Digital Media and the Politics of Intersectional Queer Hyper/In/Visibility in *Between Women*

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> *To imagine Black women's sexuality as a polymorphous erotic that does not exclude desire for men but also does not privilege it. To imagine, without apology, voluptuous Black women's sexualities.*
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> <div align="right">-Cheryl Clarke, Theorizing Black Women</div>

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We imagine Black women's sexualities as progressive and inclusive

Black Sex/uality
forbidden sin, unspeakable truth, public private
parts
on display and out in the open like Saartjie Baaartman

hot(tentot) my ass
black women's desires are silenced and muted
hypersexualized and invisible at the same time
Look at me
Look at us

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Black Sex
eww
ahh
doin' the nasty   beatin' cuttin' tappin bonin' fuckin'
knockin' boots getting busy getting freaky humping hunchin'
bumpin' uglies
who you calling ugly?

hittin' it   doin' it   layin' the pipe   the freaky deaky   you know
screwin'-smashin'-twerkin'
smack it up, flip it, rub it down, oh no!

gettin' some

bout to blow his back out
gettin' the bizness, doing what grown folk do, making love
intercourse, of course

mmmmm

Sex, unspoken like sin yet ubiquitous (Boylorn, 2013), remains a controversial topic in contemporary society. Silenced (shhhhhh, you're not supposed to say that out loud) and out in the open (used indiscriminately in advertisements, songs, and other forms of popular culture), the contradictory messages we receive about sex are further complicated by the limited spaces where sex can be talked about, especially if your notions of sex/uality are non-hegemonic. In public, conversations about sex and sexuality are often limited to "acceptable" desires based on heteronormative lenses. In academe, discussions of sex and sexuality can be overly sanitized, white-washed, or altogether absent.

As two Black women scholars, one cisgender and heterosexual, the other gender-nonconforming and sapio-pan-sexual, we are invested and interested in representations of Black women and the sexual politics at play in Black intimate relationships. While there are some offerings of Black women's sexuality available in digitally mediated contexts, the desire and objective gaze is often directed at/towards Black women from an audience, rather than focusing on the needs and desires of Black women themselves (Boylorn, 2008). Borrowing from bell hooks' (1992) notion of the oppositional gaze, we use our "rebellious desire" and "intentional black looks" to interrogate how digital media serves as an opportunity for Black women's desires to be explored, expressed, and engaged from a place of agency.

Because media influences and is influenced by assumptions about race and gender, social media offers a look at performances and representations of Black female sexuality. Baker (2005) explains "Because of the limited opportunities available for Blacks in all aspects of the mainstream media, there have emerged options designed by Blacks specifically for Black audiences. This has meant that there are more opportunities to portray positive images of Black women" (p 16). This does not mean media is not problematic, however, nor does it mean that all representations of Black women (and their sex/uality) are positive.

Between Women, a webseries airing on YouTube that premiered December 2011, tells the interconnected stories of ten black lesbian women living in Atlanta, GA, negotiating their work and romantic lives, friendships and family life. With hip-hop culture as the backdrop, we witness the characters engage in interpersonal relationships, conflict, and self-actualization with their lesbian identity centralized. At the time of this writing there are two seasons of the webseries available on YouTube. Following the abrupt end of season 2 in 2013, there was an unsuccessful kickstarter campaign to raise funds to develop a *Between Women* film, unconfirmed rumor that *Between Women* was picked up by a major network, and their website, www.BetweenWomenTV.com is currently defunct.

While there is nothing formidably extraordinary about a webseries that traces the life experiences of a group of friends, the focus on and visibility of black lesbian relationships makes *Between Women* a notable representation. If we look to mainstream series we are left wondering where the black lesbians are, especially when we know that black lesbians exist. Even shows like *Orange is the New Black* (a Netflix series) which features black lesbian characters, push them to the margins marking white lesbian bodies as quirky, normal and sexual while black lesbian characters are casted as criminal, dangerous, predatory and undesired/able.

