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The Art of Becoming

by

Charity J. Jackson

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

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

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

This study aims to bring attention to the ways in which Black womanhood is curated in the digital landscape by both Black women and non-Black women. Representations of Black women, often coded as negative, circulate mainstream media today, but when the same representations are taken up by non-Black woman bodies, they are regarded differently as unique, profitable, and desirable. In this context, Black womanhood is described as a specific performance assembled through cultural references popularized by Black women. To explore this topic, I analyze two Instagram accounts through visual analysis. The results show how my own curation of my image on Instagram account as a Black woman and Emma Hallberg's, a white Swedish woman accused of "Blackfishing," curation of her Instagram account are shaped by the performance of Black womanhood in digital space.

INDEX WORDS: Black womanhood, Blackfishing, Black identity, Racial and gender performance, Racial

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2021

The Art of Becoming

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May 2021

DEDICATION

In dedication to Black women in search of being seen, the freedom to feel, and the experience of pure joy. May this work inspire, affirm, and support you in some small way.

From a Black woman in search of the same.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to everyone who helped make this work possible. To my committee and my cohort, thank you for taking the time to keep me focused and motivated to finished.

To my friends and family to supported me throughout my journey, I appreciate you undying love and consistent cheerleading through this process.

To my grandmothers, whose constant prayers I know are the reason that I have gotten this far, everything I do is in thanks to you.

And the great state of Ohio, to whom, I'll always call home.

Without you all, none of this would be possible.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I was born Black. I was born a woman. I was not born a Black woman. That is something I became.

Black womanhood is a unique experience that is consistently made and remade on the micro, macro, and global scale. It is something that is passed down and evolves. It is a struggle for identity and freedom. It is a constant fight to be seen. It is something that many women have had to grow to love despite the consistent pressure to do the opposite. It is something that I, myself, had to grow to love despite what the world told me to do. It is an identity that I had to learn, unlearn, create, edit, and edit again. Because of this, my identity as a Black woman is something very personal. It is not only something that I acquired based on my visual markers as both Black and woman, but also something that I created and harvested from my own life experiences. Something that I worked for, building upon all those before me. Something that I grew, but also, given my visual markers of both the color of my skin and expression of my gender, is something that is sometimes imposed upon me in certain contexts. Regardless, I am proud to have the privilege of being a Black woman.

There are many things that affected the formation of my identity as a Black woman including, my family, my friends, my school environments, and my location. These things I had very little say in. I came to know the tenets of who I was, Blackness, womanhood, Black womanhood, and what they meant to me separately as individual concepts. However, one major catalyst to the formation of my idea of Black womanhood was reality television and social media.

Reality television and social media, to me, were windows into the rest of the world. Beginning in my pre-teen years, I used reality television and social media as a tool to surround

myself with Black women. I watched *Love and Hip Hop* (inclusive of all spinoffs), *Married to Medicine*, *Basketball Wives*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *W.A.G.S. (Wives and Girlfriends of Sports Stars*, (inclusive of all spinoffs), *Real Housewives of Potomac*, and many more shows featuring the innermost lives of Black women. These show featured people who were marked as successful while being Black, being a woman, and being a Black woman. The voyeuristic aspect of reality television gave me something that the popular scripted dramas featuring leading Black women such as, *Empire*, *Scandal*, and *How To Get Away With Murder*, could not. Although I did watch the scripted dramas, they were fictional, and reality television was the “real.”¹

Starting with the first episode of a season and binge-watching until the last episode afforded me access to curated performances of Black womanhood over time. I could see how each cast member edited their character, persona, and style, and I inferred direct links to enhance my personal identification. The makeup of Shawne O’Neil on *Basketball Wives* led me to buy my first makeup contour palette. NeNe Leakes on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* led me to be more witty and outspoken. *Love and Hip Hop* inspired me to buy my first wig and start wearing Fashion Nova. *WAGS* made me prioritize financial stability in a partner, and *Married to Medicine* made me demand all my medical providers be Black women. Social media compounded all these ideas. It allowed me to see other Black women embodying and performing various aspects of Black womanhood. They were even more real and seemed more accessible. They showed me the behind-the-scenes elements of the performance. This made me believe that I, too, could achieve their “brand/performance” of Black womanhood through makeup tutorials, fashion hauls, inspirational messages, and vulnerable struggles. I unconsciously studied their performance and ways of being. I became more connected to the ideas of Black womanhood,

¹ Reality television is highly produced and constructed with many of the scenes being staged

what it meant to me, and what I wanted to be. Reality television and social media were both vehicles, which helped me form my ideas around Black womanhood.

I felt comfortable negotiating those ideals of womanhood with the women on the television and digital screen like I never had before. Although I had always watched reality television, seeing shows that featured Black women made me feel connected to these women and their performances of Black womanhood as a young person born both Black and woman. Although I did not pick up every aspect or characteristic of the women, the connection we shared was meaningful. The women on screen and I were both navigating our identities as Black women.

Although Black womanhood differs worldwide and across generations, it remains an identity that Black women negotiate against a critical backdrop. Although one could argue that all Black women have some shared experiences, this work specifically speaks to cis – Black women born in the United States of America, their identity, and their gendered performance. Due to the overt visual markers that denote both race and gender, their identity as Black women is one that they cannot take off and replace for another. At this moment, Black womanhood is in constant motion in relationship to contemporary twenty-first-century models and performances of Black womanhood.

Representations of Black womanhood flood mainstream American society, and with it has followed a volume of criticism about their impact on American popular culture. With many of the representations of Black womanhood deriving from stereotypes of Sapphire (Black hostile nagging wife), Mammy (Black nurturing, domestic service), or Jezebel (the sexualized bad Black girl), much of the known academic literature dating back to 1998 views the depictions of Black women in popular culture as one-dimensional (West 1995, 456, 461, 462). Popular culture is an

important sphere where the status quo is both upheld and challenged. However, there is still a gap in scholarly research analyzing the performance of Black womanhood in popular culture. Although the criticism surrounding performances of Black womanhood is prevalent, the presence of Black femininity and its performances are undeniable forces that influence its audiences. According to scholar Aisha Durham, “the hypervisibility of the imagined Black female body in popular culture can translate to the collective muted voice of real young Black women (Durham 2014, 3).”

Within the scope of my project, Black womanhood is a set of encoded representations that collectively signify Black women in media. Blackness is defined by the historical, cultural, and social understanding of Black people. The definition of woman or womanhood that I use is drawn from Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, where “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one (de Beauvoir 7) (Butler 8).” Although definitions and hegemonic performances of Black womanhood vary across the African diaspora, Blackness and womanhood have been reduced to racist and sexist tropes in the United States, which are heavily displayed throughout media. Similar to Raquel Gates, I am interested in “the idea of ‘Black [woman]’ as it comes to be defined in the process of circulation through popular culture (Gates, 2018, 28).” Where Black womanhood rest at the intersection of Blackness (having melanated skin and ancestry traced back to Africa) and womanhood (cis-gendered women who were both assigned female at birth and identify as a woman), my work seeks to interrogate the production and reception of the performance of Black womanhood in relationship to- within and against- American tropes and controlling images as depicted on reality television.

I recognize that by branding the performance as “Black woman,” I am predisposed to universalizing and overgeneralizing the experience of all Black women, although that is not my

intent. My work focuses on the ways in which Black womanhood is performed in the US media through the para “real” spaces of reality television and Instagram. I coin the term para “real” spaces to describe virtual spaces that are positioned as being real or authentic, despite being highly constructed and curated. The para “real” spaces run alongside reality but are experienced through a screen. This para “real” space resembles the absolute real, disguising crafted manipulations. Crafted manipulations are defined by actions, which alter the real, including the use of Photoshop within a social media post or a staged confrontation within a reality television show. By dissecting the racial and gendered performances enacted through the bodies of Black women in these hyper-visual spaces that mimic realism, I consider how Black womanhood is constructed, taken up, and imagined to address uneven media power relations, media representation, and hegemonic spheres of power. My work explores the ways in which Black womanhood is performed, exploited (by Black and non-Black woman), and is a space of contestation and struggle. Engaging the works of Aisha Durham, Evelyn Higginbotham, L. H. Stallings, Darlene Clark Hine, Safiya Noble, Jacqueline Bobo, Stuart Hall, and Patricia Hill Collins, my analysis examines the production and performance of Black womanhood that influences popular culture and identity formation. I will use a textual analysis connecting theoretical texts to visual analyses of my own and social media influencer, Emma Hallberg’s Instagram accounts.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Black Popular Culture:

Is popular culture a reflection of the people, or are the people a reflection of popular culture? This question animates academic debate in the field of cultural studies. One thing most scholars agree upon is that the two are closely related and build upon one another. For this

project, I focus my literature review on works centering on popular culture, representation, and television as both are heavily involved in identity creation and negotiation for many people.

Speaking about media and popular culture in 2014, Harris and Goldman argue that “[Popular culture] started as a rebellious form of culture giving voices to those outside of the mainstream continues to exist as a means for expression, socialization, and entertainment (Harris and Goldman 1-2).” As new forms of popular culture are expressed through new mediums, the literature around popular culture continues to develop. Harris and Goldman take up conversations around the importance of analyzing popular culture and mass media, including television, films, blogging, and social media, to understand society (Harris and Goldman 2).

Popular culture is influential. Its images and messages teach individuals how to think, act, believe, and perceive the world around them. In fact, scholars have argued that mass media is one of the strongest agents in the socialization process, along with family, friends, and school (Harris and Goldman 2).

Harris and Goldman began to think about how popular culture affects Black women in myriad ways. Popular culture’s depictions of life tend to be exclusive; therefore, Black women have often struggled to be included (Harris and Goldman 2). Harris and Goldman argue that Black women have a unique position within popular culture that differs from their counterparts. “[Researchers] may classify Black women with Black men, with White women, or with women of color. This bias fails to consider the unique position of being both Black and woman (Harris and Goldman 2).”

Ward takes up the conversation about the positionality of Black women in popular culture in the 2015 book *Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality*

TV. Reality television programs that feature predominantly Black cast members serve as a voyeuristic tool that mimics Black reality or popular culture. Although the representations on-screen are specifically edited and produced racial and gender performances, millennial audiences subconsciously interpret scenes moving across the screen as authentic or real, which paint a distorted and often one-sided picture of the people represented in actual reality. Ward's approach to unpacking popular culture with Black womanhood in the forefront fills a gap in popular culture and media studies literature, acknowledging that Black women have a unique experience in society that differs from the singular experience of being Black or the singular experience of being a woman.

