ROUTED SISTERHOOD: BLACK AMERICAN FEMALE IDENTITY AND THE BLACK FEMALE COMMUNITY

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By

Carlotta M. Blackmon, B.A.

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Master’s Examination Committee:

Professor Kwaku Korang, Adviser

Professor Stephen Hall

Professor Maurice Stevens

Approved by

Adviser

Comparative Studies Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

The body and the identity of the black woman in the United States has been under siege since at least the 18th century, as African women were brought to the colonies to labor and procreate. Misrepresented, by the white majority, as morally and intellectually inferior to white men and women, and as sexually perverse, black women have been victims of physical and sexual abuse, social discrimination, and intellectual dismissal. But black women have also challenged the misuse of the black female body and the misrepresentation of the black female identity. This essay explores how black women have worked within and outside of discourses created by western white men to revise understandings of black womanhood. I argue that black women must continue to counter their realities of violence and discrimination by envisioning the black female community as a collective of unique agents working toward a common goal of liberation.
Dedicated to my Future
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VITA

June 27, 2008………………………….. Born - Columbus, Ohio

2003…………………………………….. B.A. Mass Communication, Wright State University

2006-2007……………………………… Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University

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INTRODUCTION

A September 2, 2008 entry on the online Blog, *What About Our Daughters*, reads:

I was on the Chicago Tribune site yesterday . . . when I saw this photo of an adorable little Black girl along with this headline “Tying Her Sister’s Shoe”. It was the story of 10-year-old Nequiel Fowler. Apparently she was shot as she was bending down to tie the shoe of her blind 5-year-old sister.

You may not have hear [sic] about Nequiel’s story because she’s a little Black girl and their violent, senseless deaths don’t make national news. Unlike the equally tragic story of *Caylee Anthony*.

For those of you who have managed to miss the Caylee Anthony story, I have heard about it on television, on the front page of all of the major news websites. I have even heard the Caylee story being discussed on both local and national radio. Now maybe Caylee’s story is gaining more attention because the circumstances surrounding her disappearance are soap opera-esq. But it is yet another example of two little girls, one black and one white, who are killed or go missing at the same time yet receive vastly different coverage in the national media. Police are continuing to search for Nequiel’s killers.

Is it that we expect the Nequiel Fowler’s of the word [sic] to die by stray bullets? Three children in the Chicago area were killed over the Labor Day weekend (McCaulay).
Gina McCauley’s observation—that violence against black females goes largely uncovered in United States media—and her unrest over it, are not unique. In hundreds of Blogs, news articles, message boards, and other commentaries on the web, black women and others question why women and children of color who go missing are covered so drastically less than troubled white women and children in local and national media. Yet many others think the outrage is unfounded. The reader commentaries on one CNN Blog are characteristic of how the intersecting realities of race, gender, class, and sexuality—and their attending oppressions—are dismissed, overlooked, and oversimplified in the national conscious. Tom Foreman, a CNN correspondent, who is white and male, wrote a Blog reflecting on the phrase “Missing White Woman Syndrome,” used by a woman he interviewed, regarding coverage of white women like Natalee Holloway and Laci Peterson (All Points; Official). 1 The phrase refers to the intensity and frequency of national coverage given to purportedly attractive, wealthy, white women and children in trouble. Foreman concludes, “Is that racism or realism? We can't cover every murder, but ignoring them all or reporting just statistics seems irresponsible. So how should we decide whose life or loss is covered” (Foreman, par. 7)?

His question misses the point that racism is the reality. But the respondents to his blog largely agree with him. Collectively, their comments indicate a quick disregard for the reasons that ratings increase when white women’s soap-opera-like stories of tragedy are discussed in the media—and the associated scarcity of troubled black women’s stories mentioned. Dozens of comments suggest that viewers are more shocked when bad things happen to white women because “we” expect them to happen to black women. However,

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1 Laci Peterson went missing and was later found murdered in 2003. Natalee Holloway went missing in 2005. Her body has not yet been found.
responses like, “life is never fair,” highlight the lack of concern about the lives and bodies of black women. This comment emphasizes that the troubles black women in the U.S. face are as well known, as they are immaterial, within the dominant society.

Whether or not they receive appropriate coverage in the media, black girls and black women in the U.S. are, as Nequiel Fowler’s death indicates, under constant threat of death, violence, discrimination, and erasure. More than half of women in the U.S. living with AIDS are black, black women are more likely to face imprisonment than their white counterparts, and black women continue to face unfair treatment in the workforce (CDC; Drug; Rouse). It is this shared condition relative to the nation that has, for decades, led black women to engage the questions, *Who are we?* and *Who can we be?*

For instance, in her address to the New England Anti-Slavery Society in September of 1832, Maria W. Stewart discussed the absurdity of black girls being excluded from full participation in society’s educational and vocational spheres. She stated:

> And such is the powerful force of prejudice. Let our girls possess whatever amiable qualities of soul they may; let their characters be fair and spotless as innocence itself; let their natural taste and ingenuity be what they may; it is impossible for scarce an individual of them to rise above the condition of servants. Ah! why is this cruel and unfeeling distinction? Is it merely because God has made our complexion to vary? If it be, O shame to soft, relenting humanity (Stewart 46).

Here she suggests that it is ludicrous for black women to be treated as brainless creatures undeserving of citizenship when they have proven the extent of their intellectual and moral capacities. It did not make sense to Stewart that black people should be
necessarily excluded from full humanity when she herself was proof that black women and men think and feel indifferently from their white oppressors. For black women have long understood the deliberate construction—by white supremacist patriarchal structures of power in the west—of black inhumanity.

Centuries ago, white ideologues in the west determined the crucial link between the dehumanization of black persons and the creation of wealth. In his 1754 essay, *Of National Character*, David Hume contends that nature has predetermined, and fixed forever, white superiority. He argues that any apparent intellect observed in a “negroe” is a certain exaggeration. Hume notes, “In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly” (229). Their purported status as permanently unqualified for intellectual development or moral discretion made black persons a logical fit for chattel property—in the minds of white supremacists. Black women, who possessed alone the ability to multiply wealth in birthing children into slavery, were particularly central to the sustaining of slave-based capitalism. As Naomi Zack observes, “The monetarization of race required the mechanics of mammalian heterosexual reproduction in order to be maintained and expanded in the way capitalistic enterprise requires” (149-150). The degradation of black womanhood has been central to the projects of capitalism and nation building in the United States. Consequentially, the redefining of black womanhood, and the insistence upon the full and equitable participation of black women in U.S. life has been the principal project of numerous black female intellectuals, activists, entertainers, and others independently navigating their private lives.
This essay has the following question at its foundation: How can black females acquire the agency of self-definition while acknowledging how their shared positions in the history of western discourse and in U.S. society—as not fully, or perversely, human—make community and coalition building favorable projects to continue? It begins with an exploration of scholars’ attempts at countering derogatory definitions of black female subjectivity within western intellectual discourse. In chapter one I examine ideological challenges from black and female scholars to mainstream narratives about black female identity. First, I consider how scholars have utilized western discourses to counter and revise understandings of black female subjectivity. I show how the essentialist approach taken from Enlightenment ideology reifies the purported fact of biological essences, and is therefore insufficient as a tool for challenging historical untruths of black female perversion.

The definitions of humanity written into the ideologies of scientific and social thought during the Enlightenment period necessarily excluded black subjects. This exclusion allowed and encouraged the violence and abuse of black bodies in the west; black women's bodies in particular became colonies to be sexually exploited. The revisioning of essential subjectivity by black women, while it may create a safer place from which to engage patriarchal and supremacist institutions, nevertheless gives credence to the grounds from which wielders of dominance continue to destroy black lives.

Second, I argue that scholars continue to find useful appropriations of post-structuralism, even as its extreme application is troubled. The fragmentation of the subject in post-structuralist thought rejects notions of biological essences, making fictive subject categories like race and gender. While this position easily refutes myths of a
priori black inferiority, some scholars contend that it can be troublesome for subjects needing to demonstrate how those historically grounded subject categories continue to operate within structures of power as truths with material consequences. Academicians engaging black female identity have continued to engage in scholarly debate as to the most appropriate application of post-structuralist discourse for projects seeking to de-colonize black females from the persisting narratives of inferiority.

In the final segment of chapter one, I outline Patricia Hill Collins’s conception of Black Feminist Epistemology, a philosophy created within the black female community to establish new approaches to knowledge discovery and thus counter narratives of black female inferiority. Collins’s work is important because in establishing an intellectual epistemology created by black women, it simultaneously celebrates black female traditions and challenges the narrative developed by white supremacist culture that disputes black female intelligence. I then examine Gayl Jones's novel *The Healing* and argue that Jones’s use of the elements of BFE in her text is an affirmation of its importance in the black female community.

In chapter two I look at intra-racial approaches to liberating black females from restrictive definitions of subjectivities developed within the black community. First, I examine Paul Gilroy’s theory of routed identity as outlined in his text, *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy contends that U.S. and global black identities have always been fractured and disparate, with black folks sharing a societal position as marginalized and un-free, and thus a common interest in liberation. In *Black Atlantic*, Gilroy is concerned with the foundational nature of hybridity in black diasporic culture. He imagines the global black community as a collection of fractured subjectivities that share political grievances and
what he calls "structures of feeling," rather than racial or ethnic sameness. Focusing on the "routes" black life has taken across the Diaspora, he rejects notions of "rootedness."