The overall lack of lesbian, trans* and queer women in mainstream representations of nonheterosexuality coupled with the lack of people of color (within and beyond those already limited lenses) make the emergence and internet success of *Between Women* an important artifact for analysis. A critical examination of the webseries shows contradictions and missed opportunities to humanize rather than stereotype the characters. In this essay, we examine the first season of *Between Women*'s depictions of intersectional identities, and the ways in which those depictions both perpetuate and challenge racial, sexual, gendered, and class based representations. We begin our analysis with a discussion of performative possibility, hyper/in/visibility, and Black sexual politics, including Black feminism and quare theory. We then offer a brief episode analysis to further familiarize our readers with the show. Finally, we analyze themes of Black sexuality, masculinity, and intersectionality as depicted through the narratives, lives, and performances by the cast and writers of *Between Women*. Our goal is to argue for quare intersectionality as a method to explain the need for a compre-

hensive intersectional approach when studying queer subjects. We also want to clarify that we define queer here as non-normative and not explicitly or exclusively nonheterosexual, which expands the possibilities of quare intersectionality beyond discussions that involve sexuality. As we situate our examination and critique of the webseries, we will introduce the cast to give you a foundational understanding of their relationships to each other.[1]

Performative Possibility and Digital Media

Social media's open structure yields space for people to insert their traditionally silenced performances into the virtual realm resulting in new narrative forms that move beyond the individual story (Murray, 1997). Within these digital stories are rich research sites for exploring identity, performance, and the ways in which bodies become discursively inscribed as social media users insert their selves into cyberspace (Campbell, 2006; Johnson, 2013) and the immediate, political, public, and easily disseminated dialogic spaces social media affords (Meyers & Rowe, 2012). Social media offers an opportunity to revisit what Erving Goffman (1959) coined the presentation of self in everyday life in more complex ways. As danay boyd and Nicole Ellison (2008) posit, social networks offer unprecedented possibilities for identity performance research because social networking sites leave digital trails of users mirroring, supporting, and challenging everyday practices.

One of the possibilities of social media is the space for the performance and subsequent investigation of intersectional identity (Johnson, 2013). In her groundbreaking article, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) delineated the qualitative differences between women's experiences with sexual assault and domestic abuse across intersections of race, class, and gender. The distinctions in experience were staggering, suggesting that intragroup variances are just as important

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[1] These characters are not mentioned in the essay body, but serve important roles. Natalie's sexuality is fluid as she has had sexual relationships with men and women, and is currently married to the same man who impregnates Winnie. Natalie is presented as the racially ambiguous "prize," who Mecca and Miller are willing to fight for/over. She and Miller exchange vows in the final episode of the first season. Gabby Monroe is not a central character. She meets Winnie at the bookstore and after an intimate but non-sexual friendship, reluctantly becomes involved in a lesbian relationship with her. Gabby seems unsure and uncomfortable with the sexual component of her relationship with Winnie, and may be confusing platonic love for romantic love.

Eric Johnson is Winnie's black gay friend. He appears periodically as Winnie's only non-female acquaintance. His presence is inconsistent but fulfills the stereotypical "gay male friend" role, offering comedic relief. Because *Between Women* normalizes Black lesbian identity, Eric represents non-normality, both because he is biologically male and because he sleeps with men.

as broader categories of difference like race or gender. Ange-Marie Hancock broadens Crenshaw's definition and defines intersectionality as "both the normative theoretical argument and an approach to conducting empirical research…that considers the interaction of race, gender, class, and other organizing structures of society a key component influencing political access, equality and the potential for any form of justice" (2005, p. 75). Several scholars have called for utilizing intersectionality in research (Cole & Stewart, 2001; Hawkesworth, 1997, 2003; McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008; Bowleg, 2008; Nielsen, 2011). The goal of intersectional research is to recognize (1) the significance of multiple categories' explanatory power and (2) the vast intragroup differences instead of singling out aspects of identity as if they are discrete, neat concepts we can separate. Within social media contexts, social networks create space to study the ways in which people insert their intersectional identities into the virtual world through performativity.

Performativity, "rests upon a constitutive theory of language [and]… presupposes the idea that words are active as well as descriptive…and have the capacity to do things, whether provoking an estrangement between meaning and performance or creating new meaning" (Slinn, 1990, p. 64). While performativity serves as an entrance point for investigating intersectional representations in mediated performances, E. Patrick Johnson (2001) argues that performativity fails to articulate a deeper politic of resistance. Alexander and Warren (2002) remind us that skin is political; it participates in the meaning created in culture, which social actors carry with them. Raced skin carries implications in terms of sexuality, gender, and class, among other markers of identity. The way our bodies perform in social media illuminates not only what is brought into being (performativity), but also "what it *does* once it *is* constituted [in performance] and the relationship between it and the other bodies around it" (Johnson, 2001, p. 10).

