip Hop industry that is more empowering for female artists since Antney is encouraging Rasheeda to explore and question who she wants to be. The inclusion of more female executives in the Hip Hop industry could potentially foster more female artists being in charge of their careers and less misogynistic portrayals of women in Hip Hop.

Rasheeda eventually tells Kirk about the meeting with Antney, which results in him questioning if she loves him because she went behind his back. To me, Kirk's reasoning reflects Hip Hop feminism's concern with Black men limiting Black women's agency. Kirk also discusses how the industry has dictated their personal life saying "we put off having kids cuz' if Rasheeda has a baby right now ain't nobody gon' to buy a pregnant women rap. How we let the industry decide do you not have a baby because you a rapper? Is that what a rapper is supposed to be? A woman who can't have kids and can't be a wife?" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). This scene underscores how Hip Hop is viewed through a patriarchal male gaze, where few alternative portraits of femininity are allowed or supported. Thus, Kirk reduces Rasheeda's options for correctly navigating her personal and professional lives by presenting her situation in binary form, where she is unable to be both a mother/wife and a Hip Hop artist.

In a different episode, Rasheeda and Kirk meet with Deb Antney to discuss the possibility of her managing Rasheeda. Kirk reveals that he was displeased with Rasheeda meeting Deb without his knowledge. Antney immediately replies that his having taken offense is a problem because Rasheeda should be able to make her own business decisions. She continues explaining that Kirk's company D-Lo was the common denominator in Rasheeda's career and she questions what makes D-Lo right and other companies' suggestions wrong. She remarks "It's about coming from underground. She's dirty, she stinking; she wants to come up for air" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). From a HHF perspective, this scene highlights one woman

advocating for another woman to have control over her career. Antney's underground analogy exposes the control that Kirk has over Rasheeda's career and emphasizes the agency that Rasheeda and other female artists need to have in relation to their careers. Antney's comments also draw attention to Kirk's sexist refusal to acknowledge his role in Rasheeda's career losing steam. I interpret his refusal as sexist because Kirk positions Rasheeda at fault in her career failures rather than his own mismanagement.

Mama Dee. The reproduction of male privilege and misogyny can also occur via Black females in Hip Hop reality television. Black women serving as agents of sexist ideology can be seen in the character of Mama Dee. As the mother of Lil Scrappy, Mama Dee is protective of her child's emotions and relationships. For instance, Lil Scrappy asks Mama Dee about his situation with Erica and Shay after an emotional meeting with Erica the previous day. Lil Scrappy explains how they had a conversation about reuniting, which leads to Mama Dee saying "No the hell you didn't...You really think I'm feeling that bitch?" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). In a confessional, Mama Dee says Lil Scrappy needs a new woman and spells out "bitch" to explain how she feels about Erica. Mama Dee tells Lil Scrappy "You ain't ready for a relationship. Keep it real with them. Let them come in and out. Let them know you only in and out, in and out. Do what players do. How do players play? All day, everyday." (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012).

Watching this particular scene, I feel Mama Dee reinforces Black males as hypersexual, uncaring pimps. To me, Mama Dee reproduces the masculine, promiscuous gaze in Hip Hop spaces and dehumanizes Black females as objects in the process. This reproduction of sexist ideology limits Black women's agency and conceptualizations of Black femininity. In essence, Mama Dee reduces Black women, Erica and Shay in particular, to interchangeable objects for

male consumption and pleasure. In the next section, I discuss how self-definition and agency emerge for Black women in Hip Hop from a Hip Hop feminist perspective.

“I’m a Bitch, So What!”: Agency, Self-Definition, and Voice in *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*

In Hip Hop, Black women have been marginalized and dehumanized by Black males (Pough, 2003; Durham, 2010). Hip Hop feminism interrogates Hip Hop to explore the agency that Black women can find via Hip Hop to counter their marginalization (Morgan, 1999; Pough, 2004). This section highlights Mimi and Joseline from *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* to reveal their paradoxical relationships to Hip Hop and explore how they define themselves in the show differently than the dominant discourses surrounding Black women. This section also highlights K. Michelle’s reinforcement of the jezebel script and how she, in opposition to the jezebel, uses her voice to connect her experiences to social justice via HHH.