I then present Mara Brock Akil’s situation comedy *Girlfriends* (2001-2008) as an example of what routed black female identity can look like in a U.S. context. The story of *Girlfriends*, four black women who embody multiple versions of black subjectivity, works to disrupt ideals of across-the-board sameness in black female life. The show highlights the idiosyncrasies and vulnerabilities of black female experience, personality, and emotion, and insists that black females perform and understand their sexualities and their identities variously. The women’s approaches to life and their experiences are contrasting, but they share an understanding of the ways in which their social/political positions as black women in the U.S. are rooted in a history of racialized struggle.

I examine how Akil uses the themes of religion, sexuality, beauty, and heritage to de-homogenize understandings of black female identity. Each woman in *Girlfriends* understands and performs those nodes of identity uniquely. The community of sisterhood the women create is mutually valued and embraced for its usefulness as a space of understanding and refuge—even as it is not immune to conflict and struggle. I am arguing that black women must construct communities that share a resolve to contest systems of oppression and refute discourses that mark black bodies as inherently inferior, and simultaneously acknowledge the disjunctures of experience and identity within those communities. Because black women continue to live in the United States under threat of violence and discrimination, validating the reality of fractured subjectivities within our community, and recognizing the need to collectively contest lasting systems of oppression, remains crucial.
CHAPTER 1

RE-VISIONING BLACK FEMALE IDENTITY IN WESTERN DISCOURSE

In her article, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” Evelyn M. Hammonds proposes that the black female body is “always already colonized” (171). Hammonds uses the story of Sara Baartman, as retold and analyzed by Sander Gilman, to make the case that the black female has historically become “the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty” and has been “relegated to the lowest position on the scale of human development” (172). When something is colonized it is taken over by an outside entity, often given a new name and a new identity, and is made subservient and an object of violence. So to speak of the black female body as colonized is to emphasize the extent to which black female subjects have historically inhabited a physical flesh that has literally and metaphorically been taken over by others.

Baartmann, a South African woman, was taken to England in 1810 after a Dr. William Dunlop promised her a life in show business. She died in 1815 in Paris, after having been exhibited in Europe as a “freak” in carnival shows for much of her time there. Gilman’s analysis addresses the ways in which the exhibition of the “Hottentot Venus,” as Bartmaan was called, worked to exclude the black female from normative ideals on femininity and sexuality. He contends that her purported “primitive” genitalia was seen as an exterior marker of a ‘primitive’ sexual appetite, and she was reduced to
her sexual parts so that she was first and necessarily a sexual being (Gilman). Baartman
is iconic of how the black female has been marked as hypersexual and conspicuously
sexually available—in direct opposition to white womanhood. The supposed scientific
conclusions have fed social attitudes that continue, in the 21st century, to make black
females the objects and targets of racially motivated violence and discrimination in the
west.

For instance, in April of 2007 Don Imus, who is white and male, was discussing a
basketball game on his syndicated radio program and referred to the black female players
of Rutgers’ team as “rough girls” and “nappy headed hoes.” He said that their Tennessee
opponents (also black) were good looking, and his producer compared the two teams to
the “jigaboos,” who were dark complexioned and the “wannabe’s,” who had light skin,
from Spike Lee’s School Daze. He was suggesting that the Rutgers players’ physical
performance should have been better, since, based on his reading of their appearance—
big, black, ugly, nappy-headed, and hypersexual—they must be strong, tough,
masculine—and better athletes. These insults exposed his derogatory thoughts about
black women’s perverse beauty and sexuality. Imus was dismissed because of his
comments, and the Rutgers basketball players received hate mail from irate Imus fans,
even though the players didn’t demand his firing. Imus used violent words to reference
the black women’s bodies, but the very lives of the women came under threat. This
example demonstrates that conceptions of black female sexuality in the dominant culture
of the United States cannot be divorced from ideas about their physical and mental
aptitude, or their perceived beauty.
In this chapter I set up the problematic from which black women must extricate themselves. I consider how black and female scholars have attempted to eradicate derogatory conceptions of black female identity from the mainstream U.S. national conscious using western discourses. First, I outline how some scholars appropriated Enlightenment thought for liberating purposes and who how these ideals have proven problematic in their reification of biological essences. I go on to examine how other scholars have found poststructuralist discourse useful in its refutation of essentialism even as some have cautioned that complete deconstructions of identity categories can present challenges for identity-based politics. I then consider how Patricia Hill Collins’s Black Feminist Epistemology is useful in establishing counter knowledges and opposing white society’s destructive definitions of blackness.

Collins’ work is significant for me because of its deliberate attention to ways of being that are found in black women’s lives. Collins focuses on black female traditions, marking the traditions as both folk and academic. While she acknowledges that the epistemology is taken from black female communities, she also points out that they are applicable to other communities and movements. Furthermore, Collins doesn’t suggest that all black women are familiar with the practices she takes up in her analysis. She states that the customs are found in multiple black female communities, and are worth adapting and utilizing for purposes of liberation. I examine Gayl Jones’s *The Healing* as a text that actualizes Collins’s philosophy. Jones affirms Collins’s model by adapting the four elements of BFE into the healings the protagonist Harlan Jane Eagleton performs.

A central debate within black female scholarship on the body is how to address the interplay of race and gender as social constructs with material realities. The
recognition that the fictions assigned to the black female body need not be accepted as ‘the way things are’ or believed as ultimate truths, must be tempered by an understanding that those fictions nevertheless influence the lived experiences of black women.

Margaret Homans argues that race and gender can be understood neither as metaphorical social constructions nor the accumulations of physical experience. Instead, she suggests and interplay of the two—that socially determined meanings ascribed to skin color and biological sex manifest in a myriad of concrete lived experiences. In other words, the black female body is a sign for sexual deviance and black female bodies experience physical violence and various social hostilities and barriers as a consequence of those predetermined meanings.

Let me illustrate this point anecdotally. I once hit a curb and busted the tire of my car. I pulled into a store parking lot and a man approached and offered to change my tire. I enthusiastically accepted his offer, popped my trunk and helped him to access the spare tire, which was covered with books, shoes, purses, and the like. As he changed the tire, my cousin arrived, and he greeted her saying, “Yeah, she had a lot of junk in her trunk—and I’m talking about the one on her car.” Until he made that comment, I was not thinking about my status as both black and female. I felt fully female because of the social implications of a man having to do physical labor for me due to my lack of knowledge about cars. But it was his reading my body as sexual—specifically because of its blackness—that made it a raced, gendered, sexualized experience.

The Black Female Intellectual History

In the second edition of her important text, Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins argues that black women’s introduction to U.S. society under interlocking,
oppressive systems of labor exploitation, political exclusion, and derogatory ideological representation “created the political context for [their] intellectual work” (4-5). Black women were relegated to the “lowest position on the scale of human development” (Hammonds 172), and were summarily excluded from the creation and development of knowledge systems. Though black women have certainly been readers, writers and thinkers outside of society’s official institutions since the earliest days of U.S. nationhood, black female intellectual work continues to face exclusion and dismissal. Sojourner Truth is a figure often associated with the abolitionist movement, though she also played an important role in the political circles of white women lobbying for equalities. But Truth is only one of many black women who were speaking and writing on behalf of justice in the lives of women in the early centuries of U.S. development. Despite the talents and efforts—as early as the mid 1800’s—of women like Maria W. Stewart, who has been called “America’s first black woman political writer,” and Harriet Jacobs, considered a historical foremother to the literary traditions of African American women (Richardson; Johnson), the concerns of black women—and their unique perspectives and experiences—were not given space in the white female led feminist movement.

bell hooks notes that “Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique is still heralded as having paved the way for the contemporary feminist movement. . . [yet] ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women” (2). It became necessary for black women to organize movements that placed their particular needs at the center. Patricia Hill Collins points to two such significant moments: the black women’s club movement at the turn of the 20th century, and the “antiracist and women’s social justice
movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s” (2, 30). The growing presence of black women in academic and political circles did not bring with it a welcoming or an acknowledgement of black female experience. As Collins notes, “Black women’s experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have been routinely distorted in or excluded from traditional academic discourse” (1, 201).

Collins also contends that black women have historically approached justice movements and scholarship from social locations that differ drastically from that of other race/gender groups. And their exclusion from established circles of thought and process incited a need to do work elsewhere. Black women began, and continue, “to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black feminist consciousness” (1, 202). The black centered feminist movement became an important location from which black women could address their numerous grievances with white and male centered institutions and norms.

**Troubling Enlightenment Thought**

Though black women have long understood the relationships between their substandard position in U.S. society and mainstream society’s definitions of their humanity, reclaiming and redefining black womanhood in order to uplift black women has not been without challenges; using the language of the oppressor can be a conflicted project. Take for instance Audre Lorde, who problematically describes the erotic as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). She insists that the erotic is an abstract essence present in women, ever waiting to be made manifest. She locates its
suppression with white supremacy and male dominance in the west, and suggests that women must re-embrace the erotic, which she argues, “can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (59). While Lorde is clearly defining the erotic as a female essence for emancipatory purposes—she states that it is “an assertion of the lifeforce of women”—she nevertheless articulates it in terms of the very Enlightenment ideals, as I show below, that have been used to oppress persons who are not white and male (55). Lorde identifies herself as a black lesbian feminist, and speaking from this position, insists on the natural presence of the erotic, which is at odds with “male models of power” (53). How can Lorde seek to dismiss those models of power, founded upon notions of the biological inferiority of black humanity, if she uses them to proclaim a different, albeit potentially emancipating set of biological essences?