Taking a similar approach by placing Black women at the forefront of popular culture, my work seeks to extend the current conversation by focusing on the ways in which identity is negotiated and produced within society. With this emphasis, I aim to understand the way that the performance of Black womanhood reflects performances and curation of the self on Instagram.

1.1.2 Gender and Racial Performance:

There are specific ways in which gender and race are performed and enacted on and through the body and flesh. Simone de Beauvoir believed that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one," regarding womanhood as performative (de Beauvoir 7). Judith Butler builds upon this framework by defining gender as a social construct that is a result of cultural practices "to see descriptions of other cultures as evidence for alternative but equally real conceptions of what it means to be a woman (Butler 6)." This approach allows the gendered body to become a performative space, signifying a foundation of understanding (Butler 136, 139). While this theory has many merits, the universality of womanhood depicted in this theory is white-centered and fails to look at womanhood through an intersectional lens.

DeFrantz and Gonzalez use Black Performance Theory to “show us how subjects and subjectivities animate Blackness across landscapes (2014 viii).” Arguing that Blackness is born and reborn as something uniquely itself, their theory highlights how Blackness is performed and executed (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014, vii-viii).

If performance constitutes forms of cultural staging—conscious, heightened, reflexive, framed, contained— within a limited time span of action from plays to carnivals, from poetry to prose, from weddings to funerals, from jokes to storytelling, and more; if performativity marks identity through the habitus of repetitive enactments, reiterations of stylized norms, and inherited gestural conventions from the way we sit, stand, speak, dress, dance, play, eat, hold a pencil and more; if the performative is the culmination of both in that it does something to make a material, physical, and situational difference— then BPT speaks to why all this matters to Blackness and to contested identities (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 2014, viii).

Although both compelling arguments, neither theory takes into account how race and gender are performed together. I seek to fill this gap using intersectional approaches emerging from Black feminism. Although both white women, Black men, and Black women all encounter some burden of discrimination, the overlapping nature of the oppression of being both Black and woman sets Black women’s experience apart. Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) captures this experience in “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics” through the dissection of several legal cases involving Black women. Crenshaw’s research depicts the clear distinction between the Black women’s experience from those of non-Black women and Black men. Although specifically referencing legal cases with her research, the themes present in this text

apply to popular culture. Without this intersectional lens, the Black women's experiences are erased.

Knowing that Black women have a specific experience different from their white women and Black male counterparts, I seek to answer the question, if one is not born a Black woman, can you become one? Because both Blackness and womanhood can be performed, I argue that Black womanhood is also a performance. Accepting this notion contends that non-Black and non-cis, non-trans woman can also perform Black womanhood.

1.1.3 Black Women and Pop Culture Representations:

Several stereotypes of Black women have emerged and evolved over time in popular culture. These stereotypes include Jezebel (sexualized bad Black girl), Sapphire (Black hostile nagging wife), and Mammy (Black nurturing, domestic service) (Hill Collins s17). Hill Collins suggests in 1986 that “stereotypes represent externally-defined, controlling images of Afro-American womanhood that have been central to the dehumanization of Black women and the exploitation of Black women's labor (Hill Collins s17).” Hill Collins continues stating that Black women's resistance to the multifaceted oppression challenges white patriarchy threatening the hegemonic status quo. Due to this opposition, media has ridiculed and attacked Black womanhood with an assortment of “externally-defined negative images” to punish, control, and keep Black women in their place (Hill Collins s17). “When Black females choose to value those aspects of Afro-American womanhood that are stereotyped, ridiculed, and maligned in academic scholarship and the popular media, they are actually questioning some of the basic ideas used to control dominated groups in general (Hill Collins s17).” The uniqueness of Black womanhood, its perspective, and its experiences produce endemic commonalities of the larger group of Black women (Hill Collins s16). Stereotypes, negative images, and misleading assumptions overly

populate the media landscape, misrepresenting the identities of Black women and become a fundamental aspect of distorting definitions of self.

In Carolyn West's 1998 article "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical images of Black women and their implication for psychotherapy," West links the stereotypes of Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy to their potential psychological effects for Black women, including eating disorders, anger, sexual problems, and victimization. These representations significantly impact Black women negatively and influence the identity development of Black women differentiating them from their counterparts. However, there remains a gap in the literature about how these same stereotypes affect and influence identity when performed by non-Black or non-women identifying bodies.

Continuing this conversation, Tia Tyree looks at the ways in which popular culture impacts identity development (Tyree 395). Young women look to popular culture to "shape their conceptualization of Black womanhood," culture, and beauty standards (Tyree 395). In 2016, Tia Tyree dissected ten reality television shows from 2005 through 2008 and found that each show with at least one Black cast member performs a form of Blackness that is closely related to the angry Black woman, Jezebel, Sapphire, or hoodrat. These intersecting conversations help establish the repetitive presences of stereotypes of Black women across reality television but do not offer a theory about the meaning of these stereotypes to popular culture.

In addition to these stereotypes, Black women are also associated with the newer term, circa 2012, "ratchet" (adj.). In "Shoving aside the politics of the performance of respectability: Black women, reality tv, and the ratchet performance," Therí Pickens defines "ratchet" as a strategic performance of excess and exaggerated style deriving from words like "ghetto" and "crunk" (2015). Associated with poor and working-class Black women, this term has heavy

negative connotations and is commonly associated as a way to degrade Black womanhood (Pickens 44).

Additionally, L.H. Stallings resumes conversations about the use of the signifier of ratchet. L.H. Stallings defines ratchet as “foolish, ignorant, ho’ishness, ghetto, and a dance. It is the performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race, as opposed to the promotion of failure or respectability that is important here (Stallings 2013, 136).” Stallings implies that the performance of ratchet is a way of undoing womanhood and working against respectability politics. Stallings speaks of the “Black Ratchet Imagination” and its “ability to unleash postwork imagination and antiwork activities that do so much more for gender and sexuality than institutional and political dismissals (136-137).” Looking at Black womanhood as a performance, similar traits emerge across the Black diaspora. “Black womanhood as a performance becomes conditioned by myriad other performances, encounters, and interpolations (Stallings 138).

Adding to the academic imaginings of ratchet, Brittany Cooper challenges rigid notions of Black womanhood in 2017. Through the collectively coined Crunk Feminist lens, Cooper interrogates Black women’s representation and analysis in popular culture, pushing back on notions of ratchet, Jezebel, and Sapphire. “[Ratchet] is the second or third cousin of the terms “ghetto” and “hood” that preceded it, has similar meanings, and it has been embedded in popular culture as long as Black culture itself (Cooper 119).” Cooper argues that “ratchetness can be seen as a dismissal of respectability – a rejection of (rather than a failure to embody) propriety – an act of transgression that Black woman can use to push back against too-rigid expectations of acceptable womanhood (Cooper 119),” an innovative perspective to the conversations about

Black womanhood in popular culture. Through this lens, ratchet is not just an action; it is also an act of freeing oneself from white colonized notions of appropriateness.

Although the objectification of Black womanhood is evident throughout history, the popular stereotypes commonly associated with Black women are being recreated and reproduced throughout popular culture by both Black and non-Black and/or non-cis women to promote specific cultural notions capitalizing off of Black women. This can be seen through the performance of drag personas, reality television personalities, social media influencers, elicited entertainment memes, and other performances that go viral in digital space and popular culture at large. A newer phenomenon, known as “Blackfishing” has yet to be explored in academia. “Blackfishing” refers to the art of performing a persona characteristic of Black womanhood by non-Black women, Black non-identifying women, or non-Black and non-identifying women. Blackfishing will be explored explicitly in chapter two.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) What are the ways Black womanhood is performed and represented in “para” real virtual spaces like Instagram?
- 2) What can one learn from my own curation of my performances of Black womanhood?
- 3) What aspects of the performance of commodified Black womanhood can be taken up by folks who are not born or assigned as cis-Black girls and women?

1.3 Methodology

My work uses a visual and textual analysis informed by Black feminist thought. As it is a theory that started with Black women at its inception, Black Feminist Thought has the best methodical lenses for analyzing the performance of Black womanhood. This method allows me

to take up the outsider within approach, to construct a dynamic space that encapsulates the performance of Black women toward a distinctive standpoint. Like Aisha Durham, “I draw from the personal to make sense of my felt researcher/ed self in relation to virtual bodies and other flesh-bone Black women grappling our bodies in relation to media and popular culture representations or what [she] describe[s] as living memories (Durham, 2014, 2).” Drawing attention to the interlocking layers of oppression, I will bring Black womanhood to the forefront of popular culture discussion by using “an analytical model that explores the relationship between oppression and consciousness (Hill Collins 1986, 16).”

Borrowing from the scholarship of Raquel Gates (2018) *Double Negative*, my work uses the concept of negativity as a mode of analysis for seeing. Negativity is not used to denote disdain or criticism of the text. Negativity as a concept marks the distance from normative white hegemonic standards considered the positive to the complete inversion of these images, considered the negative (Gates, 2018). To this end, I will track performances of Black womanhood that rely on a deployment of the “negative” or a distancing from the norms of whiteness to effectively perform Black womanhood. This method “seeks to move the discussion past the first level of scrutiny and onto the question of what meaning these texts hold relative to the culture that [produces it] (Gates, 2018, 19)” in relation to race and gender. This “bottom-up” approach to culture highlights a better understanding of these performances of Black women on reality television (Gates 2018). Gates asserts that much like the medium of photography, “the negative image is a necessary component for the production of positive image Gates, 2018, 17).” With this approach, I contend that social media platforms, including Instagram, offer an alternative reading of Black womanhood and the cultural production of Black women not visible in their positive counterparts.

I intend to examine contemporary representations of Black women in popular media and situate negative theory to contextualize its reception on Instagram. Using a textual analysis as a qualitative methodology, I plan to unpack encoded themes and recurring patterns to garner a sense of cultural meaning. This analysis will consist of a primary viewing of each Instagram page to get acquainted with each account. Following, my second level of analysis and viewing will consist of pulling relevant images from each page and noting recurring patterns and themes. My third approach will closely examine the performances of race and gender of each Instagram user's page. After collecting the emergent themes and recurrent patterns, I will unpack both my own performance of Black womanhood represented on my Instagram page against that of the popular non-Black woman Instagram influencer, Emma Hallberg.

In doing this close reading of the media texts from Instagram, I will situate the performance of Black womanhood and interrogate representations of the performance of Black womanhood in social media by adding self-valuation ("replacing externally-derived images with authentic Black female images (Hill Collins s17)") and self-definition ("challenging the political knowledge-validation process (Hill Collins s16)"). Using my analysis, I hope to extend and reimagine the positionality of Black women in popular culture literature.