Social media has the power to reproduce any type of image, albeit oversimplified representations of identity, through clicking and sharing videos, or more complex and intersectional narratives through personal blogging, websites, or twitter feeds. Social media, then, affords a space to challenge representation and performativity. Social media users can participate in what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls world-making at a micro-level by inserting detailed stories alongside the viral videos and memes to allow a fuller story to emerge where each story feels like it fits with the others. Dominant media outlets have been called out for perpetuating skewed representation of Black people, but social media complicates this notion. Everyday users choose what to watch, what to share, and what is viral worthy. Not surprisingly, social media users capitalize on the same "non-threating images" portrayed in media controlled by large corporations and gatekeepers. However, social media is not a closed system dominated by gatekeepers or large corporations like more traditional media outlets. Individuals can insert their own stories into the asynchronous timeline of events, creating more com-

plex and fluid representations. Once a person rises to social media fame, people seek out those stories and participate in world-making (Jenkins, 2006).

Social Media and the Politics of Hyper/in/Visibility

Within this critical space of possibility, we feel it is necessary to interject a structural intersection between hypervisibility, invisibility, and visibility. How one distinguishes between the complex layers of hyper/in/visibility depends on who dictates the rendering of the visible text, or, who gets to tell what story to whom. Stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning, asexual, intersexed, polyamorous, pansexual, and sapiosexual (LGBTQQAIPPS) folk have appeared on various social media platforms in recent times. While percentages of visibility continue to rise, housed within those percentages are inequities across intersectional identities. For instance, gay white men are still rendered the most visible, and, arguably, the face of homosexuality in mainstream outlets, and, consequently, the center of sexual deviance although sexual expressions are extremely diverse. Those claiming minority positions centered on race, class, age, desire, beauty, geography, and religion, among others, are still rendered either invisible or hypervisible. Because blackness and non-heterosexuality are considered non-normative, and Black sexuality has been branded as deviant (hooks, 1992), discussions of Black non-heterosexual sexuality are nearly invisible.

According to GLAAD (2012), LGBT characters appearing on prime-time network television series made up 4.4%, which was up 2.9% from the previous year. However, of that 4.4%, only 12% were African American and 4.1% Hispanic, and men outnumber women by more than 10%. To go back a little further, between the years 2007 and 2009, only two Black lesbian characters with supporting roles appeared on mainstream television and in movies. Since 2009, three more emerged, resulting in only 3 Black lesbians currently on air. To say that media lack representations of queer women of color is an understatement. With the advent of YouTube and other video based social media platforms, producers are able to challenge representation inadequacies, resulting in several webseries[2] that feature Black, non-normative characters like *Lez-B-Honest*, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, *Friends and Lovers*, *If I Was Your Girl*, and the focus of this analysis, *Between Women*. These shows feature narratives specific to Black women and their audiences.

Within limited representations of non-normative identities exists an opportunity to reinscribe the norm, or reconstitute the center in ways that perpetuate

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[2] See http://www.forharriet.com/2014/10/6-brilliant-web-series-featuring-queer.html#axzz3TO5gov6F

heteronormative ideologies. For instance, *Between Women* deals in love, loss, romance, domestic violence, masturbation, reproductive justice, and health, among other things. While the show marks a new era of visibility for Black lesbians, especially considering there has never been a show in mainstream media dedicated solely to Black lesbians, the show relies on hegemonic and heteronormative representations of masculinity via sex scenes, gender roles, and gender norms. While YouTube demonstrates the fluidity of cyberspace and our ability to insert multiple narratives, who tells those stories and how they are reproduced and interpreted deserve equal attention. For instance, stories can be misconstrued, misunderstood, mischaracterized, manipulated, and told in ways that reconstitute the norm, even if only temporarily or for only minor parts of an entire text. Because "media are central to what ultimately come to represent our social realities," the limited representations of multiple sexualities are problematic (Brooks & Hebert, 2006, p. 297).