Let me demonstrate the violence against black female bodies that the Enlightenment ideals Lorde adapts inspires. As part of her investigation of ideas of “sex, violence, and slavery” in the works of Blake and Wollstonecraft, Anne K. Mellor analyzes John Stedman’s watercolor drawings and accompanying commentaries in his 1796 Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam . . . from the year 1772 to 1777. Stedman was a soldier and an advocate for the reformation (rather than the abolition) of slavery in the West Indies. One of his descriptions reads as follows:

a truly beautiful Samboe Girl of about 18, as naked as she came to the World, and lacerated in such a shocking Condition by the Whips of two Negro Drivers, that she was from her neck to her Ancles literally died over with blood—It was after receiving 200 lashes that I perceived her with her head hanging downwards, a
most miserable Spectacle, Thus turning to the overseer I implored that she might be untied from that moment . . . but my Answer was . . . that to prevent all Strangers from interfearing with his Government, he had made it an unalterable rule, in that Case always to redouble the Punishment, and which he instantaneously began to put in execution (qtd in Mellor 354).

As Mellor notes, such violence was both commonplace and expected in a society whose Enlightenment ideals held that to be civilized was to be Christian, English, and white (350). Black women, existing as they did outside the parameters of full humanity, were available for sexual exploitation and physical abuse. One of Mellor’s arguments is that Stedman’s illustrations evade “the violence of his text” (354). She writes, “the girl is not entirely naked but rather modestly draped with a loincloth; no blood is visible; the overseer is not actively lashing her, nor is Stedman’s attempt to stop the overseer represented. Instead we see a classically draped female body in an erotically charged position, a female in all respects European in appearance save for shaded skin tone” (354). Such an evasion condones the sadism enacted upon the black female and erases its magnitude from the mainstream conscious in the west.

Enlightenment thinkers “established particular conceptions of scientific method and epistemology” that became “commonsense ways of thinking about thinking in the West” (Ramazanoglu 25). According to Enlightenment thought, scientific knowledge is the omnipotent knowledge that enables progress, and reason and rational thought lead to autonomy. Significantly, though, the very (white, privileged) men who decided to favor scientific knowledge were also its creators, and the freedoms that reason was said to make possible were not available to all people. The establishment of natural binaries is
one such area of knowledge that has been central to the oppression of and violence against nonwhite peoples.

Descartes’ belief that consciousness is what separates humans from animals played a significant role in establishing the mind over matter dualism from which other important binaries (man/woman, white/nonwhite, civilized/savage, chastity/sexuality) derive (25). As Ramazanoglu and Holland state, “One consequence of this logic was to conclude that the rational, civilized, cultured man, with his access to certainties, could master the savage, primitive or barbarian, who was subject only to passion or a childlike mind” (28). Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume argued that whites are the only civilized people in the world—by nature. He writes,

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation (228).

Significantly, Hume connects skin complexion to innate characteristics. The important distinction here is the fact of nature—for if nature has pre-determined the propensity for talent (or sexuality, or violence, etc) for people of a given skin color, or sex, then there is nothing anyone bearing that complexion or having a particular sexual organ can do to alter her status in the established world order.

The assigning of particular bodies to specific characteristics, attributes and positions in social hierarchies worked in concert with the establishment of binaries. The 19th century ideology of womanhood defined white women as sexually covert, sensitive bearers of heirs and citizens. Black women were characterized as overtly sexual seductresses, and breeders of property and capital. White women represented the ideal
woman and personified femininity, and black women were assigned to exist in opposition. As Angela Davis states, “Judged by the evolving nineteenth century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women’s roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies” (5). Black women in the United States were legally classified as property through the 19th century; their bodies were subjected to neglect and violence by citizens of the Union, and they were exempt from social or legal redress. As Hammonds states, “Because African American women were defined as property, their social, political, and legal rights barely excluded those of farm animals—indeed, they were subjected to the same forms of control and abuse as animals” (173). As the Imus-Rutgers controversy indicates, the abolition of slavery and subsequent movement of black women into different positions in varied facets of society has not been accompanied by an eradication of the ideology that exiles black women from the ideal.

If black women continue to be positioned as not fully or not yet human, in accordance with the binaries established by Enlightenment thought, it will continue to make sense in mainstream white supremacist society to deny black women both equal access to jobs, healthcare, and other resources, and protections from rape, harassment, and other violence. Lorde’s recasting of a female essence may work to refute the narratives that black women are always and necessarily hypersexual, sexually available, breeders, workhorses, etc, because the erotic essence is all about mental, intellectual, and sexual excellence; however, it insists that all women claim a particular biological essence, and contends that a refusal to embrace this erotic is a denying of the true self. This prohibits other ways of self-definition. Lorde concludes:
We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women (57-58).

The problem is not so much that Audre Lorde or others might find it liberating to claim a naturally occurring eroticism as black women; if what is believed to be a “firmly rooted power” enables Lorde to share joy and connect with people, or to work to capacity, then she should be permitted the agency to claim and act on that power for herself. But her claim that this power is biologically determined for all women is indifferent from those made by white men in earlier centuries proposing that black people were naturally unintelligent and amoral. What do we tell the black woman who believes just as certainly that it is not the erotic, but instead a divine spirit, which she may connect with the earth, or with a male or multiple gods, that has been suppressed, and through which she can find joy and excellence? Binaries and biological essences can be powerful for persons who identify with or are inspired by them, but are problematic because they are created by one or few people but lock into place human characteristics for entire populations of people. This discourages individual and group self-definition because it works against the notion that people negotiate multiple identities.
Debating Post-structuralism: Problems and Potential

Postmodern thought critiques the narrative of a universal, rational subject, and the objectivity of science. Notions of the sublime, alterity, and hybridity replace the certainties and binaries of Enlightenment. In post-structuralist thought, subjectivity is fluid and always changing within discourse. As Ramazanoglu and Holland indicate, postmodern thought takes [the foundations of male-centred western knowledge] apart to show what is taken for granted in their constituent elements and processeses (rationality, the knowing subject, scientific method, truth, reality) and how knowledge is produced and made powerful. These deconstructions uncouple knowledge, power and reality in order to examine how various connections between them have been produced, and with what effects (86).

In so doing, they continue, “The boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ collapse, opening up new possibilities for subjugated voices, stories about experience, autobiography, memories” (86). This re-articulation of subjectivity as something necessarily unfixed and never pre-existing dramatically renders discourses centered on Cartesian dualisms false. “Blackness,” as conceptualized since the slave era, is released from the confines of innate inferiority.

Yet the ways in which academicians have taken up post-structuralist discourse in race and gender studies have been both diverse and conflicting. In her essay, “Racial Composition,” Margaret Homans outlines a debate that took place during the 1980s in the U.S. between black female and black male scholars. At the root of this debate, argues Homans, was that Henry Louis Gates’ use of post-structuralism “could be seen to identify
and celebrate the abstract as masculine and devalue embodiment as female” (78). Some black feminists found this dismissal of the female-identified body problematic. To quote Homans again, “Whereas for some feminists such a view of language led the way as well to an escape from biological essentialism in the realm of gender, for others it meant hostility to the female body” (78).

The issue for black feminist Joyce, and others, in Homans’ analysis, was that they understood the body and the mind to be inseparable, even while rejecting culturally assigned racial designations (80). For some black feminists, notes Homans, the experiences of the body and its interplay with the mind remained significant and undeniable. Furthermore, the black male scholars taking part in the debate seemed to attempt a wielding of linguistic and intellectual power over black women—the dismissal of the black female body in black male discourse was coupled with a dismissal of black females as intellectual peers. Homans concludes that Gates and Joyce weren’t as “far apart as each appears to believe” (80). She continues, “When Joyce concludes by calling race an ‘innane, illogical concept’ she would seem to agree with Gate’s statement, quoted by her, that ‘the relation between a sign such as blackness, and its referent, such as absence’ is arbitrary” (80). Still, the conflict demonstrates the intensity with which black female scholars continue to attempt to free black female bodies from (metaphorical and physical) distress.

This question over the use of post-structuralist discourse is taken up in feminist studies as well. Linda Alcoff, in “Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” argues that one feminist response to deconstructing the concept of “woman” from those meanings men have assigned to it “has been to reject
the possibility of defining woman as such at all” (407). For post-structuralist thinkers like Derrida and Foucault, “there is no essential core ‘natural’ to us” (415). The subject does not exist in any concrete sense. Instead, subjects are constructed through social discourse and cultural practice, and are therefore always in flux.

Alcoff contends that the feminist use of post-structuralism can work to dismantle the category woman altogether. This is problematic for Alcoff; she argues that without the category of woman, there is no place for feminist politics. A complete destruction of “woman” results in a dismissal of the material experiences of “women.” She asks the question, “How can we speak out against sexism as detrimental to the interests of women if the category is a fiction?” (420). Even if subjects are constituted through discourse, and in spite of the extent to which race (or gender) is more an ideological concept than a biological fact, real things happen to the bodies that inhabit those “fictions.”

While post-structuralist discourse is potentially liberating in that it opens up identity categories and divorces them from any pre-determined meanings, it remains important to acknowledge how the fictitious definitions of black womanhood established during Enlightenment are still central in determining how black women live. In “The Norplant Solution,” for instance, Elaine Burrell argues that the Norplant drug was used to police the reproductive rights of poor and nonwhite women due to a belief in their innate inferiority. She states, “The image of the welfare mother is that of an irresponsible, lazy, and sexually promiscuous African-American woman with more children than she can possibly hope to support” (1). Similarly, Hammonds argues that the AIDS epidemic in the black female community continues to be ignored because stereotypes about perverse black female sexuality make them deserving of and responsible for their position (179).
The suggestion that race and gender are inconsequential fictions renders women who have been historically relegated to the lowest social and economic positions in society individually responsible for their poverty; the historical exclusion from access to resources—based on their assigned race/gender status—is erased and the women become personally responsible for not having acquired the appropriate education, health treatment, etc. As George Lipsitz states, “As long as we define social life as the sum total of conscious and deliberate individual activities, we will be able to discern as racist only individual manifestations of personal prejudice and hostility. Systemic, collective, and coordinated group behavior consequently drops out of sight” (20). Still, post-structuralism remains useful in that it allows for the conversations and debates on identity and representation to continue, rather than drawing final conclusions. In the foreword to Bennett and Dickerson’s anthology, Recovering the Black Female Body, Carla Peterson asks the following questions:

What can we say then about the representation of the Black female body as we begin the twenty-first century? Perhaps simply that history repeats itself given that this body remains a highly contested site of meaning both within and without the Black community and that African-American women still struggle with its representation, vacillating between the poles of sentimental normalization and the flaunting of eccentricity (xv).