Mimi. Mimi functions paradoxically throughout the first season as both an example of the sapphire (Collins, 2009), and also as an empowered Black woman via HHH. Mimi is the embodiment of the controlling image of the sapphire (Collins, 2009) in that she yells and uses profanity often in her interactions with Stevie J. For example, after discovering Joseline’s pregnancy, Mimi lashes out at him since he is the father. Then, Mimi explicitly refers to Joseline as a “bitch” and emphasizes how Stevie J is promiscuous but never wants to handle the consequences of his actions. In this scene, she embodies a loud, aggressive posture with her hands moving rapidly, while Stevie J remains calm with a knowing smirk on his face. Examining this scene, Mimi can be understood as the embodiment of the sapphire described by Pough (2004) as a Black woman who draws upon abusive language and has the potential for violence.

Not only do the antics of Stevie J cause Mimi anger, but also great anguish. She has been emotionally abused and lied to by him repeatedly. After Stevie J performs a song for Mimi, he

asks her to meet him outside to talk. Mimi begins to cry saying, “I don’t think you know how much you hurt me... as you managing this one and that one and I’m at home with a baby by myself. You hurt me to the core. I don’t think you understand that” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Even after this emotional scene, and despite the fact that she did not come with Stevie J, Mimi leaves with him. This scene underscores the emotional pain that Black men can inflict on Black women and the agency that Black women have in their relationships, regarding whether to leave or stay. To be fair, Mimi does not have complete agency to leave her relationship with Stevie J since she is still invested emotionally; however, Mimi is financially independent by owning her own cleaning service which highlights her access to agency.

Though Mimi embodies the sapphire, she also represents a unique embodiment of agency and self-definition. Likewise, although Mimi is manipulated by Stevie J, she also displays moments of self-empowerment. For instance, Mimi drops Stevie J’s belongings off at his house, so she could be rid of his presence. She remarks “You spend more time with that bitch, more than me and your daughter. . .I don’t want to be with a man that’s with a bitch every day” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Through a Hip Hop feminist lens, Mimi is using her agency to cleanse herself of Stevie J’s control and to protect herself and her daughter from his philandering ways. To be fair, her comments reproduce sexism toward Joseline, but she also embodies a strong sense of Black womanhood. She is not just a sapphire; she is a strong Black woman. The weight of her being a strong Black woman carries on her psyche, as evident in this scene. From my perspective, Mimi’s repeated usage of the word “bitch” in reference to Joseline, and her emotional breakdown driving away from Stevie J’s house indicates this burden. Morgan (1999) situates the strong Black woman in relation to Hip Hop and helps us understand how Mimi functions paradoxically as the simultaneous embodiment of multiple controlling images

used to oppress Black women such as the sapphire and liberation. Inspired by Morgan (1999), Mimi's strength behind her words and direct demeanor demonstrate Black women having agency in Hip Hop reality television.

Joseline. From my perspective, the woman who is the most mentally and emotionally abused by Stevie J is Joseline. Joseline, like Mimi, serves as an example of the paradox that Hip Hop feminism allows women of color to embody. As previously mentioned, Joseline has an abortion after being pressured by Stevie J. After the abortion, Joseline exerts her sexual agency while talking to Stevie J by explaining, "If we gon' to be together, we gon' be together. If we not gon' be together we not having no sex, we not doing this, we not doing that" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). By centering her sexual agency, Joseline is situated alongside women of color and Hip Hop artists, such as Nicki Minaj and Missy Elliot (White, 2013), who refuse to be sexually defined and/or controlled by men. Like these women, Joseline creates a space where women of color in Hip Hop can define their sexuality despite patriarchal ideology. In response, Stevie J jokily says, "I'm celibate" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). To me, his willingness to joke about such a serious matter underscores Stevie J's disrespect toward and dehumanization of women of color.