Reality Television offers an area of growing visibility. With shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* (VH1), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which featured a transgendered male on the show (BRAVO), and *The A-List* (Logo)—all shows specifically about LGBT populations, alongside LGBT folk appearing on shows like The Voice (NBC), more stories are entering the realm of sexuality and sexual desire. However, some people watch these shows as a way to romanticize, fetishize, and/or demonize non-normative behavior. What occurs then is a sort of hypervisibility that further ostracizes non-normative sexualities.

Queer visibility has also been used to support nationalist agendas. Shakhsari (2012) explores Iranian Queers' lived experiences after the President claimed they didn't have that *problem* and refuted rumors of hanging gays in public. Many American nationalists used Iran as an entrance point to discuss queer violence in order to push forward a nationalist agenda that paints Iran as a country tormented by violence, hatred, and inequality, while simultaneously painting America the heroic land of the free and home of the brave. Within these narratives are spaces to further violate queer bodies, queer realities, and queer politics by spinning stories and telling lies. This results in a form of hypervisibility where bodies become overly visible in harmful ways. Hypervisiblity is just, if not more, harmful as invisibility. There is a thin line between the two, and a complexity creeping below the surface where visibility supposedly rests comfortably.

We can think of many points in life where we desired to be left alone. We beg, please stop telling our stories. As long as our stories/words come out of your mouth, detached from the source, they no longer represent who we are, or what we do (Floyd-Thomas, 2006). To retell, to perform, to reimagine, is to detach from the source, and create potential space for misinterpretation and misrepresentation. When the discourse reinscribes the heteronormative norm/ dominant discourses, the stories become fodder for fetish, poking fun, amusement, and comedy. When the stories challenge the heteronormative norm, exposing

the center, they are rendered invisible by mainstream media. The Iranian case aforementioned might seem an example, but it reinstated the nationalist norm, so gays become a guinea pig for insisting negative foreign policy. In cyberspace, the celebration of fluidity often overlooks the violence in so called "disembodied" spaces. There is a rhetorical reproduction of normal/abnormal binaries when exaggerated accounts jeopardize queer populations in a country where sexuality is rendered invisible. The politics of visibility then complicate this analysis further. It is not enough to just create a space where bodies are viewable; how, when, where, and to whom we share those bodies are just as important as the sharing itself. While it is important to celebrate the gender bending occurring in reality and digitized contexts, the fluidity of cyberspace, and the visibility of LGBT characters on screen, we must also stop and ask at what and who's expense. There is always an expense.

Black Sexual Politics

Sexuality is a significant marker of identity. Due to the sexualization and fetishization of Black bodies in American culture, Black women's bodies in particular, Black female sexuality has been a long silenced topic. Black women have lacked the agency and/or opportunity to discuss their sexual desires outside the scope of male pleasure. In what Weekes (2002) terms "excluded sexualities" Black women and girls develop a sense of their sexuality in contrast to their observation and response to white women and for the pleasure and attention of men. We would extend that definition to include heteronormativity.

　　Black women's sexuality is largely limited because we are "allowed to express [our] sexuality through narrow constructions [often] informed by a heterosexual (often white) male gaze" (Clay, 2008). While scholarship by progressive and sex-positive feminists and queer theorists attempt to expand those constructions (Bell, 2005), it is often without a race critique, meaning Black women are sometimes left out of the conversations, or written into problematic stereotypes around their sexuality.

　　While we are familiar with feminized and heteronormative depictions of Black female desire and desirability, there are few/er representations of queer Black sexualities and Black female masculinities as a site of desire.

　　In order to interrogate the possibilities inherent in digital media representations of Black women and sex it is important to examine the sexual politics in the lives of Black women, particularly non-heterosexual Black women.

Winney Rise is Miller's cousin and Mecca's ex-girlfriend. She is the femme of the group and experiences conflict because she enjoys occasional sexual relationships with men, but fears that if she shares her secret with her friends they will see it as betrayal. When a one night stand leaves her with an unwanted pregnancy, she finds a new love interest with a woman who has never been with a woman before, and battles lingering feelings for Mecca.