So far, I have discussed how black and female scholars have utilized discourses constructed by white men in the west to address the freeing of black women from narratives of sub-humanity and its attending consequences of violence, exclusion and oppression. Next, I review Patricia Hill Collins’s outlining of Black Feminist Thought as
an epistemology developed within the black female community to establish new approaches to knowledge production and to oppose derogatory accounts of black female identity. In the preface to the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins suggests that her text reflects: her struggle to find a voice after having been silenced, an acknowledgment and representation of “everyday” knowledge through accessibly written scholarship, a commitment to centering black women’s experiences and ideas, and her decision to present the theory “as being coherent and basically complete” (2, vi-viii). In the preface to the second edition, she discusses her growth as woman and scholar, and states that while her initial goal in writing the text was to empower women, the revisions in the second edition result from a more complex understanding of empowerment.

I have chosen to reference both versions of the text, because I appreciate the knowledge born from both stages of her personal and professional development, and because I think that other black female scholars join me in identifying with her earlier focus on coming to voice and wanting to present the theory as sound and thorough. My review of Collins’s epistemology indicates my championing of black female scholarship. My belief that the validation of such counter-knowledge is crucial to the survival of that knowledge also accounts for my analysis of Gayl Jone’s use of the elements of BFE in her text. In the final segment of this chapter, I examine Jones’s *The Healing* and argue that the elements of BFE Collins proposes are championed in the story of protagonist Harlan Jane Eagleton. Harlan is a faith healer whose story—particularly her healing “show”—affirms the value and validity of BFE. Through the healings, we can see how elements of BFT can operate in black female centered communities.
**Patricia Hill Collins on Black Feminist Thought**

Black female thinkers have historically been educated using the intellectual tools established by white men in the west, but black women have not necessarily accepted those tools as superior or sufficient. Advancing new ideas about the world from black female perspectives can be difficult within frameworks set according to Euro-centric male or Euro-centric female standards. Collins says black women “may know that something is true but be unwilling or unable to legitimate . . . [their] claims using Eurocentric, masculinist criteria, (Collins 2, 204).” She sees black feminist thought as essential because she says “Black women with academic credentials who seek to exert the authority that our status grants us to propose new knowledge claims about African-American women face pressures to use our authority to help legitimate a system that devalues and excludes the majority of Black women” (204).

While Collins does not wholly diminish the potential usefulness of Eurocentric knowledge systems, she emphasizes the value in the creation, validation, and application of black female centered knowledge. She conceptualizes black feminist thought as an academic body of knowledge and an approach to scholarship composed of the experiences and viewpoints of black women. While their experiences vary, she contends that the shared histories of colonialism, slavery, and other societal oppressions create a commonality of position amongst black people, relative to dominant society, and that gender based oppressions consequence unique black female perspectives. Collins argues that black female intellectual work is subjugated knowledge because it is not recognized as rigorous or viable according to white male institutionalized knowledge systems. The
four elements of Collins’s conception of Black Feminist Thought are: concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, the value of dialogue, the ethic of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability.

“Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning” is a crucial and foundational aspect of Black Feminist Thought. Black women within and outside of the academy have noted its importance, because changing the conditions of black female life requires that their experiences be examined by persons who “know what . . . [they’re] talking about” (1, 209). Racial, class and gender oppression have required that black women be vigilant about citing and examining personal experience in order to legitimate and advance counter-narratives and new knowledge systems. Collins makes a distinction between wisdom and knowledge arguing that, for many black women, knowledge applied through the lens of experience is important and “has been key to Black women’s survival” (1, 208). Having experienced something makes a person’s analysis of an argument more credible in this ideological approach.

The use of dialogue to evaluate knowledge claims is a second precept of BFT. She writes, “For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (1, 212). Collins states that the use of dialogue fosters connectedness and encourages the participation of multiple viewpoints and is rooted in African-based oral and African American traditions. (1, 212). Collins argues that call and response discourse, which requires the active participation of speakers and listeners, and Black English, which is intentionally spoken in active rather than passive voice (thereby
assuming the participation of speaker and listener, according to June Jordan), both exemplify the importance of dialogue in black communities.

The “ethic of caring,” which includes “the value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy,” is a third element (1, 216). The appreciation of individual uniqueness is represented in quilts made by black women, where the distinctiveness of each piece is thought to enhance the quilt as a whole (1, 215). The emotion behind a singer’s voice or a preacher’s words emphasizes her truth. And attempting to intimately understand a person’s perspective is a respected approach to identifying with him or her. Collins calls this component “connected knowing,” where reason and emotion are intertwined. She states, “While the ideas presented by a speaker must have validity . . . the group also appraises the way the knowledge is presented” (1, 216).

Finally, the “ethic of personal accountability” rejects “the Eurocentric, masculinist belief that probing into an individual’s personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion” (1, 218). In Black Feminist Thought, a person’s background is an important factor in evaluating her or his statements. Collins recounts a class discussion in which black female students wanted to know concrete details of the personal relationships with Black women, the marital status, and the social class background of a male scholar whose work they were considering (1, 218). Knowledge of his personal background were used to assess his “ethic of caring,” and the students dialogued to work out their personal assessments of his work and in turn develop individual analyses.
Collins argues that the four elements outlined above are interconnected and work together when persons using black feminist epistemology are establishing and evaluating knowledge. Furthermore, she argues that this approach is significant because it “challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth” (1, 219). This interconnected process takes place in *The Healing*, the story of Harlan Jane Eagleton, a southern black woman and faith healer who tells stories of love and loss as she travels to small “tank” towns healing people’s bodies and spirits. Although the healing is a community experience not academic in nature, Jones’s description of it, via Harlan, confirms the ways that black women establish and advance knowledge claims, according to Collins. The healings represent a black woman’s establishing of new truths—her audience is skeptical but she is able to prove the validity of her knowledge through the four elements of BFT.

**Concrete Experience**

Harlan Jane Eagleton knows that the people she encounters when she visits a new community are generally skeptical of her powers. But she is also certain that concrete experience will change the skeptic’s mind. She tells a woman riding the bus with her that she is a faith healer, and then ponders, “but I know what she’s thinking: that I’m some kinda charlatan and mercenary, or some kinda crazy woman. . . ‘Cause I can tell she’s one of them skeptical types” (5). She goes on to say, “when they witness the healings, then they’ll come ‘round” (6). Harlan admits that she would be a skeptic if she had not done the healings herself, and that she never set out to be a healer. Once she discovered
her “power,” though, she decided it was important to share. This symbolizes the black woman who finds that telling her story is necessary.

Reflecting on the possibility that her witness Nicholas—a man who saw her first healing and speaks on her behalf to new audiences—may retire she says, “I thought about hiring me another ‘witness,’ but that would be duplicitous and Nicholas the true one witnessed the first true healing, and that ain’t the same as a hired witness” (10). For Harlan, it is important that a true witness speak of his experience on her behalf. This dialogue with the audience helps to prepare the people to believe in what they will soon experience. Harlan describes the “procedure” as follows: “Nicholas stands up in front of the people and tells them all folksy-like about the first time I ever healed someone, and then, after they’s caught up in the tale . . . I begin the healing” (12). Harlan is insistent that Nicholas’s presence and testimony are necessary. Nicholas witnessed her first healing, and the re-telling of his experience sets the groundwork for her personal introduction. Harlan’s second telling highlights the importance of one’s personal experience in establishing new histories.

**Dialogue**

Collins states that the call and response dialogue often takes place in the African-American church. Harlan heals in a local church to a religious audience, and during the recounting of her first healing the audience members talk back to the speaker, enacting the call and response discourse. Nicholas begins his testimony: “I stabbed her, but the knife bent. Wouldn’t go all the way in. Went in just enough to do some tiny damage but not what it coulda done . . . Then it bent. And you know I’m a powerful man.”

“Hush now, a woman shouts. Hush, hush now” (33).
He finishes his account by saying, “And now she try to heal everybody that want to be healed . . . And that the truth. And I wouldn’t trade truth like that for gold” (33).

The audience encourages and challenges his story. Harlan observes: “Yes! someone shout. Lord today! Exclaim another. A unbeliever mumbles, pirates, bandits, confidence people. A few snicker at a tale like that. Another starts singing” (33). Through the call and response, the listeners are engaging in a debate of sorts, each shouter sharing his or her feelings about the truth of what’s being said. This is a communal approach to validating a new story.

**Ethic of Caring**

Harlan is concerned that Nicholas may retire from witnessing, even though she thinks that his testimony has gotten “dry.” Harlan notes how important it is for Nicholas to be passionate as he speaks. She says, “All I know is that Nicholas himself usedta tell the tale with more fanfare, more flourish, more confabulatoriness. And when he tells about that healing, it sounds like a true tale; it don’t sound like no confabulatory tale. Least the way he usedta tell the tale of the healing. Now he tends to be kinda dry. And those people that come to faith healing most of them want to hear confabulatory-sounding stories, which don’t mean they’s confabulatory stories they ownself” (11). The people need to hear an energetic, charismatic speaker; “dry” emotion is unconvincing and seems insincere and therefore, suspect.