1.4 Implications and Conclusion

My research explores the ways popular culture constructs Black womanhood as both hyper-visible and hyper-invisible when performed by Black women, exploiting, erasing, and devaluing their identity. I focus on the ways that Black women resist oppressive and controlling images to reclaim their identity.

In conclusion, my work brings awareness to the ways Black women negotiate identities and representation to make sense of media texts. My work aims to interrogate performances of Black women in social media and popular culture, encouraging approaches that do not rely on the exploitation and invisibility of Black women (Durham 5). By analyzing the media text of my own Instagram page alongside the Instagram page of popular social media influencer Emma Hallberg, I will unpack the ways in which Black womanhood is negotiated and received, gaining a clearer understanding of the mechanisms that allow for and police varied performances of Black womanhood (Bobo 5-6). It is my hope that my work will contribute to Black feminist literature on Black womanhood in digital and popular cultures.

2 THE ART OF BECOMING YOURSELF

2.1 Introduction – Looking In While Looking Out

Launched in October 2010, Instagram is a social media platform that invites users to share themselves through captured images and videos, 15-second stories, highlights, and IGTV (Dean 2021). With one billion active users, its visual emphasis draws audiences in, becoming voyeuristic in nature (Dean 2021). With this constant need to show your best self to your followers, Instagram becomes a space where both viewers and users create and negotiate ideologies around identity. Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? How can I show that to my followers? Will they like it?

I am not different. Despite acknowledging the dynamics at play, I still fall prey to the same patterns. In this para “real” space², I am forced to curate an image that I feel captures somewhat of who I want to be and more of who I am supposed to be, hoping that my followers will not only accept my product but like it as well. These types of dialogues are happening across both the digital and popular culture landscape. What does it mean to be a Black woman on Instagram? This chapter looks at my personal Instagram page as both subject and object. As a subject, I use my Instagram page in a way that communicates encoded messages about contemporary Blackness, womanhood, and the intersectional nature of Black womanhood. As an object, it is a discursive site, and it is a digital space where I produce and curate Blackness, womanhood, and Black womanhood. Looking closely at both, I intend to look at the ways in which I produce, curate, and circulate Black womanhood.

In this chapter, I utilize an autoethnographic approach, becoming both the researcher and the researched in a way that only an autoethnography could do (Durham 20). Using the work of

² the term para “real” space denotes virtual spaces that are positioned as being real or authentic, despite being highly constructed and curated. It runs alongside reality but is experienced through a screen. It resembles the absolute real, disguising crafted manipulations.

Home with Hip Hop Feminism: Performances in Communication and Culture by Dr. Aisha Durham as a framework, I “chart my lived experience[s] of navigating representations of [Blackness, womanhood, and] Black womanhood (Durham 7).” By giving my account of my experience, while contextualizing conversations around identity at the intersection of race and gender, it is my hope that this work portrays an experience with Black women’s practices of curating the self in a context of hyper-visibility and hyper-invisibility in social media spaces. Following Dr. Durham, I take from my personal history and memory to make clear of my researcher/researched self in regards to Black womanhood and popular culture representations (Durham 2).

In *Practices of Looking* (2009), Sturken and Cartwright encourage the analysis of images to better understand meaning made through specific cultural contexts. They asserted that society “engage(s) in practices of looking to communicate, to influence, and to be influenced (Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 9).” Under this paradigm, representations, myths, ideologies, and images become principal tenants to understanding society. Using the definition present in the text, representations are “languages and images used to create meaning about the world around us (Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 12).” Their work dictates that images hold a plethora of meanings “that include their formal aspects, their cultural and socio-historical references, the way they make reference to the images that precede and surround them, and the context in which they are displayed (Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 46).”

Also discussing images, Susan Sontag wrote *On Photography*, a series of essays “about the meaning and career of photographs (Sontag V)” in 1977. Since that time, technology has advanced the way we take and share photographs, but many of the principles described by Sontag still apply to the modern era. “In Plato’s Cave” discusses humankind’s relationship with

photography. “[P]hotographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing (Sontag 1).” Sontag asserts that photography allows people to capture and manipulate little pieces of reality of the world around them (Sontag 2). Every picture has the photographer’s imposed standards and biases of their subject (Sontag 4). Through their photograph, the photographers assign value and worth. Photography allows photographers to take control of their surroundings because the act of taking an image impacts the way the picture is being taken by both the photographer and what is being photographed. Because of such, photographs can never be reality or absolute truth, just a perception of reality, an illusion of truth, and an idea of the past.

Additionally, Sontag believes that images cannot be understood in isolation but need narratives and stories to be realized. According to Sontag, “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses (Sontag 18).” To this scholar, photos are deceptive but are also tools that enhance the experience and confirm identity in a consumerist society in which people become addicted, needing validation (Sontag 19). “Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution (Sontag 19).” More than forty years since the publishing of her work, her closing sentence rings true: “Today, everything exists to end in a photograph (Sontag 19).”

The theories produced by Sturken, Cartwright, and Sontag can be applied to the way that Instagram is used today. The social media platform exists to capture portions of reality, thus allowing its users to distort and manipulate their world to display a reflection of their curated self. Users can become addicted to displaying carefully constructed pictures of themselves on the platform to affirm their constructed perception of reality. To fully understand what is happening

in the picture, you must also understand the context and the social reality that made the picture possible.

Using these assertions, my work utilizes my personal Instagram account to explore the application further with hopes to help better understand the meaning ascribed to all Black women and illustrate the positionality and cultural identity of Black womanhood.

2.2 Thinking Through Identity Creation and Negotiation

Black women have a long history of collective identity building distinct from their counterparts. In *Righteous Discontent* (1993), Evelyn Higginbotham outlines the practice of politics of respectability. Widely circulated in 1900 – 1920, respectability politics were a set of standard rules and social practices governing the Black community. With assimilationist leaning, respectability politics relied on the conformity of the Black community to the manners and morals of the dominant societal norms to win respect and acceptance from their white counterparts while concurrently distancing oneself from negative racial stereotypes (Higginbotham 187). Popularized by Black Baptist women, the practice reinforced the hegemonic values of white America to “bring Black America in line with both the religious and class values of the dominant society (196).” Heavily emphasizing individual reform, conformity was enforced with no room for error, as individual behavior determined the behavior of the whole, “ever-cognizant [that] the gaze of white America focused perpetually upon each and every Black person and recorded his or her transgression in an overall accounting of Black inferiority (Higginbotham 196).”

During this time period, “Black womanhood and white womanhood were represented with diametrically opposed sexualities (Higginbotham 190).” Black women were symbols of uncleanness and Black sexual deviance (Higginbotham 190). Contesting the pervasive negative

images, respectability politics strictly enforced the behavior of Black women, regarding them as the caretakers of the race to refute Black biological inferiority by the production of alternative representations of Black women (Higginbotham 191-192). Outlining “ladylike” behavior, respectability politics condemned the “excessive freedom of young girls” and called for Black women to “be stylish, yet modest.....call[ing] less attention to their physical charms and more attention to the intellectual, moral, and spiritual (Higginbotham 199-200).” “By claiming respectability through their manners and morals, Black women boldly asserted the will and agency to define themselves outside the parameters of prevailing racist discourses (Higginbotham 192).”

“The Black Baptist women asserted that “proper” and “respectable” behavior proved Blacks worthy of equal civil and political rights,” countering racist structures and representations (Higginbotham 187, 203).” Respectability politics served as the opposition to white supremacy and provided the foundation on which Black women petitioned for complete equality with white America (Higginbotham 186, 221). “By insisting upon conformity to society’s norms and established rules, Black women subverted the cultural logic of white superiority and condemned white America for failing to live up to its own rhetoric of equality and justice as found in the Constitution (Higginbotham 222).”

Although over 100 years since its circulation, remnants of respectability politics still persist in Black culture today. Given this, I realized that I needed to track my own response to scripts of Black respectability in my own performance of Black womanhood on Instagram.

2.2.1 Charity J. Jackson and Instagram

Before I even began my Instagram page, those around me repeatedly told me how I needed to get one. Despite the vast majority of those around me already being on the platform by

2013, I did not care to have one. In all honesty, I did not think I needed one. As my upbringing instilled the importance of always being aware of one's image as a Black woman, the new application seemed like too much unnecessary work (it was), and I was happy with the social media platforms that I had already, including Facebook and Twitter. There was a time that I genuinely thought that I would never have one. That lasted until October 2013.

I logged into my own Instagram account for the first time on October 17, 2013, under the same handle as other social media platforms, @thecoolerkidd. This name is a quirky play on a lyric by rapper, T.I., as I have never described myself as cool but have always aspired to be. The decision to create an Instagram was made in part because everyone else was doing it. I was bored. I wanted to see what the excitement was all about. As more of the Black women who I had followed through the years on reality television entered the digital space, I became intrigued by what I would find on the application. Although a late adopter, jumping on the trend after most, this decision would eventually impact my daily life.



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4

The first picture I ever posted (figure 2.1) was of my brother and me, my favorite picture at the time. When I first started Instagram, I was able to post frequently with minimal thought. There was no intricate thought process involved about posing or shot composition, with only little consideration being given to finding a good angle for my face. My only goal was to capture great moments that were happening around me and share them with my small following. Success was determined by gaining new followers and likes. The early portion of my page is encompassed by close-framed shots prominently featuring on my face, usually with a guest, as seen in figures 2.1-2.4. As I delved deeper into the platform by following my favorite Black women from reality television, my relationship with Instagram started to shift.

Sometimes I think that I started Instagram a bit too late. Could my page have reached a peak level if I started six months earlier after my official entrance to the Black Greek community? I could have gained a substantial amount of followers from this newness. As this was the time in my life where people were the most interested in getting to know who I was and

the behind-the-scenes of my life, I could have closely mimicked a reality TV experience, but I was still developing my own identity as a Black woman.

2.2.2 Developing @thecoolerkidd's Strategy:

Within the year of my initial post, I became more engrained with the application and representations of Black womanhood and my pictures became more strategic and intentional. With both the Black women from reality television and my peers' increased emphasis on curating the perfect image to improve digital engagements and reinforce social standing, I became more concerned with shot composition, background display, posing, and overall aesthetic.



Figure 2.5

Specifically, on October 16, 2014, as seen in figure 2.5, I spent up to forty minutes posing on campus, in front of my phone with the direction of a friend. As I shifted using different angles and posing, I squirmed embarrassedly, not knowing what to do with my body with this all happening in front of an audience, but I persisted with hopes to get the best picture. From this moment on, it is hard to tell if I stop posing when the best picture is received, or if my embarrassment for trying so hard becomes too overwhelming, but at the intersection of both, I conclude my photoshoot and begin investing additional time into finding the perfect caption for the image.