Beyond the aforementioned scene, Joseline continues to embody and trouble the complexities of womanhood in Hip Hop. For example, Stevie J confronts her for texting Mimi vulgar messages and tells her not to ever text her. Joseline responds, "She is a bitch" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012) and Stevie J says "So what are you?" (Abrahamson, & Scott-Young, 2012). Joseline explains "I'm a bitch too. I ain't tripping about me being a bitch" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Reading this scene through a HHH lens, this statement is both empowering and problematic in two ways. First, her use of the word "bitch" as a term of

self-definition, reclaims the word from its traditional negative connotation. In this sense, Joseline is creating a space for women of color to use the word in an empowering rather than dehumanizing manner in that the label does not define her. This is not to say that the usage of the word is unproblematic toward women of color and all women. The freedom to freely use “bitch” when women of color historically have not had the space to express themselves is an important issue (Carpenter, 2006). Yet, by referring to Mimi as a “bitch,” Joseline reinforces underlying patriarchal ideology by, as Collins (2004) explains, “putting women in their place” (p. 121). On one hand, calling Mimi a “bitch” situates the term in its historical and contemporary oppressive connotation. However, by calling herself a bitch without concern for the patriarchal legacy, Joseline regains her own agency to self-define. Thus, Joseline depicts herself as a liberated woman, who controls and owns her own voice. K. Michelle presents a different representation of Black womanhood on *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, which I highlight in the next section.

K. Michelle. Examining K. Michelle from a Hip Hop feminist perspective also reveals controlling imagery and the liberating potential of Hip Hop. K. Michelle often reflects the jezebel defined by Collins (2009) as “sexually aggressive women with large sexual appetites” (p. 88). For example, K. Michelle goes on a blind date with an NFL player, where their interaction is dominated by sexual conversation. In one instance, K. Michelle says “I don’t like a lot of drama. A lot of drama is good if it leads to hot sex... I think you’re pretty hot and tempting” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). I interpret her embodiment of Black femininity as the jezebel because she is hypersexual in her pursuit of a man and uses sexual innuendo. After additional sexualized conversation, we leave them as they kiss and K. Michelle jumps onto his lap leaving the audience with the interpretation that sex could occur. K. Michelle embodies the

jezebel script through her sexual assertiveness toward her date, despite later recognizing he was not right for her.

Despite embodying the jezebel at times, K. Michelle also represents the potential of social justice in Hip Hop emphasized by Hip Hop feminists such as Pough (2004), Peoples (2008), and Durham (2010). K. Michelle embodies social justice outreach when she performs for the organization Saving Our Daughters. K. Michelle, in a confession directly presented to the audience, explains that Saving Our Daughters is an organization that speaks to young females about the experiences of women who have experienced domestic violence. K. Michelle, a victim of domestic violence herself, explains that she selected this organization because it is one that she personally can relate to and she hopes to help other young women avoid abusive relationships. K. Michelle begins her performance in a wedding dress, with a bruised eye and cuts on her lip. Tears flowing throughout the performance, she articulates that the love she wanted came in the form of a dream record deal from an industry executive, who initially gave her love and affection. Then, she highlights the change in their relationship explaining, “The arms that use to wrap me with love, were now bruising, crushing me, and threatening me” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). K. Michelle concludes her performance by saying, “As a girl I dreamed of this moment right here, when I would be okay with me with who I am and accepting my flaws and everything about me. For all of you, I wish this such moment” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). The scene concludes with K. Michelle telling the viewing audience that a burden has been lifted because the performance for Saving Our Daughters helped in her own healing process.

Hip Hop feminist scholars such as Morgan (1999), Pough (2003), and Durham (2010) view Hip Hop as a revolutionary vehicle to conceptualize Black female identity and provide

avenues for social justice within the Black community. This abovementioned scene at Saving Our Daughters centers the goals of Hip Hop feminism in two ways. First, K. Michele's decision to publicly narrate her story potentially helps other young women in similar situations. Exemplifying this possibility, in the episode you see the emotional reactions from audience members, indicating the possible positive effect of her performance. K. Michelle embodies social justice through her performance by creating a pedagogical space to teach Black women about domestic violence via her own lived experiences. Secondly, K. Michele implicitly critiques male privilege in the Hip Hop community. Thus, the fact that her abuser is still working in the industry speaks to the power that males continue to have in Hip Hop. As a Black man, I feel that her abuser's ability to maintain his status in the Hip Hop community, despite his abuse of K. Michelle, reflects sexism and the systemically ingrained power of males in Hip Hop. By speaking truth to power, K. Michelle troubles and "talks back" (hooks, 1989, p. 9) to male executive privilege in Hip Hop through her mediated performance.