It’s also significant that Nicholas and Harlan give individual accounts of the same story. Much like distinct pieces of a quilt, their unique versions of the same experience offer a deeper, more genuine understanding of it. And Nicholas and Harlan each think that the other person’s telling is important. Harlan can’t imagine doing a healing without
Nicholas’s testimony, but Nicholas tells her that he can’t tell the story of her first healing better than she can.

Harlan also describes his telling as “folksy.” This conveys an organic rapport with the people. Identifying with the community is important because it suggests a level of empathy. His “folksy” talk signals to the listeners that he is one of them. He understands and respects them, and therefore would not mislead them. Nicholas’s down-to-earth appeal helps Harlan to establish trust with her audience. Finally, Harlan empathizes with her audience. She understands that they may be skeptical, and tells them that she relates to their trepidation. Harlan doesn’t take the people’s hesitancy for granted. She keeps her former disbelief, and the culture of the people, in the forefront of her mind, and is thus able to approach the healings with compassion and humility.

**Personal Accountability**

A woman named Martha hosts Harlan while she’s in town for the healing, and before Harlan arrives, Martha and her friends discuss Harlan’s background. They ruminate, “I heard other vile things and notions about her. Say she was a gambler. Say she was loose-virtued before she become a celibate. You don’t always begin on the right road. Especially saints and prophets don’t” (16). They continue, “They says, that were her profession, a business manager. One of them rock ‘n’ roll and rap singers business managers . . . And somebody even say she usedta be a beautician or one of them makeup artists out there in Hollywood . . . Martha, tell us what stuff you know” (17).

Martha speaks positively of Harlan and tells them that Harlan healed her, even though Martha was first a skeptic. She speaks well of Nicholas, too, and advises them to ask Harlan any questions they have when she arrives. Even though Harlan healed Martha
previously, and watched her heal others, the other women do not completely accept Martha’s account. While they may not think that Martha is being untruthful, it is still important for them to evaluate Harlan based on their own analysis of Harlan’s personal history. Her works are not enough—her personal background is a crucial component in determining her sincerity and evaluating the legitimacy of what she offers.

**Conclusion**

In the first chapter I have examined how black and female scholars have grappled with how to use Eurocentric male discourses to release black female subjects from narratives of inferior humanity and perverse sexuality. I then reviewed Patricia Hill Collins’s discussion of Black Feminist Epistemology and argued that her work celebrates and establishes the long and ongoing history of black female intellectual work. This celebratory establishing refutes dominant society’s statement on the inferiority of black women’s intellectual capacity, and it validates the work done by black women, which in turn rejects dominant society’s perverting of black female identity. I went on to demonstrate how *The Healing* operates as a work that speaks back to and affirms the value of BFT.

In an important discussion between three generations of black women in *The Healing*, Jones highlights the importance of giving voice to multiple experiences and ideas that are represented in black female communities. Harlan’s grandmother, Jaboti, tells her daughter and granddaughter about a woman she traveled with in the circus. This “Unicorn” woman claimed to have a real horn. Jaboti says:

> “But I know that horn real and I know she a real Unicorn woman. . . At least I think that horn was real. I can’t testify to the reality of it being a real horn. I
mean, there wasn’t nothing that Unicorn woman said or did to make me
disbelieve the reality of that horn.”

Her daughter responds:

“Hush. . . She’ll grow up and won’t be able to tell truth from truth. You can’t
know the reality of that unicorn horn and not know it’s reality at the same time.
That ain’t logical in nobody’s book of logic. . . It ain’t classical logic.”

“I don’t know whether it a contrary fallacy or a logical proposition, say
Grandmother Jaboti. It may not be classical logic, but it’s Jaboti’s logic” (Jones
137).

Grandmother Jaboti’s experience with the Unicorn woman was enough—to her
mind—to give credence to the truth of the horn. But what’s more is that Jaboti believes
the words of the Unicorn woman to be worthy to be taken as truth. She uses her criteria
as a black woman to evaluate the woman’s story. For Jaboti, it is important that the
Unicorn woman found meaning in her own story. Additionally, Jaboti realized that her
way of evaluating a person’s experience or story was in conflict with “classical logic.”
But she believes her logic is just as valid. Nevertheless, Jones does not diminish classical
logic. Harlan’s mother does not seem to believe that the horn was real—she does not buy
Jaboti’s logic, but both women engage in the conversation equally and respectfully.
Although Harlan’s mother says, “hush,” there is no actual attempt made to silence
Jaboti’s story. We can presume, then, that both Grandmother Jaboti and her daughter
believe that Harlan will have to decide for herself her own truth.
This taking of the woman’s word on its on merit is crucial for black women, given the historical culture in the mainstream of the necessary disbelief of black women’s truths. In her essay on “Multiple Oppressions,” Kimberle Crenshaw states, “In the U.S., African American and Latina women are least likely to see men accused of raping them prosecuted and incarcerated. Studies suggest that the victim’s racial identity plays a significant role in determining such outcomes; there is evidence that jurors may be influenced by sexualized propaganda, thus believing that these women were more likely to consent to sex in circumstances jurors would find unlikely if the victim were European American.” (Traffic at the Crossroads: Multiple Oppressions). In other words, when black and Latina women make an accusation of rape, their stories are questioned because of widely held stereotypes of immorality and sexual perversion.

Although BFE offers valuable avenues for black women to confront and oppose derogatory conceptions of black females, society continues to present and promote derogatory images and understandings of black womanhood. And as black women have begun to write our own stories, conflict has arisen over whose “story” should or shouldn’t represent black women, both in the mainstream and in black communities. This battle has been waged with particular intensity over how black female sexuality is imaged in popular media. But if multiple truths can be equally acknowledged and validated, black females can create unique identities without assigning her ideals on the black self to the collective. This position recognizes that race and gender categories are socially constituted, but it allows space for each subject to engage those constructions variously—rather than having to conform to a collective engagement, which too often silences or denies individual agency. To validate multiple, simultaneous truths is to grant each black
female subject a space to define and enact her particular expression of a black female self—and to alter that self depending on time, place, and circumstance.

In the next chapter, I engage the fluctuating nature of identity by analyzing Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. His discussion insists that the global black Diaspora be conceptualized as a mobile, incomplete and disconnected conglomerate of persons who share “structures of feeling,” socio-political positions relative to white supremacist societies, and, consequentially, an “orientation to the future” that seeks liberation. I argue that his notion that black subjects do not share an exact essence, but build communities in spite of their differences, is represented in the situation comedy *Girlfriends*, which centers on the social/sexual lives of four black women in 21st century Los Angeles. I posit *Girlfriends* as an encouraging model showing black women whose identities are dissimilar and views sometimes conflicting, but who share an understanding of their commonality as yet un-liberated persons who must continue to nurture relationships and coalitions that work toward freeing black people from the margins of society, and from the confines of assigned subjectivities.
CHAPTER 2
GIRLFRIENDS: A ROUTED SISTERHOOD

The July 21st 2008 issue of The New Yorker features a satirical cartoon, entitled, “The Politics of Fear,” in which Barack and Michelle Obama exchange a “fist bump” in an oval office that honors Osama Bin Laden, and desecrates an American flag in the fireplace. Mrs. Obama is wearing an Afro and carries a machine gun on her back. Then-Senator Barack Obama is wearing attire, including a white turban, which many Americans associate with Muslim terrorists (Blitt). Cartoon creator Barry Blitt contends that the picture was meant to make laughable the untrue and derogatory perceptions that some Americans were promoting about the Obamas during the presidential campaign (qtd. in Pitney). 2

According to MichelleObamawatch.com, an online, self-proclaimed “repository of all of the criticism, praise, and general chicanery thrown at Michelle Obama,” Mrs. Obama was characterized as bitter, anti-American, ungrateful, and angry during the 2008 presidential campaign (Meagan). These characterizations are certainly not new to black women. The stereotype of the “angry black woman” is familiar to African-descended

2 He is quoted in a July 13th Huffington Post online article stating, “I think the idea that the Obamas are branded as unpatriotic [let alone as terrorists] in certain sectors is preposterous. It seemed to me that depicting the concept would show it as the fear-mongering ridiculousness that it is.”
women in Western society who gain access to social or political power. Significantly, Michelle Obama’s Afro was modeled after that of Angela Davis, who was no stranger to the terror and abuse of her body, her reputation, and her representation, by American media and government.  

While Michelle Obama was cast as angry and unpatriotic, Cindy McCain, the white wife of Republican presidential candidate John McCain, was presented as demure and ladylike, quietly and tirelessly working as a “one-woman philanthropic organization” (Zuckman). It is particularly significant that Michelle Obama was presented in conservative media as playing an overall deviant, and particularly “masculine,” role in the campaign. Media polls indicated that Michelle Obama was covered more than Cindy McCain in the news, and that viewers considered the coverage to be largely negative (Alexander). This damaging coverage was often a result of comments Mrs. Obama made about the country and the campaign that were considered critical (while she should, presumably, have remained silent). Cindy McCain’s more “background” approach to supporting her husband was covered as being traditionally feminine, patriotic, and therefore more befitting of a first lady.