Figure 2.6

Again in a picture on April 19, 2015, in figure 2.6, I spent time getting dressed specifically because I knew I would be taking pictures that would be posted on my Instagram page. This picture stands out to me because very little of my face is visible, and the image has high levels of contrast that create dark space and shadows. I did not know it at the time, but this is my signature pose (showing half, but cutting off half of my face and leaning on my hand); however, I thought it looked super cute and matched my intended aesthetic. I added, “happiness is hard sometimes you have to work for it,” a lyric from rapper Wale that I had been saving.



Figure 2.7



Figure 2.8



Figure 2.9



Figure 2.10



Figure 2.11

Now, so much goes into one post that I am unsure where it starts and where it ends. Before I even think about posting a photo, I spend time scrolling through Instagram, gathering inspiration from others from Instagram, including the Black women who I had been following from reality television. This inspiration can be from shot composition, lighting, filters, make-up techniques, and fashion. I will study their posing and analyze their content. I will even research and buy pieces from outfits that I found from others on Instagram and attempt to recreate a

similar look in my own posts. I still have outfits in my closet that I have never worn. My intent when buying them was to wear them for specific events for Instagram, but they never came to fruition.

Instagram compels you to become a certain kind of subject, a subject that desires the gaze of the Other (Uzlaner 288). “Needing the gaze of the Other, the subject preens with all its might in order to obtain that very gaze (Uzlaner 288).” As both the photographer and the subject, one becomes a malleable object who exists to be manipulated in order to reach the desired aesthetic that will curate favor among your followers. Similar to a professional photographer looking to publish one of their photographs, users shoot images with hopes to share with the broader audience. Because of such, things such as shot composition, lighting, fashion, make-up and subject matter becomes important, and editing techniques like the use of coloring correcting and filters become essential. It is all about producing the perfect image. “The subject, in order to impress the gaze, thinks: now I will get such a cool haircut, I will paint my lips just so, I will smile alluringly, so that this gaze will be mine. I finally will get what I desire so much (Uzlaner 288)!” All these things matter to gain the gaze, which is represented through likes. Although likes are just a means to notify you that someone else enjoyed your image enough to click your heart button, it also symbolizes being seen.

However, unfortunately, “no matter how successful the resulting image, however many likes or enthusiastic comments it gets – all the same, it is not enough. The subject must again dress up, again put on makeup in the hope of finally catching that same gaze of that same Other (Uzlaner 288).” Because of such, the process is never-ending (Uzlaner 288).

In a world where people’s attention is being pulled in multiple directions at any given time, to be seen, even in a small way, is such a valuable payoff. As users began to receive

notoriety from the platform, which ranges from paid brand sponsorships to being widely recognized, catapulting into the sphere of fame, likes and a large following become more important. Due to this, orchestrating your shot becomes more normalized (Hund & Lee 31). Nevertheless, with the social media landscape forever changing, one must be in a constant state of evolution to be able to keep up with the evolving trends. You exist to be seen but at a price. Knowing that every picture posted will be analyzed by your following to see if you are worthy of a like, you consistently try to create perfection without flaws while seeming to be effortless, despite all the background that goes into each shot. If you get it right, you get acknowledged. You get validated, and you live to post another day.

One thing that changed the trajectory of my Instagram page was my discovery of the HUIJI app. This application utilizes the camera on your phone that manipulates an existing photo and reproduces it as a disposable or analog photo/camera. I love the look of the pictures from the app, and since I found the app, all the pictures I post almost exclusively come from that app.

At a time when I was negotiating my own identity as a Black person, a woman, and a Black woman against the changing spaces around me, I was able to unintentionally capture this transition through my Instagram page. Reflected on my Instagram page, it is clear my identity negotiation was heavily impacted by perceived perception. It was not just about me showcasing my identity but also cultivating a specific presence and produced persona for my audience as I looked to Black women in reality television for markers of success and my peers for validation and acknowledgement.

2.3 Roles of @thecoolerkidd

On Instagram, many of my varying identities come into play. I am a daughter, sister, and friend. I take up different spaces as a Soror (member of a Historically Black Greek Letter Organization) as well as a former pageant titleholder.

My role as a daughter and sister requires me to seem pure and respectable. In this role, not only do I serve as an example to my younger siblings, but I am also a direct reflection and representation of my family and the way I was raised. Onlookers can view my page, judge my upbringing, and assess my value without my permission. Am I a well-adjusted respectable young woman, or am I an unhinged, despicable young miscreant? Is she a good sibling? Does she have a good relationship with her family? Should she be allowed to our home?

As a soror and former 2018 Miss Black Ohio USA, I serve as a member of my Black Greek Letter Organization and a previous pageant contestant at all times. For both of these historical organizations, I pledged to maintain high ethical standards, promote sisterhood and friendship, help mankind through acts of service and advance each respective organization through positive contributions. Regardless of how active I am within each organization, it is a marker that people know me as. Because of such, I must also remain a representation of not only the organization or pageant system but my chapter, pageantry, and state as a whole. As both organizations were heavily influenced by respectability politics, with my Black Greek Letter Organization being founder during the same time as its circulation, I must be poised, ambitious, unattainable, but not too stuck up. I must be successful and well adjusted. I must be put together and friendly. I must actively display caring for others and be seen giving back to my community.

Furthermore, as a member of both these organizations, comes a set of social media guidelines and policies that I must adhere to. Although the specifics of each are for member's

eyes only, they each embody the same principles of being respectful, being appropriate, and maintaining a positive representation of the organization. They require one to be continuously aware and continuously on, every day with no days off, as each member's actions reflect the group as a whole. In each respective space, failure to comply fully with the outlined policy could potentially result in a disgraceful dismissal of the organization.

As a friend, I must display someone worthy of friendship. This is also a foundational element of the reality television programs that I primarily watch, as friendship is the cornerstone and invisible cast member of each series. Friendship comes through in many ways, like showcasing fun and having positive friendships with others. Am I visible at a well-known event or function? Are there other well-connected people there? Are we enjoying ourselves together? Do we look like people you would want to hang out with? Furthermore, serving as proof of my value of friendship as well as affirming the value of others' friendship similarly to reality television, I post pictures of myself with other friends to dually serve both purposes.

Whatever I post, my followers will view it against these identities, whether it aligns within or not. And although I am all these things and more at all times, it does not mean that each identity is always as salient during every phase of my life. Regardless, my profile and, ultimately, I will always be held to the standards attributed to these roles. This is something that I am always conscious of. So despite being a growing human, expanding and contracting in different areas, I am always cognizant that my page needs to present in a certain way. Therefore, there are no in-feed images prominently featuring alcohol, despite being well over the legal age or any post that could be considered too revealing or scantily clad. To oppose pervasive and prominent hyper-sexualized stereotypes of Black women, I, like many other Black women, feel "compelled to downplay, even deny, sexual expression (Hines 918)." Despite the fact that my

sexual expression is blossoming in several different ways in real life, it is still scarce from my online persona as it would not fit within many of the identities ascribed to me. There is no space for that as a daughter, sister, soror, or pageant queen. I am so mindful of this that there is no imagery of me wearing a bathing suit, despite being a lover of laying by the water. I do not want a potentially negative perception to impact my audience's view. And as more and more pressure is added to the social media space, with more emphasis regarding the space as permanent and employers taking an active interest in your online presenting persona, it is harder to feel free in the space. All these roles require me to present my best self at all times, despite the reality of not always being my best self at times. Additionally, my roles imprison me to the confines of the politics of respectability. In efforts to overly produce a positive representation, I inherently adhere to the assimilationist governing of manners and morals to live up to the expectations of proper Black womanhood.

My roles rarely conflict with each other. Because they have many of the same goals, I am often able to navigate all these presented roles at once. They do, however, conflict with my reality. Although I can embody most of these characteristics often, I cannot bear them all the time. Sometimes I am selfish and lazy, unmotivated. Some days I wear sweatpants and do not brush my hair. Sometimes I have acne. Sometimes I am lonely, and sometimes, I do not like leaving my house. Because it is rare to see this vulnerable side of Black women on reality television, it makes me uncomfortable to showcase. Although these things are also true and also a very genuine part of me, they have no space on my page as they directly conflict with the roles carefully placed upon me.

2.4 Analysis of @thecoolerkidd

As of October 30, 2020, there are one hundred twelve posts that I have featured on my page. The posts are encompassed of fifteen posts from 2013, twenty-one posts from 2014, fourteen posts from 2015, nineteen posts from 2016, nineteen posts from 2017, eleven posts from 2018, nine posts from 2019, and four posts from 2020. Of all the posts, I am featured in over seventy-nine posts, with some posts featuring myself multiple times, leaving thirty-three posts where I am not pictured. There are seventy-eight pictures featured on my page that were specifically staged for Instagram, with only four photos taken candidly and only two taken candidly of me. There are forty-nine photos of me featured on the page with makeup on.

Although I have only one hundred twelve posts on my Instagram page, I have three hundred eighty-seven media texts gathered from Instagram. These media texts include all the photos and videos that I have taken using the application, both posted and not posted, all photos and videos I have posted to the application but taken using a different application (whether HUIJI or my iPhone camera). Of these three hundred eighty-seven media texts, I have seven texts from 2013, twenty texts from 2014, fourteen texts from 2015, fourteen texts from 2016, twenty-one texts from 2017, one hundred thirty-five texts from 2018, eighty-nine texts from 2019, and eighty-eight texts from 2020. Despite there being a distinct increase in media texts gathered since my begin with Instagram, there is a decline in the number of posts on my in-feed page.

Two things can account for these differences. The increase of Instagram media texts can be linked to my use of Instagram stories. Instagram story is a feature that allows you to temporarily post a picture of a photo to your page through the story feature. These stories are viewed by clicking a user's profile picture and are only viewable for twenty-four hours. Starting

in 2018, there is an increase in photos with a diversity of angles, use of face tuning filters, and photo composition to produce the desired interesting and intriguing shot and content.

Additionally, I started to capture more media texts that are content from other creators that I re-shared as I found them intriguing or funny. Although it seems I have remained consistent in the number of posts posted, I decreased posts with me as the focal point and increased text of my surroundings. As if I was attempting to bring my followers on a journey with me.