Another progressive aspect of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* that surfaces in most episodes is the communal love that the Black women share with each other. Despite the arguments and fighting on the show, strong Black female friendships present an alternative to the stereotypical portrayals that typically center Black women in reality television. Two specific examples highlight progressive representations of Black female friendships. First, after discovering that Joseline is pregnant by Stevie J, Mimi, K. Michelle, and Mimi's friend Arianne meet over drinks to discuss the news. As Mimi begins to cry and explain the emotional stress that Stevie J causes her, K. Michelle sheds tears and consoles Mimi. While offering advice, K. Michelle explains "If you want to hurt, you can hurt with me. . . cuz' I've been there and I still have hurt days. You got to hold on being strong. And my heart goes out to you because I'm a single mama just like you"

(Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). From my perspective, this mutual understanding highlights how Black women love and empathize with each other. Secondly, Erica meets with K. Michelle and Rasheeda to discuss her situation with Lil Scrappy. Erica explains her break up with Lil Scrappy after he felt she was not there for him during an asthma attack. Their discussion is characterized by bonding and mutual understanding, rather than the vulgar language that is often on the show. For example Rasheeda, in response to the breakup says, “I don’t understand it [the break-up] and I know that’s got to be killing you” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012).

Conceptualizing the empowering relationships between Black women on the show, Cooper (2012) offers “ratchet feminism.” Although the word “ratchet” is primarily associated with Black women who are loud, unintelligent and usually hypersexual (Lewis, 2013), ratchet feminism refers to speaking against systemic oppression via “ratchtness” through what may be considered loud or ghetto language (Cooper, 2012). Cooper (2012) articulates that although the women of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* may be considered ratchet, they provide insight that exposes sexism in Hip Hop outside of academic jargon. Thus, the women of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, further feminist ideals in media discourse by defining themselves and loving each other through language that is relatable to everyday Black women.

Black Men: Sex, Pain, and Hip Hop

The controversy and success of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* is oftentimes traced to the exploits of Stevie J. For example, Bobb (2012) notes that fans of the show are fixated on “Stevie J’s many lies and ‘struggle faces’, Joseline’s audacity, and Mimi’s blind love” (para. 3). Additionally, Nostro (2012) remarks that Stevie J’s “unfaithful antics are front and center on the show” (para. 2). In alignment with these criticisms, although the show centers Black women in

the Hip Hop industry, from my perspective Stevie J is centered in the storylines, instigates the drama, and is the main antagonist throughout the first season. As such, the deconstruction of Stevie J using a Hip Hop feminist lens mindful of Jackson's (2006) scripts of Black masculinity allows for a more nuanced deconstruction of him and other Black men on the show. Along with Stevie J, Lil Scrappy is examined as well to theorize the complex characteristics that each character embodies.

Stevie J. Examining Stevie J reveals two troubling historical scripts related to Black masculinity. First, Stevie J reinforces Jackson's (2006) script of Black men as hypersexual and Orbe and Hopson's (2002) script of Black men as sexually aggressive. Stevie J embodies hypersexuality by manipulating Black women for his personal gain and sexual pleasure. For example, Stevie J asks Joseline and Mimi to go to therapy with him to resolve the tension among all three of them. He convinces Joseline to go by asking her to do it for their relationship. Similarly, he convinces Mimi to go to settle their disagreements over his cheating and Mimi agrees to therapy because she wants validation around how wrong their relationship is. Mimi says "something tells me that a therapist will think this situation is fucked up as much as I do" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Stevie J narrates his real reason for all three of them receiving therapy together by saying he wants them to have "a winning team" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). He explains further with, "At the end of the day I have Mimi on this side and I got Joseline on this side. We work great together, but if everybody could just zip it and let me control the show than it' be lights, camera, action" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). As a Black male using Hip Hop feminism, I am troubled by his reasoning because he reduces Mimi and Joseline to objects that are easily manipulated to his benefit. Furthermore, Stevie J's insistence on controlling Mimi's and Joseline's minds and bodies draws attention to the

stereotype of Black males as hypersexual since he intends to have sexual relationships with them both.