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3 In Angela Davis’ essay, “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia” she laments that the large Afro she wore in photos widely circulated in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, during the time of her trial and acquittal, are remembered in the national conscious as a fashion statement. Regarding the photos, Davis writes, “their broader and more subtle effect was the way they served as generic images of Black women who wore their hair “natural”’. She goes on to state, “From the constant stream of stories I have heard . . . I infer that hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Afro-wearing Black women were accosted, harassed, and arrested by police and FBI and immigration agents during the two months I spent underground” (42). The Afro alone marked the women as having a particular politics—one that was anti-American and anti-white (39).  

4 An April 15, 2008 Chicago Tribune article “contrasts” McCain’s quiet beauty with her tireless philanthropy. Jill Zuckman writes that the “ever stylish 53-year-old with long, blond, perfectly arranged hair” prefers to “cede the spotlight quickly” even as she remains a “constant presence on the stump with her husband.”  

5 In response to Michelle Obama’s February 18, 2008 comment that “for the first time in my adult lifetime, I’m really proud of my country . . . because I think people are ready for change,” John Pohhertz’s blog on Commentarymagazine.com suggests that the comment exposes the Obamas as vain and unpatriotic.
This setting off of the ideal woman against the deviant Other, as I have demonstrated previously, is a historical binary within western ideologies; its redeployment should come as no surprise. The focus on Michelle Obama’s supposed anger and vocality worked to cast her as unfeminine, particularly when countered by the delicacy and couth with which Cindy McCain was presented. In the context of the political campaign, an operation of nation building, it is significant that Mrs. McCain was read as the appropriate next “mother” of the nation. Naomi Zack’s investigation of race and sexuality in America notes that, “It has been believed that the only way the whiteness of the white race can be preserved is to ensure that white females, who are the only females who can be the mothers of purely white children, have no way of breeding children who are not purely white” (153). Black women, however, viewed simultaneously as objects of sexual desire and capital-producing property during the slave era, have been firmly placed outside of womanhood, and therefore, nation building.

In discussing the demonizing of Michelle Obama in the media, I wish to point to the continued intensity with which the body and reputation of the black female in America is mishandled and misrepresented. That black women came to Michelle Obama’s defense via blogging, one of the most popular and wide-reaching forms of new media, evidences both the refusal of the Black female community to accept the grand narrative of their unfitness, and their resolve to counter such distortions with images and stories created within the black female community. Black women continue to interrogate and deconstruct the narrow, historically grounded narratives about black female deviance,
and attempt to recast themselves as women with complex identities that have a legitimate space in American life. It is the importance of the ongoing project of black female identity reconstruction that drives this discussion.

Next, I discuss black subjectivity as always having been constructed in unbounded spaces. I want to point to representations of blackness that encourage and emphasize intra-racial differentiation. Specifically, I will engage Paul Gilroy’s conception of the black Atlantic to discuss a presentation of black female life in contemporary media culture. I examine the situation comedy *Girlfriends* as an enactment of Paul Gilroy's theory of “routes” in *The Black Atlantic*. In his text, Gilroy is concerned with the foundational nature of hybridity in black diasporic cultures. I am arguing that Mara Brok Akil, creator of *Girlfriends*, constructed a community of black women whose lives share a commitment to individual (and collective) agency rather than allegiance to racial authenticity. The four women all identify as black, but the way they live their lives as black women is as varied as the life experiences from which each has developed her concept of self. Each woman brings a history that is in some ways similar to, but in multiple ways divergent from, that of her black female peers. I conclude here that if we begin from the assumption of multiple black female histories, black female identities, like those presented in *Girlfriends*, can be understood to be rooted similarly—in histories balancing racialized oppression and community building, but routed variously—as individuals engaging and developing subjectivities from those histories uniquely.
Gilroy’s Black Atlantic: A Model

In his text, Gilroy examines the position of the black subject in modernity—which he describes as “the fatal intermediation of capitalism, industrialisation, and a new conception of political democracy”—and the engagement of black subjects with the intellectual traditions of western thought. He argues that the tendency of black thinkers in the west to conceive of blackness as a rooted national and ethnic phenomena stems directly from modern Euro-American ideologies, and is troublesome. Gilroy examines instances in which diasporic writers like Martin Delany, in spite of adherences to notions of nation and progress, developed works that viewed blackness as a disparate collection of identities mutually concerned with liberation from racial tyranny. Gilroy imagines blackness as a collection of fractured subjectivities that share political grievances and what he calls “structures of feeling,” rather than racial or ethnic sameness (3). Because he does not dismiss the unique history of racial terror and violence from which black people have had to attempt to construct sound identities and safe communities, he is concerned with “the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once” (3). Still, he insists that this stress does not derive from authentic racial or ethnic essences. To bring to life his emphasis on the extent to which black life has been constructed via experiences just as disparate and dislodged as they have been shared and intermarried, he imagines the black Atlantic.

The black Atlantic is the fractured “transcultural, international formation” of black folk globally who share “structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering” (3). The image of the ship and the sea are relevant not only because they
call to mind the movement of black bodies across waters during the slave era, but also because they highlight the unyoked and boundless nature of black identity formation in the Diaspora (4). Gilroy is troubled by race-based positions that perpetuate ideas of national borders and ethnic particularities. “Marked by its European origins,” he argues, “modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes” (19). He demonstrates that the intellectual legacy of black thought in the U.S. contains within it a challenge to “easy claims of African-American exceptionalism in favour of a global, coalitional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse” (4). Focusing on the “routes” black life has taken across the diaspora, he rejects notions of “rootedness.”

**Reading *Girlfriends Through the Black Atlantic***

Gilroy reads Martin Delany’s 1859 novel *Blake* as a primary example of routed black solidarity. He argues that the life of its protagonist mimicked that of Delany in its movement across different geographic locations throughout the world. Delany is also significant, argues Gilroy, for the ambivalence he exhibits to questions of nation, progress, and autonomy (20). While Delany’s ancestral history was rooted in Africa, his life experience and identities developed throughout the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Delany’s political positions, rooted in European philosophy and history (22), drifted during his lifetime. He revisioned his approaches to attaining freedom for black persons, and Gilroy sees Delany’s consistent use of ideologies derived from white thinkers telling (25). It is one example of the ways in which “routes” develop in the lives of black people
in the diaspora. It is representative of the “syncretisms” that constitute black identity. Delany’s life is, for Gilroy, a text from which to read into the “contradictory” relationships to region, nation, and culture that black persons in the diaspora have had to navigate. What remained unchanged in Delany’s lifetime was his commitment to liberation.

So, too, was his protagonist, Blake, resolved to free black persons around the world from racist oppressions. Most relevant for the purposes of this essay, however, is the understanding of “blackness” that the text presents. As Gilroy states, “The version of black solidarity Blake advances is explicitly anti-ethnic and opposes narrow African-American exceptionalism in the name of a truly pan-African, diaspora sensibility” (27). Gilroy describes the cast of Blake as being rooted variously in terms of ethnicity, region, religion, and class. He summarizes thus:

Abysa, a Soudanese slave and former textile merchant, brought from Africa on Blake’s second transatlantic trip; Placido, a Cuban revolutionary poet who is also Blake’s cousin,; Gofer Gondolier, a West Indian cook who has attended a Spanish grandee in Genoa; the wealthy quadroons and octoroons of Cuba; Blake himself, and indeed their white revolutionary supporters constitute something like a rainbow army for the emancipation of the oppressed men and women of the new world (29).

A brief description of the characters in Girlfriends shows a similar sense of miscellany. The girlfriends are a decidedly "cosmopolitan" group of women. Hailing from a diverse collection of family situations and geographic regions in the United States, these women also look physically different, talk with different speech patterns, and dress
in varied styles. Their careers span the socio-economic scale and their socio-spiritual
worldviews are conflicting. Joan Clayton is a caramel complexioned wealthy attorney
and restaurateur from L.A., with big hair and sophisticated style. Toni Childs is a
successful real estate agent who grew up in a poor family led by an alcoholic mother.
She has dark-skin, keeps long, straight hair extensions, and frequently professes the
depths of her beauty. She marries and has a baby with a white man. Lynn Searcy, from
Seattle, is a fair-skinned bohemian who has spent most of her adult life in school
obtaining advanced degrees. She plays in an alternative band and has alternately worn
her hair long and straight or in locks. Maya Wilkes was Joan’s assistant at the law firm,
but was able to quit after publishing a successful book. Brown-complexioned with golden
hair extensions, she has a husband, who she left and returned to, and an adolescent son.
She was raised and resides in a poorer area of L.A. The girlfriends are textured
characters with vulnerabilities and faults. Their variant identities suggest that Akil
understands Gilroy’s contention that “Black survival depends upon forging a new means
to build alliances above and beyond petty issues like language, religion, skin colour, and
to a lesser extent gender” (28).

The story of four black women living in Los Angeles works, via the complexity
of identities within the group, to disrupt the notion of sameness or rootedness in black
female life. Yet the disjunctions in identity do not ignite unmanageable conflict or
preclude solidarity; the women find a way in each episode to confirm their love for self
and each other. They share, more than anything, a common understanding of the ways in
which their social/political positions as black women are rooted in a history of racialized
struggle. Akil has stated that one of her most important “agendas” in creating the show
was to address issues of health in the black female community. She sees the prominence of diseases like HIV/AIDS in black women as a political issue. Her characters confront themes of sexuality and health in every episode (Hontz par. 1). Their friendships are built from compassion for one another that derives from a "deeper unity" constructed on a "common orientation to the future" (Gilroy 28). For the remainder of this chapter I examine four nodes of identity that are routed distinctly in the lives of the girlfriends: religion, sexuality, beauty and heritage.