The decrease in posts that are stored on my page can be linked to the pressure felt to get the perfect picture, caption, and timing for each post while meeting the desired goal. As my desire to have a well-curated Instagram presence increased to closely resemble the Black women I looked up too, my confidence decreased, making each post harder than the next to post.



Figure 2.12

Figure 2.12, my most liked picture, was posted on January 29, 2018, and is actually a picture of another post. On this day, I announced that I would be representing Ohio as Miss Black Ohio USA in the Miss Black USA 2018 pageant, but I would deem my most successful picture as the one posted on February 16th, 2019, figure 2.7. After spending a day with friends, known for taking amazing Instagram photos, I had one of them take my photo specifically for

my Instagram. Once I received this photo, I used a caption that I had been saving for two years. Although it is only my fifth most liked picture on my page, it is my favorite photo, from the caption to the overall aesthetic, and is used for my profile picture across my most used social media platforms.

2.5 Themes of @thecoolerkidd

After a thorough look into my Instagram page, four themes emerged:

2.5.1 *Picture me*

Picture Me: I am commonly featured showing from the neck up with less than four pictures showing visible cleavage separation. There are less than thirty pictures on my page where you can see the visible whites of my eyes. And despite rarely wearing makeup in my everyday life, almost every picture featured on my page shows me in makeup. Influenced by the images of Black women from reality television, this social space required one to present as perfect, without flaws as the ideal; therefore, I became intentional about hiding parts of myself that feel imperfect to curate a person that resembles perfection as closely as possible. I hid parts of myself that I am embarrassed or insecure about and rely on angles and posing, mimicking the Black women I saw, to compliment my most acceptable features.

2.5.2 *Caption This:*

Caption This: Captions are a big part of my posting strategy, serving as important a piece as the photo itself. The majority of the captions I utilize come from rap lyrics. Despite only listening to rap music on a limited basis, they make up the majority of my captions. I attempt to use them in clever and quirky ways. Taking obscured lyrics hidden in layered rap verse, I place them under pictures within witty contexts. To me, this relates to my expression of Blackness. I am Black, but I have spent a lot of my formative years in predominately white spaces. As I am

working to negotiate my own identity, I am not entirely comfortable utilizing some aspects of Blackness, knowing that not all aspects of Black culture speak to me authentically. But this use of rap within my captions creatively shows an introspective and funny user, even if I am the only person who believes so. I am thoughtful, thinking through things deeply in complex and layered ways. Some of the captions that show this the most are the following:



Figure 2.13

(Figure 2.13: At the Louvre in Paris with my cousin, in reference to a Kanye West lyric)

Got my cousin in Paris and we going gorillas



Figure 2.14

(Figure 2.14: On my phone, in reference to a TK Kravitz lyric) *My phone's been blowing*

up like Samsung 7 and I'm tryna stay committed to you.....



Figure 2.15

(Figure 2.15: Sitting on a window seal but a play on words because my name is Charity, in reference to a Big Sean lyric) *"Don't mean to sit ya down and turn this into therapy, But you gave too much time to that boy, Charity"* - @BigSean



Figure 2.16

(Figure 2.16: On my twenty-fourth birthday, in reference to a Drake lyric) *Walkin' livin' legend man I feel like Kobe [24] Yall don't feel me man this ain't okay.....*



Figure 2.17



Figure 2.18



Figure 2.19



Figure 2.20

2.5.3 On Location:

On Location: As seen in figures 2.17- 2.20, the majority of my photos posted feature me on location, with only eight photos being taken from the home. For me, this translates to me portraying a life of adventure and fun. As girls' trips are a seasonal staple in reality television with every season featuring a new exotic location for the cast to visit, I looked to recreate such in my own life. Although I am a chronic homebody and typically enjoy spending time alone in my home streaming television, my social network does not reflect that but instead shows multiple images of a young woman who travels and spends time with friends and family. This

visualization of traveling is used to denote success and serves as an expression of my Black womanhood. Not only does it mark having the financial ability to travel for pleasure, but also it marks the ability to be physically accepted into different regions.

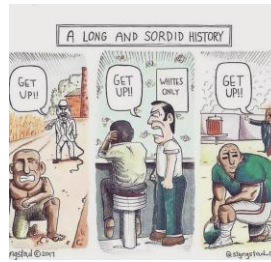


Figure 2.21



Figure 2.22

2.5.4 Overall Blackness

Overall Blackness: From my Instagram page, Blackness is an ever-running presence on my page. Outside of just my skin tone, there are intentional things present on my page that affirm my Blackness. I note these items are intentional as I made a conscious decision to post these aspects and leave them on my page as they felt like essential messages to convey on my platform, despite not fitting in with the desired aesthetic.



Figure 2.23



Figure 2.24



Figure 2.25

There are associations present on my page directly linked to Black culture, similar to what is shown in figures 2.23-2.25. I have seventeen posts directly related to Black Greek life. Although not something that is a consistent topic brought up in my everyday life, it remains present on my page. Additionally, I have posts made to represent Black Lives Matter. As seen in figures 2.21 and 2.22, on my page, I have a black square, which represented the 2020 Black Out Tuesday post. Additionally, I have a post that represents the struggle for positive Black representation #whentheyseeme. Lastly, I have a post to acknowledge the struggle of Black peaceful protest, which culminates with a Colin Kaepernick reference.

There are only six photos on my page where white people are visible. Of these six photos, only two photos feature a white person prominently, where the other four photos were only having white people represented in the background.

2.5.5 *But I Am A Black Woman*

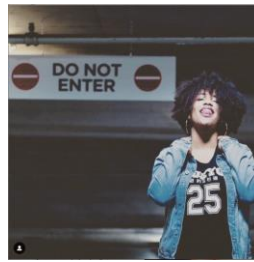


Figure 2.26



Figure 2.27



Figure 2.28

But I Am A Black Woman: One of the ways that my Black womanhood is reinforced is through the showcasing of my natural hair. With attempts to counteract Western beauty standards, I made very intentional efforts to display my natural hair on Instagram to overpower

the photos with straight hair. As seen in figures 2.8- 2.11 and 2.26- 2.28, I am featured in a various hairstyles that include braids with both extensions and with my natural hair, my natural hair pulled back into a low ponytail, my natural hair let loose in a fro. I am seen wearing twists, plaits, pigtails, hi buns, twist outs, braid outs, and straight hair. You can find me on my page in head wraps and wigs and with both natural and slicked edges. But even this was a transition over time. As I saw more hairstyles with differing hair textures being represented in reality television, I learned techniques and showcase my own rendition on my Instagram page.

Controversially, there are thirty-three photos on my Instagram page of me wearing hoop earrings. This is controversial because, despite my deep love for hoop earrings as they serve as my most worn earring type, there is a stigma of Black women in hoop earrings being unprofessional or ghetto in a way that is unique to women of color and not for white women. Even though I barely feel complete without wearing hoops, frequently, I go out of my way to wear a different type of earring so others will not perceive me negatively or look down upon me. Because of such, I am consistently intentionally thinking to myself that I cannot post too many pictures of hoop earrings back to back because I will look ghetto.

2.6 A Black Woman's Reality

I always tell my cousin that if something tragic happens to me, like a death, kidnapping, or a missing person scenario, make sure they use my most-liked Instagram picture as my memorial photograph, T-shirt image, or missing person photo. We joke that if she uses that picture, whatever it may be at the time, it probably would not resemble me enough to be useful.

It is quite possible that I am always thinking about Instagram. Despite not posting to my page very often, averaging less than two photos a month, whenever I see a cool scene, I think about the best way to shoot it, even if I do not post it. Whenever I hear a cool song lyric or a neat

phrase, I am mentally cataloging it and sometimes physically recording it to be sure to later use it as an Instagram caption. When I get dressed to go out and feel as if the event could be a good backdrop, I am sure to pick the best outfit for the Instagram picture. I plan my most intricate hairstyles to coincide with upcoming Instagram-worthy events. I even prep my friends by telling them how I would like my picture taken for Instagram before we go out with samples of what I want the picture to look like. Outside of these moments, I take time to watch videos and clips from popular influencers or models with tips and tricks on how to best pose, angles for my body, and lighting techniques that look appealing on Instagram.

Watching reality television from such a young age, I was inspired by and attracted to the performances of Black womanhood that flickered across the screen. Despite the criticism the genre faced, I was drawn to the ways that Black women spoke up and spoke out, sharing their opinions, vulnerability, and their innermost lives with the world. They displayed a certain freedom and carefree nature even within the confines of consistent gaze. This freedom is something that I longed for and explored in my life outside the screen. In my actual reality, I felt more empowered to use my voice to take up space. I leaned into expression and exploration in all aspects of myself, becoming bolder and more liberated. Yet in the virtual space, I did not feel that I had the ability to present in the same way. Because of such, the representations that I admired for such a long time is not present on my social media page or within my online persona. Although I was attracted to and recognize the beauty and freedom embedded in their performance, I still observed the ways in which Black women were heavily critiqued for their on-screen representations. I also recognized that there were distinct differences in our social media agency. Where their participation served their career pursuits, fueling their financial endeavors with each viral moment, my participation in the social media space could potentially

put my professional aspirations at risk. Although the digital space puts us all under a heavily surveilled microscope, the stakes felt much higher for me. I became hyper aware of how dissemblance and forms of respectability could protect me, and edited my online self, creating my own para “real” space on social media.

Evident through the analysis of my Instagram page is how respectability politics guide my page, Black women from reality television influence my aesthetic, and how others’ perception of me and my Black womanhood affects my postings. In a time where both Blackness and womanhood are being questioned, there is more pressure to be Black, but only in the right way. I believe this experience is reflective of many Black women’s reality. I look to Black women on reality television to help guide my understanding within the politics of respectability framework. Identifying a few that embody my imaginings of success, I embed parts of their performance within my own.

In conclusion, Instagram is a space where I am consistently negotiating my identity as a Black woman, both consciously and unconsciously. The personal experience outlined in this chapter further illuminates the complex negotiation users, specifically Black women, who have this platform and identity expression. “In the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self. (Hines 916).” Continuing conversations around both intersectional identities and social media spaces, can detail the social reality of Black woman in the media landscape to reveal how “so much of the inner life of Black women remains hidden (Hines 916).” Although my personal experience cannot represent every experience Black women have with the application, nor does

it seek to, it does give additional insight into the complex layers of navigation all women of color may be up against. As Clark details,

There [are] additional burdens placed upon and awards granted^{[[[]]]} to the small cadre of single, educated, professional Black women^{[[[]]]} who chose not to marry or to bear children. The more educated they were, the greater the sense of being responsible, somehow, for the advance of the race and for the elevation of Black womanhood. They held these expectations of themselves and found a sense of racial obligation reinforced by the demands of the Black community and its institutions. (Hines 919).