Secondly, Stevie J's actions depict Black men as emotionally abusive and irresponsible toward women of color. Stevie J inflicts emotional abuse toward Joseline and Mimi throughout season one. For example, Stevie J often views his relationship with Joseline through a business lens and ignores her emotions. After Joseline has an abortion he explains, "The abortion kind of fucked things up with me and Joseline. It's gon' to take a minute to sort things out, but for me the most important thing is to get that money. Got to stay focused" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Stevie J's equating Joseline, and their pregnancy, to products further dehumanizes her and objectifies her body. In contrast, the emotional damage he inflicts on Mimi cuts deeply for her as well, because of her investment in their relationship and the child they have together. Mimi continues to be cheated on by Stevie J, but lets him back in her life time and time again. Arianne, a friend of Mimi, comments on this situation: "It's all going well, then Stevie gets bored all of a sudden, and just does hurtful shit to Mimi. But Mimi's to blame to. She is always there to just take him back and welcome him back home with open arms as if nothing ever happened" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Arianne's comments speak to the emotional abuse and control that Stevie J has over Mimi. These representations of Black women also speak to Boylorn's (2008) discussion of the binary that is present on reality television where Black women are either independent or dependent on men. For example, Joseline is dependent on Stevie J for the advancement of her career, while Karlie is dependent on her male managers to support and produce a hit. Meanwhile, Erica is independent in the sense that she owns her home and does not rely on Lil Scrappy financially outside of child support. However, all of the women

on *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* appear to be emotionally dependent on the Black men in their lives.

Lil Scrappy. Similar to Stevie J, Lil Scrappy's storyline revolves around two women: his homey Shay and ex-finance Erica. Lil Scrappy is also influenced by the presence of his mother Mama Dee, who offers him advice on his relationships with Erica and Shay. Outside of the relationships with the women in his life that largely speak to the script of Black men as hypersexual, Lil Scrappy embodies two additional scripts around Black males: Black males as violent and Black males as uneducated/irresponsible (Jackson, 2006). As the only moderately successful male rapper on the show, Lil Scrappy is situated within the norms of Hip Hop culture and code of the streets. The code of the streets, which demands respect and requires retaliation for disrespect, refers to a system of rules for lower class communities where respect is central and emphasis is placed on "toughness, sexual conquest, and hustling" (Oliver, 2006, p. 928). In maintaining the code of the streets, Lil Scrappy reinforces the script of Black males as violent. According to HHF, violent Black males are problematic because Black males are more likely to be jailed, leaving children fatherless, which greatly affects Black women and the entire Black community.

One scene that highlights Lil Scrappy's reinforcement of Black males as violent occurs when Stevie J calls Erica a "bitch" for her involvement in his personal business with Mimi. Erica tells Lil Scrappy, and he feels that Stevie J disrespected Erica and needs to apologize. Erica and Lil Scrappy meet Stevie J and Joseline at the studio, where Stevie J apologizes for his behavior. Lil Scrappy and Stevie J are talking respectfully at first, but the conversation escalates after Lil Scrappy, ironically, refers to Joseline as a "bitch." Then, Joseline and Erica start to argue about Erica's nonexistent relationship with Stevie J. Suddenly, Lil Scrappy and Stevie J begin to fight

and continue to fight even after security attempts to break them up. Stevie J stumbles away as Lil Scrappy, now in a t-shirt, continues to yell vulgarities and punches the aluminum siding. Two Black males attacking each other clearly align with Jackson's (2006) script of Black males as violent, and reinforce the violent aesthetic of Black culture in Hip Hop reality television. Stevie J and Lil Scrappy's fight over "their" women is ironic in the sense that they both refer to each other's women as "bitches." Defending their women from the perception of being a "bitch" highlights how Stevie J and Lil Scrappy simultaneously "protect" their women from being disrespected, yet both men disrespect other Black women on the show. This underscores how Black men substantiate sexism and patriarchy under the guise of shielding "their" women's honor.

Secondly, Lil Scrappy centers the script of Black males as uneducated and irresponsible. The Southern accent that Lil Scrappy speaks in is characterized by choppy sentences and slang such as "keepin' it real" and "you feel me" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012) which reinforces the notion of Black males as uneducated. Lil Scrappy's mispronunciation of words in relation to "normal" U.S. American English diminishes perceptions of Black male intelligence and limits Black male agency in society. Lil Scrappy's unique Southern slang serves as capital in that it helps him sell records in the Hip Hop sphere; however, beyond Hip Hop it limits his agency to advance in society because his dialect is deemed abnormal or uneducated. Lil Scrappy is also presented as irresponsible by asking Erica to take him off child support. Erica responds that she asked him to put up money for his daughter and she has yet to receive it. Lil Scrappy explains that he did not get around to it and would provide for his daughter whenever she needed. The storyline of child support centers the idea that Black men are either unable to or do not want to provide for their children. Though this representation of Lil Scrappy not providing

for his daughter damages Black masculinity by divorcing Black men from the role of provider (Jackson, 2006), Erica's advocacy on behalf of her daughter can be understood via HHF as her using her agency to ensure support for her child.