It is important that the details of identity that the women embody are varied. Certainly, the show was created and is viewed as a “black” sit-com; U.S. society’s conditioning of its citizenry remains intense, such that people overwhelmingly make decisions, like what to watch on television, according to identifiers like race and gender (Hontz pars. 6-8). Still, the definitions or understandings of what blackness is need vigilant re-visions and re-intepretations, given that they are ever in flux (Gilroy xi). As Michelle Wright argues in Becoming Black, “race cannot operate in a vacuum, divorced from those other subject categories--gender, sexuality, and class--that are always already part and parcel of any subject status but especially that of the subaltern” (229). Girlfriends confronts this divorcing of the elements by featuring a collection of black women with an intermixture of those facets of subjectivity. What emerges, then, is a story about the routes black experiences take as these women differently navigate the complicated, racially constituted terrain of U.S. society.

In response to dominant patriarchal conventions which suggest that black women be “well stored with useful information and practical proficiency, rather than the light, superficial acquirements, popularly and fashionably called accomplishments, as Delany
contended (Gilroy 26),” Akil develops stories that place women in social and economic positions both in conjunction with, and above their male contemporaries. Joan, for example, co-owns her restaurant with William, a senior partner at the law firm. And Maya’s economic status and career position outrank those of her husband when her book becomes a best seller.

Collectively, the women inhabit a wide spectrum of the socioeconomic scale. Yet each woman’s competence in her educational or career position resists a rigid definition of “success.” That each woman navigates the opportunities and challenges brought on by her economic or career position with agency makes black female intelligence and potential something viewers can take for granted. Black female aptitude in *Girlfriends* is a given. In her journalistic lament over the cancelation of *Girlfriends* in 2008, Melonyce McAffee writes:

A soft focus on the characters' casual affluence testifies to the gradual normalization of black women on television. In the 1970s, it came as a shock to all involved that Weezie and Helen lived in penthouses on *The Jeffersons*; meanwhile Florida Evans on *Good Times* was in a constant state of "Oh, Lord, what is we gonna do?" misery. In the '80s, the Cosbys' self-conscious affluence gave way to a more down-to-earth depiction of black college life on the '90s hit *A Different World*. The *Girlfriends* come across as graduates of that school—women professionals who are black, but don't spend much time apologizing for or explaining their blackness. The show does not shelve its characters' color, but it doesn't use race as an excuse to make them hyper-successful or sad-sack bottom dwellers. This tack might give network programmers a hint as to how to market other black shows—sitcoms need not be treatises on the socioeconomic status of the black community. Nuanced characters will suffice (par. 6).

Akil takes themes familiar in stories of black life and disrupts their stereotypical representation. In *Girlfriends*, black experiences don’t unfold predictably or identically.
The routes the women’s lives take converge at the crossroads of friendship and a shared understanding of how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality have shaped their divergent experiences. Religion, sexuality, beauty, and heritage texture each woman’s character idiosyncratically; and each woman’s understandings of and approaches to those facets of identity fluctuate as she evolves throughout the seasons.

**Religion**

Gilroy writes that “African-American religion is so often the central sign for the folk-cultural, narrowly ethnic definition of racial authenticity” (28). Having grown up in the black church is often a qualifying factor for black female authenticity. If music can be considered a site of black identity construction and development, it is relevant that black musicians often cite the church as an important contributor to the development of musical talent. Still, while it has certainly been instrumental in its position as a place of refuge and revolution for black communities, and though some black persons have historically understood the church to be a significant site of cultural, spiritual, and community development, it is also important to recognize the multiple ways in which black church doctrine and practice have manifested in black lives. Furthermore, that the black Christian church has not been the only site of religion and spirituality in black cultures speaks to the diversity of experience of black life.

Gilroy argues that Delany’s *Blake* conveyed “criticisms of religion in general and Christianity in particular.” Gilroy contends that it is Delany’s critical approach to religious belief which supplies the key to book’s anti-ethnic, pan-African stance. Blake refused to ‘stand still and see salvation’ wherever it was offered to him: by the rituals of
the white church on the plantation, in the Catholic church or in the superstitions of the conjurers he interacts with during a visit to the Dismal Swamp.

Instead, Blake viewed religion skeptically and as a potential instrument of liberation. Without wholly disregarding religion, Gilroy contends that Blake refuses to require homogeneity of religious experience or values for persons seeking to construct community. The characters come from varied religious traditions. His is an attempt to build community neither disregarding difference, nor idolizing sameness. Gilroy writes, “Because religion marks . . . petty ethnic differences with special clarity, its overcoming signifies the utopian move beyond ethnicity and the establishment of a new basis for community, mutuality, and reciprocity” (29). In Girlfriends, religion is a spiritual reality that each woman engages differently. While the show doesn’t spend a lot of time on religion, one episode exhibits Akil’s commitment to destabilizing common interpretations of black female religious experience.

Lynn meets the pastor of a small Christian church while performing at a nightclub. The two are mutually attracted, but their views on religion are oppositional. Soon after meeting, however, they sleep together, and both Lynn and the preacher are interested in pursuing a relationship. The preacher, however, tells her that he cannot continue to engage in a sexual relationship—that he faltered, but is committed to the precepts he teaches from the bible. Lynn, too, is committed to her appreciation of sexual freedom. The two split, but Lynn decides to continue to attend his church to help out with the youth choir. Maya disagrees with the preacher for hanging out in a bar. She finds this behavior unbefitting a man of faith, and she disagrees with Lynn’s version of spirituality. This story speaks to fractured black experience in that Lynn is not organically
connected to a tradition of black Christian religious experience. She is both unfamiliar with, and uninterested in committing to the traditions of black protestant theology. Her commitment to the church is driven by her compassion for music and children, and her genuine respect for the man and the work he is doing in the community through his ministry. Additionally, Maya doesn’t view Lynn’s spiritual ideas as an inherent conflict with her blackness. She doesn’t view Christian faith as a necessary qualifier for authentic blackness, and Lynn’s apparent lack of faith doesn’t threaten her friendship with the other women, or ultimately, with her new male friend.

**Sexuality**

As was demonstrated in the first part of this essay, black female sexuality has historically been storiied as deviant and unfit in dominant U.S. society. The narratives that largely circulate about black women and sexuality tend to occupy two extremes; the hypersexual and the asexual. Furthermore, stereotypes about black females often center on sexuality. Black women have been regarded as “mammies, jezebels, and breeder women in slavery . . . Black prostitutes, and . . . welfare mothers” in the memories and realities of U.S. society. Because black women’s sexuality—construed as abnormal—has been seen as a central defining characteristic of who she is in the nation, black women have often “remained silent concerning issues of sexuality” (Collins 2, 124). Black female activists like Maria Stewart believed that focusing “more assiduously to moral worth and intellectual improvement” was essential for black women’s liberation (46).

This silence, though, has not been uniform. Black women have expressed their sexuality in photos, films, music and in other arenas, but their work has not gone
uncontested. In her article, “Two Inches or a Yard: Silencing Black Women’s Sexual Expression,” Tricia Rose examines how sexually celebratory performances by outwardly pro-safe/pro-enjoy sex girl group TLC was policed by media in the 1990’s. The women openly advocated for sexual pleasure and encouraged safe sex. They wore bright colors, baggy clothes, and condoms, resisting dominant discourses that label black women as sexual deviant and breaking the “politics of silence.”

Similarly, *Girlfriends* breaks this “politics of silence” by openly celebrating black female sexuality. It has been considered a black version of HBO’s *Sex in the City*, and creator Akil admits that the story of four privileged white women dating and having sex in New York was a site for inspiration when she conceived her show. Sexuality is a central focus of each episode; Akil shows black females exercising agency over their bodies. The four women in *Girlfriends*, all with different ideas and practices regarding sex and the body, share a commitment to being in control of how their bodies are viewed and enjoyed. In an episode in which Joan realizes that she hasn’t had sex in a year, her girlfriends try to convince her to suspend her ”three month rule”—that she must be in a serious, committed relationship for three months before having sex. Lynn, who will flash her breasts to get in restaurants and clubs, believes that ”sex is freedom,” and that anonymous sex or sex with multiple partners, is exciting. Maya brags on her playful, kinky sex life with her husband, and Toni views sex as a means not only to express passion but also to satisfy men with money.

**Beauty**

In her discussion of black female sexuality and music videos, Rana Emerson cites Erykah Badu’s *On and On* video as an example of a black female entertainer challenging
the narratives dominating the black music scene of the 1990s. She argues that the video creates a black world and a black aesthetic—one in which black women are central and direct their destiny. She offers a Missy Elliot video, in which Da Brat and Lil’ Kim also perform, as another example of a black female centered and directed world. With the exception of Lil Kim, whose image is in some ways in line with mainstream notions of beauty, the women in these videos present hair styles, body types, and clothing styles—as part of musical narratives—that counter hegemonic notions of beauty, desire and belonging. To quote Emerson, in these videos, “an agency emerged through the identification with signifiers of Blackness; an assertion of autonomy, vocality, and independence” (Emerson 125).

In a society in which distorted images of black physical and intellectual inferiority have historically been crucial in creating an atmosphere of violence and hate, the revision of images and the development of a black aesthetic are both logical and necessary. And while Badu and Elliot’s creation of black female driven worlds is an important development in the history of the liberation struggle, the narratives suggest that a black woman who values herself and is in control of her life must necessarily wear natural hairstyles and African inspired or traditionally masculine attire.