By charting my own experience, as both subject and object, navigating my journey of producing, replicating, and executing my identity as a Black woman, I uncover the ways in which I transcribe roles and messaging onto my body and restrict my self-expression and the full range of my identity to appeal to followers, known and unknown. Through this careful infusion of encoded and carefully crafted messaging present in each post and photograph, I assert success, value, and desirability in my relation to Blackness, womanhood, and the intersection of the two, developing “an image of Black women as being a super-moral woman (Hines 920).” Joining in 2013, I had no idea how the application would mold and shape the world around me, but by understanding the ways in which I construct my own identity, I seek to further understand the ways in which others do the same.

3 THE ART OF BECOMING SOMEONE ELSE

3.1 Introduction

Emma Hallberg. This name may be reasonably unknown to some, but to many others, this name consumed media outlets in November 2018 when seemingly overnight, Hallberg went viral for not being Black. Although Hallberg, a twenty-one-year-old Swedish influencer, never openly claimed to be of Black ancestry prior to the newsbreak, many in the American social media landscape believed she was. This belief in her performance of Black womanhood invites examination. As conversations continued to circulate around both cultural access and identity, Emma Hallberg, who received notoriety from the social media platform Instagram (@eemahallberg), became the archetype for a new category of online deception called Blackfishing. To date, Hallberg has grown her social media following from 193,000 followers in 2018 to over 450,000 today.

There is a multitude of scholarly work that addresses and theorizes the tenants of “Blackness”; therefore, my work does not aim to contribute in this way³. Instead, my work looks through a visual rhetorical analysis that interrogates the ways in which her constructed persona closely aligns with performances of Black womanhood. Using the Instagram page of Emma Hallberg to provide context, I analyze Hallberg’s Instagram to dissect the construction of her social media identity that causes a social disruption to notions of Black womanhood, furthering our understandings of the construction of Black womanhood as a performance and the ways in which it can be reproduced with or without Black women.

Although the academic landscape is ripe with conversations about respectability politics and theories about passing for white to adhere to Western hegemonic societal standards of beauty

³ Crenshaw, K. (1989).; Gates, R.J. (2018).; Stalling, L.H. (2013).; West, C.M. (1995)

and acceptance, there is a deficit concerning the inverse process of gaining cultural capital by attempting to pass for Black. Using Emma Hallberg as a case study to fill that void, my work looks at the ways one can take up Blackness as a white person. I assert that passing for Black operates in two different fields. The politics of passing put whiteness and Blackness in a binary position, directly in opposition to one another. Successfully passing for one means failing in the other category, making assessment not only very disjointed and changeable within different communities but also having no intersection. The politics of passing put a heavy emphasis on the community of spectators and their investment in the representation. One does not have to fit within a specific label, but by distancing themselves from whiteness – performing negativity in the image – they become Black. This puts the ownership on the subject with a broader target within a racial hierarchy asking, “Is this Black or white?”

3.2 What is Blackfishing?

Blackfishing is a term that describes a person who deceptively presents themselves as Black or racially ambiguous with hopes to gain cultural or financial capital within popular culture – also known as N*ggerfishing, the new term widely circulated through the social media universe, gaining notoriety on Twitter in November of 2018. While it is difficult to trace its origins, where it first derived, or who coined the phrase, Blackfishing seems to be an offshoot of the term catfishing, a marker that denotes deceptively luring someone into a romantic relationship through the use of a fake online identity. Blackfishing is kin to the word appropriation, but where appropriation airs on the side of ignorance, Blackfishing implies an implicit intention for social gain. Additionally, in some spaces, Blackfishing can also be seen as a close neighbor to Blackface. One thing is clear. Since embedding itself in American society,

the word has transcended just being a term on social media to being used throughout the popular culture landscape in online, print, and television spaces.

Blackfishing is argued to be both formulaic and strategic and used as a way to critique the ways white women ‘cosplay’ as Black women to further position themselves as on-trend social influencers (Thompson) (Lawler). This particular performance is achieved through efforts such as darkened makeup, texturizing hair, extreme tanning, overlining one’s lips in addition to utilizing Black vernacular (Thompson). “With extensive lip fillers, dark tans and attempts to manipulate their hair texture, white women wear Black features like a costume (Thompson 2018).” They never say that they are Black, admit to pulling from Black inspirations, or acknowledge their close alignment to Black culture. Not only are they taking up a particular racialized performance that is not theirs, but white women are capitalizing off of this deceptively racially ambiguous/ Black process for monetary and social gain, often garnering more praise and compensation for the very same aesthetic that Black women are still getting criticized for (Thompson 2018). White women have taken looks and styles, specifically pioneered by lower-socioeconomic Black women, and garnered multitudes of recognition for “creating” the styles despite them already having been existed (Thompson 2018).” Through Blackfishing, white women are able to access all the benefits of being Black women with none of the repercussions that come with being a truly oppressed double minority.

Although a newer term, it has been used to criticize many prominent US figures, including Ariana Grande, Iggy Azalea, and the entire Kardashian sisterhood. Where many argue that these women are impersonating Blackness by stealing Black women’s aesthetic for commercial gain, others say that they are following the latest beauty trends to stay relevant.

What is clear is that “there is too much money to be made pretending to be somebody else on the Internet (Thompson 2018).”

3.3 Thinking Through Blackness and Womanhood:

Both Blackness and womanhood have multiple meanings. There is no one way to be Black or a woman or a Black woman. Yet still, society assigns descriptions on what it means to be Black, woman, and a Black woman.

Race does not occur in a vacuum but holds power in our society. It exists in dominant belief systems in which we constantly base pervasive social constructions to assess others. Despite being a social construct, we understand race through ancestry and appearance, looking through features such as hair, complexion, and facial features (Haney Lopez 2000). We even experience race through speech and dance. “Our very ways of talking, walking, eating, and dreaming are ineluctably shaped by notions of race (Haney Lopez 2000, 164).”

We come to understand gender in a similar context. Culturally constructed, “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one (de Beauvoir 7, Butler 8).” Using this understanding, we can look at the gendered body as being performative made up of cultural inscriptions (Butler 129, 136). It is the performance of these cultural inscriptions repeated over time that make up our understanding (Butler 168). Gender is not what we are, but “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to product the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (Butler 33).”

Focusing on the intersectionality of race and gender, I call upon these understandings to make sense of my work. Looking through these aspects of appearance, characteristics, and manifestations of both race and gender, I will analyze Emma Hallberg’s Instagram to articulate

the ways in which she exhibits the core components of Blackfishing by embodying the aesthetic of a Black woman.

3.4 Who is Emma Hallberg

Born on September 12, 1999, in Sweden, Emma Hallberg initially gained social media notoriety through her styled outfits and makeup looks, earning her the title of beauty influencer. With her first post to Instagram in 2016, followers flocked to her page for her infamous highlighter looks achieved through the use of eyeshadow. She has worked with brands such as Anastasia Beverly Hills, Fashion Nova, and Pretty Little Thing. With the addition of her YouTube page, Hallberg has amassed over 38,600 YouTube subscribers and 450,000 Instagram followers and is represented by Elite Miami Modeling Agency as of 2020.

3.5 Analysis of Emma Hallberg

To review her social media persona, I analyzed her Instagram page, dating back to 2017, to identify themes for analysis. Looking at the page in its totality, there is an overall progression into an aesthetic similar to that of a Black woman. This progression is important to note because it alludes to the notion that the particular way she presents herself has been developed and refined and did not occur naturally without action. This understanding allowed me to focus on themes present in 2018 pictures that were not present in earlier pictures to further prove the intentionality of her representation. I intend to analyze her Instagram page by organizing her page into three areas that look at the physical body, how it is positioned, and what it is positioned against, additionally pulling images from her profile that best represent the areas to show her relationship to and how she is operationalizing the Black Women's aesthetic.

3.5.1 Theme 1: The Physical Body – Blurring the Lines To Near Blackness



Figure 3.1

In a photo taken of Emma against a beige color wall, figure 3.1 features a half-body shot focusing on her upper torso. She is pictured wearing an off-the-shoulder Fashion Nova white Henley top lined with black trim, and the word “iconic” is repeated across the lining. Her top directly contrasts her noticeable tanned skin and her dark crimped and curled dark hair in a half-top bun, half-down look with a single curly strand falling in front of her face. Although this specific hairstyle is non-specific to one ethnicity, the intentional manipulation of her hair, adding texture, distances oneself away from whiteness toward a Black aesthetic. She is turned approximately forty-five degrees from the center of the frame with direct light highlighting her carefully placed shimmering gold highlighter over her cheekbone, bridge of her nose, chin, temple, and shoulder. Looking closely, you can place her large hoop earrings within the curls of her hair. She is wearing stacked necklaces that draw the viewers’ eyes down to her cleavage. Her makeup, consistent with her tanned body, carefully sculpts her face through intentional placements of contour on the cheeks, nose, and forehead, articulated eyebrows, placed on eyelashes, and over-lined, glossed lips.



Figure 3.2

Figure 3.2 shows only the noticeably tanned legs of Emma Hallberg, sitting on a stoned path next to a bright blue pool. Next to her body are placed headphones (not connected to any port), sunglasses, Body Blendz scrub and oil (products that claim to even tan), on top of a white towel. With tanning being a more prominent practice in white communities than in Black communities, the products placed around her echo a white cultural reference, but the deep skin tone against the white of the towel continues to contrast her relationship with whiteness, both literally and figuratively. It is unclear the manner in which this photo was taken, but Emma taking her own photo using the outward-facing camera held up above her head is a possible scenario.



Figure 3.3

In a photo taken by an outside party, figure 3.3 showcases Hallberg against a white brick wall in red thigh-high, pointed-toe boots, short blue ripped, jean shorts, and an oversized white

Moschino graphic shirt accented with black, red, and yellow. Under the creative direction of designer Jeremy Scott, Moschino has been associated with Nicki Minaj, Lil Wayne, ASAP Rocky, Cardi B., and Rihanna, all popular Black musical artists (Sawjani 2012). Wearing noticeable tanned skin and hoop earrings, Hallberg also wears her crimped curly hair down. She is seen posing with one hand over a popped-out hip, and the other relax over her high. Peeking through her hair that falls ever so slightly over her face is a pop of her shimmering gold highlighter.