Though Hip Hop feminism requires the critique of Stevie J and Lil Scrappy's male privilege, it also calls for consideration of representations of Black masculinity in Hip Hop that depart from traditional negative scripts. Morgan (1999) highlights how Black men are engaging complex systems, such as racism, that leave them with singular representations of themselves, often absent the presence of family or community. Stevie J's and Lil Scrappy's sexist behavior toward women certainly cannot be justified; however, situating their positionalities helps contextualize their behavior and how they are depicted on the show. For example, during his therapy session with Mimi, Stevie J reveals that he never knew or even asked about his mother. During the session, Stevie J smiles and shakes his head explaining that, "I don't know if I ever wanted to know, being honest. I mean it would have been nice to have a relationship with my mother, but I didn't" (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). By expressing his emotions and thoughts in therapy, Stevie J counters the negative scripts of Black masculinity. The lack of relationship with his mother potentially influences Stevie J's troubling relationships with women. Being raised by a single father, without the presence of his mother, Stevie J's treatment of women could relate to him not having a female role model at home. This absence disclosed to the audience underscores the possibility that he does not know how to love women respectfully. Similar to absentee fathers in daughters' lives, Stevie J's mother's absence possibly contextualizes his maltreatment of women and self-esteem. It is in this humanized space where I believe both Black men and women have the potential for healing to occur.

Lil Scrappy also counters negative scripts of Black masculinity. For example, after Mama Dee calls Erica a “bitch,” Lil Scrappy tells her not to refer her as that because she is the mother of his child. In this sense, Lil Scrappy demonstrates a level of respect toward Erica that is missing from Stevie J’s interactions with Mimi and Joseline. Furthermore, Lil Scrappy presents a departure from Black males as sexual or sexually aggressive by centering relationships and love. For instance, after Mama Dee encourages Lil Scrappy to be promiscuous, he responds, “She just want me to be on some fuck type stuff you know what I’m saying, playa type stuff. I ain’t trying to hurt Erica... I love her. And show ain’t hell trying to hurt Shay. That’s the homey” (Abrahamson & Scott-Young, 2012). Lil Scrappy’s declaration of love for Erica and expression of respect for Shay is significant in that media rarely show Black men’s love and respect for Black women. By not objectifying the women in his life, Lil Scrappy demonstrates a more mature Black male Hip Hop persona in the genre of Hip Hop. This is a prime area where HHF can create dialogue with rappers and males influenced by Hip Hop to reconceptualize how women are treated in the Hip Hop industry. Advocating for such dialogue, Hip Hop feminist Cooper (2013) ask male rappers to let female rappers be heard, interrogate their own privilege, and be allies in the way females dictate and allow. By taking this stance, HHF creates a space for reinterpretations of Blackness in Hip Hop reality television and society at large.

Conclusion

This project has examined representations of Black femininity and Black masculinity in *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* utilizing Hip Hop feminism (HHF) as a theoretical framework. I used textual analysis to expose dominant scripts and negative stereotypes that are present in *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*. This project adds to critical intercultural scholarship focused on representations of Blackness and Black culture while simultaneously extending the scholarly conversation

focused on reality TV and Hip Hop. Additionally, using Hip Hop feminism allows for reconceptualizations of Black femininity and Black masculinity on reality television.

First, I aimed to center what Hip Hop feminism reveals about representations of Black females and males on reality television. The representations of Black females and males on *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* reveal the continuing presence of negative imagery that plagues Black people on television in general and in reality TV specifically. Females such as Mimi and K. Michelle embody Collins' (2009) articulations of sapphire and the jezebel, while males such as Stevie J and Lil Scrappy embody Jackson's (2006) and Hopson and Orbe's (2002) scripts of the Black male as sexual, violent, and emotionally unstable.