Badu’s decidedly Afrocentric approach encourages notions of authenticity and roots, particularly in her apparent alignment of the physical presentation of a black self and the essence of a black self. In Girlfriends we see a greater complexity in the relationships between hair and identity. The characters do not fit nicely into the typical stereotypes often presented in media culture. Akil avoids traditional associations that necessarily align skin complexion and hair texture to stereotypical performances of
identity, as presented, for example, in Spike Lee’s *School Daze*. Lynn is very light complexioned and wears long fine hair straight or in a style resembling locks. Maya is chestnut brown and wears her golden brown hair straight, and Joan, light brown, wears her hair big, in its natural wavy state. Toni is dark complexioned and wears long straight hair extensions.

Before getting intimate with the white politician she dates in season two, Toni tells him that she is wearing a weave. She explains that her hair is short and she had hair sewn in so she could have long hair. Then she tells him that if he has a problem with it, he can walk through the door. He says that she is beautiful, and they go to bed together. Later in bed, after he asks a series of questions about where the hair came from, and how it was put in, she tells him they can talk "all about naps and beady-beads" tomorrow. Days later, during a campaign speech, the would-be-mayor states that Toni is a metaphor for the diversity of the city. He explains that she is an African-American woman dating a white man, and "her African-American hair is enhanced by strands of Korean hair," representing a “weaving together "of cultures (“The Fallout”). Toni is mortified that her hair secret has been revealed to the entire city. But what is significant is that weave is not a symbol of inauthentic or deviant black womanhood. Toni carries no shame for adding long straight hair to her short kinks. And she is unwilling to accept a man who doesn’t embrace her and her weave as beautiful.

**Heritage**

Lynn is perhaps the most fitting character to symbolically represent unrootedness in this discussion. Lynn was raised by white adoptive parents, after having been born to a black father and a white mother. She chooses blackness as a cultural place of belonging
only after meeting Joan in college. In season two Lynn goes through a box of adolescent memorabilia and Maya asks her, "just how white were you growing up?" She asks her why she waited until college to embrace her "black side." Lynn explains that she grew up around all white people, even though her biological father is black. Meanwhile, Toni comments that she has spent ten years trying to leave the ways of her “country” family in Fresno outside of her character.

Lynn is excited to reminisce about her white childhood, but after walking around in her old "white girl" clothes—plaid shorts and a polo—for a few days, she returns to her adult self. Her friends welcome back the grown-up, black Lynn, but she says, "I’m way too complex of a woman to be defined by these simple categories. I'm Lynn and not my skin." Maya playfully responds, "in America, you black" ("Just Say No"). While it may have been tempting to locate the friends similarly so that they shared “ethnic” traditions, Akil routes the family backgrounds such that each woman brings a different set of traditions to her community of black friends. When Maya decides to renew her wedding vows in a home ceremony, Joan offers to help plan the event. Before going to Maya's home for the first time, Joan asks her if there are any colors she should be worried about wearing—suggesting gang activity in Maya’s neighborhood. Maya dismisses the comment for the moment, but becomes offended at Joan's belittling of her ideas for her vow renewal. Joan thinks that the organza bridesmaid dresses and pound cake dessert Maya wants for her wedding are not "tasteful." Maya's mother, who made the dresses, asks Joan to leave. When Joan returns home and relates the conflict to Toni and Lynn,
Toni says, "if Maya wants to have a ghetto fabulous wedding let her have one." But Lynn reminds Joan that she is not planning her own wedding—she is helping Maya to plan Maya’s wedding—and that she should respect Maya’s ideas and values.

When Joan apologizes to Maya for offending her, Maya tells her that she has missed the point, that she realizes that Joan thinks her ideas, her way of life, are "better," not just "different." Maya is angry that there are a lot of people who "think like" Joan and states "we live in two different worlds" and that she is "tired" of teaching "siddidy black folks" like Joan about a "ghetto girl's" life ("Untreatable"). In this episode Akil highlights not only that black women have different tastes, values, and traditions, but also how intra-racial differences can be a source of conflict for black women. Importantly, however, the women neither bury their differences, nor apologize for them. In the end, Joan wears the organza dress at Maya’s living room wedding. Joan likely still thinks the dresses are ugly and “ghetto,” and Maya hasn’t forgotten that Joan is “siddidy.” But there is no battle over whose taste is more authentically black. Furthermore, the women are unafraid of confronting and discussing their differences.

Gilroy argues that tradition in the African American community is too often the basis for claims to authenticity. He writes, "The idea of tradition gets understandably invoked to underscore the historical continuities, subcultural conversations, intertextual and intercultural cross-fertilisations which make the notion of a distinctive and self-conscious black culture appear plausible" (188). He continues, "It provides a temporary home in which shelter and consolation from the vicious forces that threaten the racial community (imagined or otherwise) can be found" (189). Joan and her friends understand
that it is not the sameness of tradition that strengthens the friendships they are building. As Gilroy states, such a home would be temporary. Instead, the women look to how they can grow from the traditions others bring into the spaces they are constructing.
CONCLUSION

After having been moved across airwaves from the UPN network to the CW in 2006, *Girlfriends* was canceled in 2008, during its eighth season on the air. Black female fans in particular were disheartened and expressed their disappointment in news articles, and on blogs and message boards on the Internet. Wayetu Moore’s article gathered the laments of black female fans of the show after its cancellation. What is clear from her report is that the show was not above critique, and yet it offered critical content for dialogue amongst black women. According to Ashleigh Staton, “It was a decent attempt at portraying liberated and successful black women, but it’s unfortunate that all the girlfriends “had issues with men.” (qtd. in Moore, par. 14). Countering this critique, Nana-Adoa Ofori stated, “It would be completely a fairy tale for all of them to be in stable relationships and hold successful jobs. That’s just not how it is. Me and my friends go through the same thing. All of these things are reflections of what black women experience today” (qtd. in Moore, par. 17). Importantly, the differing critiques stem from the reality of the routedness of black female experience. But the shared embracing of a show that challenged at least a few of society’s historical untruths about black women speaks to black women’s common interest in continuing to pursue unqualified justice.

In considering the importance of *Girlfriends* in the lives of some black women, it is important to note that there are black female characters in other sit-coms and dramas on television. Located across genres and television stations, black females are not always
cast according to historical stereotypes. The character Kelly Palmer of *King of Queens*, is an example of mainstream media’s move away from narrow typecasting of black women. Yet their singularity can still delegate them spokespersons or representatives of the black female community. What is special about *Girlfriends* is its focus on the intraracial diversity of black experience within black female life in the U.S. It is unique in that it offers a look across the black female diaspora within the United States. Creator Mara Brock Akil has stated, “I felt like I had something to add to the conversation that was already started about African-American women. I thought that what I could add were all of our shades of gray and our complexities. I didn't see a lot of vulnerabilities in (the depictions of black women on television). A lot of times, I think we are represented as very fearless, tough women” (qtd. in Siegel, par. 3). Commenting on the “legacy” *Girlfriends* will leave, she stated, “black women were here, we were thriving, we were stylish, we were professional, we were vulnerable and we were human. We wanted the same things everybody else wanted” (qtd. in Siegel, par. 8).

**Epilogue**

Because black women have, from the earliest days of U.S. development, been defined by mainstream white patriarchal culture as sexually deviant—the black female body has been colonized from the beginning—the ways in which the black female body is represented in media and popular culture is central to black feminist concerns and to many black women outside of academia. Gilman’s analysis of the Venus Hottentot suggests that the black woman’s sexual organs and her capacity to reproduce and provide sexual pleasure or displeasure have been the dominant narratives played out in visual and media culture in the West. In chapter one, I reviewed how black women have worked to
disprove widespread, longstanding ideas propagated in mainstream U.S. society about deviant black womanhood. Some black women have done so by using paradigms designed by white, western men. I demonstrated that appropriating Enlightenment notions of biological essences, as Audre Lorde has done, is problematic because it suggests there is value in assigning people a priori characteristics. Post-structuralist approaches, however, can be effective when cautiously adapted. In the second part of chapter one, I argued that Patricia Hill Collins’s epistemology, taken from traditions found amongst black females, is valuable because it normalizes and legitimates approaches to knowledge-creation found in black female communities; this move alone contests narratives of black female inferiority by insisting on black female intelligence. But it also offers black women a way to tell stories about ourselves using familiar techniques. In the final part of chapter one I examined Gayl Jones’ *The Healing* and argued that Jones affirms Collins’ philosophy by using the elements of Black Feminist Thought within the community of black women in her story.

In chapter two I outlined Paul Gilroy’s argument on routed identity. I demonstrated how the sit-com *Girlfriends* showcases his theory that black folks globally must acknowledge a shared history and a common goal of liberation from racially motivated hatred and violence, while recognizing the reality of their fractured, disparate identities. I have argued that *Girlfriends* presents black female experiences that resist the narrow, bracketed stereotypes historically emphasized in U.S. society. While the show is certainly not above criticism, there is significance in its potential to inspire the asking of the following kinds of questions: How do we reconcile the simultaneous disparate identities across black female life and the shared collective history—based on the
hundreds of years black women in America have spent on the margins and basements of western society? How do we seek full, unqualified participation in American society even as we acknowledge that we want to experience that life differently? The need for a “common orientation to the future,” which Gilroy insists upon, is evident when we consider the ongoing realities of violence, discrimination, and poverty plaguing black females in the United States.

The starting point for a commitment to both acknowledging the unseamed nature of black identities and promoting multi-vocality in addressing the grievances shared across the "structures of feeling" in black life must be a like-minded stance against movements that put the lives of black persons in distress. While the space to be different is at the core of a position that insists on "conflict in conversation" with regard to black female life, the foundation for dialogue must be singular; that black women be liberated from structures of power that prevent the development and maintenance of healthy, safe bodies, economic stability, political representation, acquisition of knowledges, and social welfare.
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