Figure 3.4

In a photo that Emma took of herself, figure 3.4 utilizes the inward-facing camera that closes in on Hallberg to concentrate focus between the top of her forehead to the top of her shoulder. Still in tanned skin, her nude painted acrylic nails are visible with large hoop earrings and crimped curly dark hair down her back. With no clothing discernable within the shot, one can get a closer look at the construction of her makeup, including well blended but contoured cheeks, temple, and nose. Additionally, you can see her constructed eyebrows, light pink eye shadow over her eyelids, eyelash extensions, and her signature extensive highlighter over her upper cheekbone, eye brown ridges, and across the tip of her nose.

The first way that Emma purges her whiteness is through modifications and manipulations done to her physical body. This can be seen in figures 3.1 – 3.4 through the

darkening of her skin color, which is thought to be a result of extreme tanning, not acquired by purely natural means as there are no tan lines or color variations on sections of her body that receive less direct sunlight. This can also be seen through the texturizing of her hair and her lip-lining illusions. Although she denies altering her body, these specific components require some manipulation, whether that be a wig, crimping of the hair, or make-up technique that changes its appearance away from her natural Swedish heritage or state toward that similar to the aesthetic of a Black woman. This use of lighting and filters also plays an important part in this process. Warm lighting and photographer filters placed on the photos further distort her skin tone, masking her race. As seen in figures 3.1 and 3.4, Hallberg's tanned skin is seen illuminated by the warm light. Without such, her skin would appear paler and whiter. Based on the blue of the water in figure 3.2, there seems to be a filter that further saturates the images, deepening her skin tone there as well.

3.5.2 Theme 2: The Body's Positioning – Doing What Black Girls Do To The Body



Figure 3.5

Figure 3.5 frames Emma as a pop of color against an all-white bedroom space. In this full-length mirror selfie, in which Emma takes her own photo with the outward-facing camera on her iPhone, she is angled forty-five degrees from the center of the frame in a squatted prison pose, featuring a mustard long sleeve crop top and camouflage joggers. This pose draws attention

to a thin waist and a round buttock. Accentuating her tan skin, Emma is wearing a platinum blonde, straight lace front wig, which I am estimating comes in at twenty-two inches when measured. This look closely references a Black female Hip Hop aesthetic, similar to the likes of Lil Kim, Nicki Minaj, Cardi B., and more. Although it is difficult to track its start, many popular Black female artists in the 90s sought to own their sexuality in a male-dominated industry while maintain their tough demeanor, juxtaposing their sexuality of long wigs, curvy bodies, and luscious lips against the rough background of graffiti, local neighborhoods, and hard poses like the one utilized by Emma. This aesthetic remains prevalent with Black female rap artists today. Following a consistent make-up structure, prominently featured on her face is the infamous highlight of her cheek and eyebrow bones, iridescently shining. No shoes are seen in the shot.



Figure 3.6

Figure 3.6 features a full body shot of Hallberg, seen slightly leaning on the armrest of the horizontal moving platform she is standing. This pose allows an extra pop to be placed on the hip to give the illusion of being a more curvaceous woman. Wearing a pink and purple tie-dye spaghetti strap body con dress and pink and black low top air forces, the full range of Emma's tanned skin is on display from her forehead down to the top of her cleavage, the top of her shoulder down to the tips of her fingers, and the top of her thigh down to her ankles are in full

view. No tan lines are discernable. As both hands are featured within the shot, and there is no camera in the frame, this photo was taken by an outside party.



Figure 3.7

Using the inward-facing camera, Figure 3.7 features a close-up shot of Emma in a brown fur-lined hood, with curly dark brown hair cascading down both sides of her face. Doing a close inspection of the image, one can see that Emma carefully positions her hand with acrylic nails in the lower-left corner of the frame, just within view for audiences. Additionally, she features large silver hoop earrings. Through this close and tight frame, you can see the more intricate details of her makeup construction. In addition to her signature over-highlighted cheek and eyebrow bones, this includes the over-lining of her lips, a process which happens when lip liner is drawn outside the natural line of the lip and blended down to the lip line to give the illusion of larger, fuller, and more robust lips, highly glossed lips, eyelash extensions, and fiercely constructed eyebrows. This shot also features Hallberg in noticeably lighter skin compared to the other presented images.



Figure 3.8

In a tight, close-up shot utilizing the inward-facing camera, figure 3.8 frames Hallberg, from the neck up. Within the frame, Emma features her long orange acrylic nails in the lower-left corner, a light brown synthetic, slightly textured straight wig under a mimic Louis Vuitton scarf, worn like a durag. Her makeup continues to include the consistently over-highlighted cheek and eyebrow bones, her carved eyebrows, and an over-lined glossed lip, all against tanned skin.



Figure 3.9

Figure 3.9 features a close-up of Emma's hands. In one of the few shots featured on her page that does not include her face, clothing, or body, we see her long acrylic nails, shaped to a rounded point. In a natural colored French tip manicured, covered with glitter, there is black Old English font text on different nails showcasing different text. On the hand on the right, one nail features "bby," the shorthand of "baby," while the following nail features "grl," translating to "girl," making the hand on the right saying, "baby girl." The hand on the left features large

letters of “L,” “J,” and “B” on each individually on three separate fingers. Although the letters’ meaning seems to be unclear at first glance, a closer search uncovered that they are the initials of her long-time boyfriend, Lucas J. Blackwell. Together, both hands signify “Lucas J. Blackwell’s baby girl.” It is unclear the manner in which this photo was taken.

The second way Emma uses her Instagram page to purge her whiteness is through the intentional posing and strategic styling of her body that work in tandem to produce an aesthetic that brings her closer to Black women. She poses her body by emphasizing her popped hip to give a more curvaceous illusion similar to that commonly associated with Black women. Her style, which features elements of long acrylic nails, oversized hoop earrings, glossed lip, all present in figures 3.5- 3.9, and additional touches of lace front twenty-two-inch wig, air forces, and a durag, are all elements that embody a specific class based archetype and controlling image of a Black woman that signify one as being ghetto or ratchet. Also including in this specific styling is the use of the squatted prison pose, which harkens to a stance made popular by people of color in low-income areas reminiscent of a pose that one would take if photographed in prison. Although Black women are consistently criticized for this style of look, Emma is praised for her rendition.

3.5.3 *Theme 3: The Body's Positioned Against – Accessorizing Blackness Around the Body*



Figure 3.10

The post in figure 3.10 captures Hallberg with her long-time boyfriend, Lucas Blackwell, with the inward-facing camera. Within this close-range shot, showcasing both Hallberg and Blackwell from the neck up, Hallberg is wearing a red spaghetti-strapped high neck lined top, and large hoop earrings, with her dark brown/ black hair, pulled back into a low curly ponytail with two curly strands gently falling over the front of her face for a light framing. Interestingly in this shot, Blackwell, slightly tipping down a pair of pattern-rimmed, clear lens glasses, is seen in a white button-up shirt and black blazer. He is also seen showcasing several cornrow braids, which twist the top section of his hair into plats toward the back of his head. His baby hairs have also been lightly brushed out to dust across his forehead. His cornrows and baby hairs nod to a Black aesthetic, as both are staple hairstyles of the Black community for both Black women and men alike.



Figure 3.11

Taken with the inward-facing camera, the post in figure 3.11 shows both Hallberg and Blackwell amid a self-care spa day. This close-range shot features the two with brown facial masks, Emma's covering 85% of her face, while Blackwell's covers only a circle encompassing his nose and the surrounding areas. Not much else is seen from Emma outside of her white robe and her curly hair lightly pulled back into a messy ponytail. Blackwell is not seen wearing any clothing but is wearing a crushed velvet and velour mustard-colored durag tied to the front on his head with part of the flap hanging out, and crystal-covered ANKH necklace, and a clothed chain around his neck.



Figure 3.12

Figure 3.12 features a shot using the outward-facing camera seemingly in a hotel room mirror which frames both Hallberg and Blackwell from the knees up. Hallberg, more prominently featured in the shot, is wearing a beige-colored off the shoulder, strapped dress. One

of her long acrylic nailed hands rest on a flat surface, giving her easier access to pop her hip out to allude to a fuller body. Although still tan, Hallberg's skin has more of a peach undertone than her other photos. Along with her other photographs, no tan lines are noticeable. Emma is also seen in her signature bold highlighter and is wearing her straightened dark brown/ black hair pushed behind her ears and down her back. Blackwell, slightly hidden, is posed behind her. From this shot, you can see his hand resting on her lower torso. He is also wearing a white tee with a white durag tied to the back on top of his head.



Figure 3.13

Using the outward-facing camera and a full-length mirror, figure 3.13 features Emma's full-frame from head to toe. Emma is wearing an oversized black graphic tee featuring the face of Tupac, black pleather pants which cling closely to her body, and a pair of white non-descript sneakers. Her hair is pulled into a high ponytail, with straight black hair falling down her back. She is posed with the leg to the right popped out and slightly bent to leave her weight on her popped hip and back leg to provide a curvier frame.

The last way that Emma distances herself from whiteness is by using Blackness as a prop to position herself against to draw a close relation. I define this as co-opting Blackness. As seen in figures 3.10- 3.13, she places it around her much like an accessory to further associate her relation to Blackness as an accessory. This can be seen by wearing air forces with body con dresses, Tupac graphic tees, a white boyfriend in cornrows, a durag, and an Ankh necklace (an

Egyptian symbol denoting the key of life). It is important to note that Emma is from Sweden and was born well after the passing of Tupac. Although Black American culture is popular, it is not native to her, and she did not grow up with this aesthetic or in this culture. This particular aesthetic is something that she had to find and access in order to take up. In addition to the physical aspects she adds to each photo to accessorize Black, she continues along the same vein through her captions. She takes up Black vernacular by referencing the work of Rihanna, Kendrick Lamar, and Kehlani, prominent African-American artists. All these features and modifications were done to the body, with the body, and around the body, become a prop to align herself with Blackness further in a specifically gendered way to reach the desired aesthetic with relative ease.

3.6 Circulation and Reception

Publicly, Emma Hallberg was widely regarded by the masses as Black. She was even featured on Instagram pages to highlight Black hairstyles or spotlight Black women (Merrett). When in November 2018, she was exposed as being white, several media outlets picked up the story, but Twitter had the most to say. Some of the sentiments include”

“I honestly thought Emma Hallberg was half Black” - @MxssKerry (Merrett)

“I thought she was mixed. My girl is fully SWEDISH” - @JuniasWorld

“This fraud is exposed!”