Despite dominant images and scripts, *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* also presents more holistic, positive representations of Black females and males. Viewing *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* through an HHF lens reveals Black women as caring mothers, compassionate friends, and strong, independent women. A particular moment that stands out to this is when K. Michelle writes a song for Mimi that expresses her relationship with Stevie J, which for Mimi serves as a form of therapy and demonstrates the importance of their friendship. Taking account of Black males on the show, there is a deviation from the traditional cool pose (Majors & Bilson, 1992) that is often presented on television. At times, Black men embody vulnerability by expressing their emotions, such as love, in relationships with the women in their lives. This space of emotional vulnerability and communal bonding is where *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* deviates from traditional representations of Black femininity and Black masculinity on television. For instance, in one scene Stevie J consoles Mimi as they both bond over the absence of and abandonment by their mothers in their lives.

Secondly, I revealed how Black men exert their male privilege in Hip Hop reality television and how Black women subvert male privilege in Hip Hop reality television. By deconstructing *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* via HHF, I found that Black males continue to control the careers of Black female artists. These personal and professional relationships were characterized by female acquiescence to male managers and producers. The considerable absence of female management in the industry highlights how Hip Hop remains a male dominated space that marginalizes women. Centering Black women in Hip Hop reality television reveals that Black women subvert male privilege through two main avenues. First, Black women control their sexual agency and the means by which they define themselves. Secondly, Black women “talk back” (hooks, 1989, p. 9) to Black men by challenging sexism and demanding control over their bodies and music. Reading Black women, such as Mimi and K. Michelle, through HHF provides nuanced insight into how Black females embody agency in Hip Hop reality television.

As an avid viewer of the show, examining *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* from an HHF perspective offers great insight into my enjoyment of the show. As a Black male, I enjoy the show because of the dramatic storylines that are presented on screen. Storylines situated around Black female drama, instigated by Black men, is entertaining to me because of the fighting that occurs among the cast members. Taking pleasure in Black women’s drama and fighting troubles me because in some sense it situates the Black female body as abnormal, different, and Other, which further marginalizes their bodies and voices. As a Black man, with male privilege, I have the luxury to enjoy Black women’s drama, without losing anything of consequence. Yet, the mistreatment of Black women does implicate Black men including myself, because if Black women can be dehumanized then Black men, just as easily, can be as well. If Black women are

being objectified and oppressed, then Black males are too. From my perspective, we cannot escape that we are brothers and sisters and that each of us plays a part in our culture. Thus, my enjoyment of the show implicates me in the continued oppression of Black women.

Recognizing my complicity has made me question my future viewing of the show, and has also made me contemplate my relationship with feminism and Hip Hop feminism. For example, I find myself asking: have I become a feminist? And how does HHF resonate in my own life and practice? This complexity or “intriguing shades of gray” (Morgan, 1999, p. 62) is where I find myself in relation to Hip Hop reality television, feminism, and Hip Hop feminism. Embracing transparency, I still watch *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*. Yet my relationship with the show is more of a love/hate relationship rather than a pure form of escapism. The drama attracts me, but the objectification of women calls me to critique and pulls me out of an entertainment only stance.

The utilization of Hip Hop feminism as theory offers more complex theorizations of representations of Blackness in Hip Hop reality television. Since Black women are most often presented via stereotypical scripts, they have limited agency to express their voices. This is problematic because Black women need representations that underscore the diverse experiences of Black women in society. Future directions for analysis of Hip Hop reality television could explore representations of classism, “authentic” Blackness, and female beauty in relation to Hip Hop culture. For example, the cast of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* were rarely shown working but drove expensive cars and lived in large houses indicating upper class privilege. This perception in relation to Black culture is an area for further analysis. I also recommend examining the entire first season of *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, coupled with season two, to further analyze how

privilege and marginalization continue to inform the representations of the characters on the show.

Reality television needs more diverse depictions of Black femininity, Black masculinity, and Black relationships. We need representations of Black women as mothers and businesswomen that do not solely position them as being loud, violent, or rude. We need representations of Black men that portray them as loving fathers, with stable employment outside of stereotypical roles such as rappers or athletes. We need representations of Black relationships as loving and affectionate rather than manipulative and dysfunctional. From my perspective, a dialogue needs to occur not only among the Black community, but society at large to address how people of color are explicitly and implicitly damaged via our representations on reality television programs. Yet, this dialogue also needs to include how such shows simultaneously present favorable representations that can positively impact our community. This space of dialogue, I think, is where there is the most progressive potential for change in representations of Blackness on reality television and in media at large.

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