“Finding out Emma was white was so shocking due to the fact that this girl has done everything to look the part of a mixed [B]lack girl. I genuinely believed this girl was Afro-Latina. She has been mimicking [B]lack features and getting famous for it. She has been darkening her skin several tones deeper than her natural shade, braiding her hair to make it look similar to mixed people’s curl pattern, and even been featured on Instagram accounts made for Black hairstyles and spotlighting Black women. The sad part is she really fooled everyone into believing she was a mixed girl - Deja (Lawler)”.

“The girl was clearly posing as Black, as she’s posted by many Black pages etc.”

(Merrett)

“White girls, if you want to pass as Black, how about using your platform to address the injustices and discrimination actual Black people face. Don’t just appropriate, appreciate the people you are imitating #emmahallberg.”

However, not all social media users were against Hallberg. Many jumped to the defense of the social media influencer speaking of her beauty while dismissing the Blackfishing claims to argue her use of following the style trends at the time. Much of the criticism questioning the legitimacy of the Blackfishing accusation came from white women and cis Black men alike, attacking Black women by calling them angry, bitter, and jealous to counter the validity of the claims (Thompson 2018).

3.7 Emma's Response

After receiving a multitude of backlash, Emma responded to the claims via her Instagram. She addressed the claims of her darkened complexion by asserting that she naturally tans really dark. She followed up by saying she has naturally curly hair and that she does not receive her endorsement from Blackfishing but from her make-up and style looks.

In actuality, the natural glam make-up on her Instagram page and the looks she puts together, which typically consist of a dress or a t-shirt and jeans, are not unique or impressive enough for mass recognition. I believe her popularity revolves around her use/ cosplaying of Black women aesthetics as exotic othering. This specific manifestation is distancing oneself away from whiteness toward a specific class-based version of American Blackness that she has no claim to or real relation to being from Sweden. It is important to me to note that it is not the aspects of her curated image that are happening in isolation from one another but in conjunction. It is not just that she is tan, or just that she plumped her lips, or just that she texturized her hair. It is the conjunction of the process together. It is that she tanned her skin, plumped her lips, and texturized her hair in addition to other things to sell the Black woman aesthetic that makes this performance so harmful.

3.8 Conclusion

Emma Hallberg's social trajectory was impacted in November 2018. Despite never claiming to be Black, she successfully passed as Black. So much so that the exposure of her whiteness caused a social disruption and created anxiety about Black womanhood and its supposed inherent location in the body of African descended cis women. Regardless of the opinion regarding her identity, Hallberg fights to maintain her image and capacity to express herself and generate income through her Instagram page. Despite the criticism, Hallberg

continues to build her identity in the face of a society that continues to scrutinize her. Through her identity expression, she purges her own whiteness to closely align herself with a Black woman's aesthetic she cannot claim ownership of. Although a seemingly innocuous process of cultivating an online persona, it is actually harmful to the Black women who cannot exploit the aesthetic the way that she does. As white women continue to receive praise and compensation from the cultural work of Black women that Black women get criticized for by being called ghetto or ratchet, Blackfishing works to erase Black women as if they are not the best depictions of their own Black womanhood.

"I still have to wrap my mind around the fact that there's white and non-Black women portraying themselves as something I am every day without effort. They're gaining success by appearing to look like me while I work ten times as hard to get where I really want to be. It's unfair. It's very annoying to see people who aren't Black get praised for these types of things, but yet actual Black people get called things like hood rat, ghetto and ratchet - Odinaka (Lawler)."

"What makes this both so harmful and insulting is that Black women have to work twice as hard to obtain the same, if not fewer, benefits as white women in these spaces, so when white influencers are rewarded with partnerships and brand sponsorships under the pernicious guise that they are racially ambiguous women, it's beyond infuriating. Black women are constantly bombarded with the promotion of European beauty standards in media, so when our likeness is then embraced on women who have the privilege to fit traditional standards yet freely co-opt

Blackness to their liking, it reaffirms the belief that people desire Blackness, just not on Black women (Thompson).”

It is more than just her pictures. It is about how she can wear a culture as a costume, to be worn or taken off for personal gain and navigate through the world. She is able to do this in a way that Black women, who cannot take off their Blackness, cannot.

There is a line crossed when white women draw from the specific inspiration derived from Black women yet, refuse to acknowledge such. The use of terms such as “natural tan,” “natural hair,” “my look,” “my natural beauty,” “my makeup” used to defend against Blackfishing allegations places creative ownership on oneself without paying homage to the lineage they are stealing from. Because of such, Blackfishing offends and should offend Black women who are constantly facing erasure. By taking and claiming the Black women’s aesthetic as one’s own, white women are colonizing it.

Although Emma Hallberg is not the originator of Blackfishing, one can see the evidence of such through her. Her Instagram profile shows the strategic formula she is intentionally imploring to perform Black womanhood even if she herself does not define it as such. “[T]heir aesthetic is nothing new or revolutionary: it simply mirrors thousands of women on social media who mimic styles that have been created by Black women yet have been co-opted by white women. This charade in question has been embraced by numerous celebrities, which then trickled down to influencers who are simply following a formula that has proven to yield tremendous success for the high-profile women they idolize (Thompson).” I believe that this process trickled down from white celebrities, colonizes Black womanhood, making Black

women both hyper-visual and hyper-invisible. And when Black women call it out, they are gas lit, belittled, and demeaned being called angry, jealous, and bitter.

The argument presented in this work is just a start. Using this mode of analysis, I believe that looking at how whiteness is purged through Emma Hallberg's social media can further our understanding of how publics imagine both whiteness and Blackness. With more conversations at the intersection of race and social media, including ideas of Blackfishing and cultural appropriation, there is room to situate Hallberg in a larger conversation of cultural understandings and what identity really means.

4 CONCLUSION

This project analyzes the ways in which Black womanhood is curated, negotiated, and performed on Instagram through the production and circulation of crafted online personas. Using visual analysis, informed by Black Feminist Thought, I uncover encoded meanings ascribed to images posted on Instagram to better understand the ways that we imagine Black womanhood in the digital space. Considering how race and gender are performed together, this project highlights both the hyper-visual and the hyper-invisible impacts this distinctive performance has on Black women in the social media sphere. Bringing Black womanhood to the forefront of popular culture discussions, this project seeks to extend the critical intercultural scholarship that centers on the representation of Black Womanhood and our imaginings of Black culture. It also seeks to contribute concurrently to the academic conversations around identity and the ways in which we make meaning. Exploring the relationship between object and subject, this work makes space to better understand the ways in which Black womanhood is performed in para “real” spaces.

In the first chapter, I centered my own performance of Black womanhood on Instagram to shed light on the social reality of Black women today. I draw from the personal to chart the complex negotiation around both cultural and gendered identity expression on social media. Through an autoethnographic approach operating as both subject and object, I dissected the media texts presented to explore the ways in which I communicate my specific racial and gendered performance through posing, shot composition, and construction. Drawing upon my experience recalling my roles as daughter, sister, soror, and former pageant queen, I interrogate the ways in which these roles shape my social presentation in ways that both form and restrict.

By exploring the mechanisms that construct my own gendered and cultural expression, I shed light on how other Black women may do the same.

In the second chapter, I revealed how notions of Black Womanhood are performed by and transposed onto non-Black women bodies using popular social media influencer Emma Hallberg as a point of departure. Despite being diasporic in nature, there remains a dominant media imagining of Black womanhood, which Hallberg taps into, despite her refusal to acknowledge such. Through an exploration of Blackfishing, I show the ways that Hallberg used makeup, skin tanning, posing, clothing, and accessories to manipulate her appearance, distance herself from whiteness to be widely read as Black. Her images that circulated across the social media landscape caused controversy upon the discovery of her true heritage. Drawing connections to her strategic and curated performance, I highlight the ways in which her specific performance is both a formulaic and systematic rendering of Black Womanhood, a culture she has no direct connection to as a white Swedish teenager. This seemingly harmless performance, widely used within influencer culture, is both problematic and harmful. It displaces Black women and privileges white women, both socially and financially, by exploiting of Black women's cultural work that is devalued when performed by Black women. Using her social media portrayal and subsequent ownership of the stolen aesthetic as an example of the Blackfishing phenomena, I show how her performance works to distance Black women from their own cultural production and further erase Black women from the social media landscape.

Emma Hallberg's performance and the Blackfishing phenomenon causes real damage. Blackfishing allows white women access to a full repertoire of not only Black womanhood, but also freedom. It allows them the opportunity to play with the very personhood that Black women are punished for, all while erasing Black women from their own cultural production. Emma and

other white women alike participate in a predatory practice that allows them to take digital space from Black women, and continue to privilege their own whiteness. Their whiteness distances themselves from the proximity to danger the performance of Black womanhood can draw in a way that is inescapable for Black women. Because of such, the same performance of Black womanhood comes at a higher stake for Black women. When a Black woman enacts this particular performance, they are at risk of being punished by a range of actors including their family, their friends, their church, any social organizations, their professional endeavors, the greater Black community, or society as a whole. Their punishment, both structural and ontological, is one that a Black woman could not perform out of by changing her clothes or make-up techniques. Whereas if a white women's performance of Black womanhood is deemed unacceptable, they are at risk of social humiliation, but will always have the option to discard the performance in replace with another. If a Black woman's performance as a Black woman is deemed unacceptable, she is at risk of having life-changing opportunities taken away and in some cases could even experience death. They do not have access to a loophole to take off their Black womanhood, or have the privilege that whiteness can bring.

The problem fundamentally lies with the fact that Blackfishing gives white women like Hallberg access to play in Black womanhood at will for financial and social gain, and discard it when it no longer suits their needs. They colonize a performative space that is deeply rooted in the historical oppression of Black women, which emerged under conditions of deep constraint, but make no effort to dismantle the system that continues to oppress the very Black women and culture they are stealing from. Furthermore, they not only continue to remove Black women from their cultural production, but deny Black women access to it, further distancing Black women from the full repertoire of being.

This work takes up conversations around Blackfishing, purging whiteness, and the curation of social media identities to explore imaginings of Black womanhood across the digital landscape. Future directions of this work could explore: who gets to be read as Black? Are there areas where Black people are read as white? Why? How do our imaginings of Blackness in opposition to whiteness impact biracial identity where one is both white and Black? How do our imaginings of Black womanhood influence transracial and transgendered identities? What are the ways in which Black womanhood is taken up by male bodies socially within gay spaces and financially in the comedic landscape? These are topics for supplementary research and analysis.

The findings collected in this work are important to underline the ways we make meaning through contemporary media. Our social landscape needs more conversations about the cultural production of Black women. We need spaces that protect, appreciate, and compensate Black women for the cultural products and cultural trends they create and produce. Scholars need to acknowledge and give credit to Black women for their contributions to shaping the digital landscape.

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