Miller, a central character in the series manipulates women for sport. Her consistent infidelity and flirtation causes problems with her long-term girlfriend, Rhonda, who is pressuring her to settle down and get married. Miller is one of the more heternormatively

masculine characters on the show and only shows vulnerability to a former lover, Natalie, after she experiences a personal tragedy. She acts as a mentor and confidante to her cousin Winnie (who secretly struggles with her bi-sexual and lesbian sexuality) and Sunny (who has recently come out). Miller maintains close friendships with most of the female characters with the exception of Mecca, who she often competes with for women.

Mecca enjoys her role as the player of the crew. Mecca identies as trans* and prides herself on being a ladies wo/man and often brags about her sexual prowess and ability to woo and seduce women. Mecca has an on-again-off-again relationship with Miller's cousin, Winnie, but is not interested in settling down. She spends a lot of time trying to meet new women using manipulative tactics and is linked marginally to the other women through her tumultuous relationship with Winnie. Mecca's character eventually attends a support group for people who are considering sex reassignment surgery, but the storyline is abandoned without explanation.

While visibility is important, it is also important to consider the politics of sexuality on Black women's lives. Black women have not always had the agency to see themselves as sexual beings (beings with subjectivity and agency) rather than sexualized beings, as bodies that could act rather than always be acted upon. This positionality limited their ability to resist heteronormative assumptions about their bodies and sexuality (Rich, 1980), reject respectability politics (Clarke, 2006), and make claims about their desires (Collins, 2004). In *Uses of the Erotic*, Audre Lorde urges Black women to embrace our sexual selves, utilizing our erotic tendencies to access creative and spiritual power, resisting pornographic labels and insinuations. Rather than be shamed into silence, Lorde (1984) believes that eroticism is a site of power and pleasure and links it specifi-

cally to women and female sexuality. Similarly Cheryl Clarke (2006) speaks of the political implications of lesbianism and argues that black lesbians are empowered through their refusal to conform to heterosexual bias or reliance on men. In response to compulsory heterosexuality and in an effort to challenge "heterocentricity," these black lesbian scholars advocate for the sexual politics of lesbians and write themselves into visibility, centering their stories as women loving women.

Still, Black women's sexualities have been externally policed on all sides, religiously (Moultrie, 2011), morally, economically (when she may be with a lover for financial security), and/or culturally.
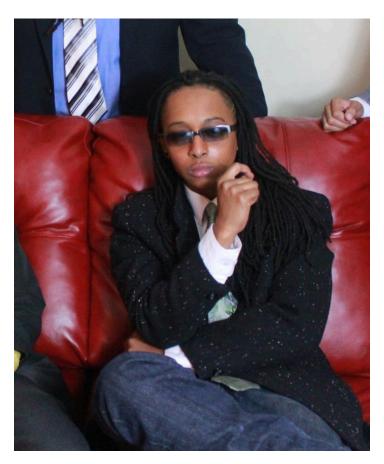

Beautiful is a single mother whose sexuality, before becoming pregnant, is unclear. We learn from memory sequences that she met and fell in love with Rae, her lesbian lover, while she was pregnant. The season chronicles Beautiful and Rae's platonic-turned-sexual relationship as they attempt to negotiate separate lives while parenting a child together.

New digital mediums make room for sexual expressions that are both explicit and implied, acted out and acted upon, and actualized and understood. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) defines sexual politics as "a set of ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame all men and women's

treatment of one another, as well as how individual men and women are perceived and treated by others" (p. 6). She argues that racism influences how Black people engage their sexual politics. Analyzing Black masculinity and Black femininity through this lens helps to situate our discussion of Black sexuality.

Rae is an unemployed aspiring rapper and smooth talker. She co-parents her ex-girlfriend's biological son while starting a new relationship with a needy and controlling lover. Her financial struggles and seeming lack of ambition create complications in her relationships, but unlike the other masculine women on the show, she is monogamous and interested in settling down. Over the course of season 1 she makes the necessary changes to "man up" and take care of her family and responsibilities.

Black feminism, which is an ideology grounded in Black women's intersectional experiences of oppression, centralizes the experiences of Black women and pays careful attention to the politics of Black women's sexuality. The inevitable links between gender and sex offer an expansion of gender possibilities in *Between Women*, which also leads to more possibilities for sexualities. We are not suggesting that gender and sexuality are necessarily linked, but we do feel that the cultural imagination connects possibilities for the two, so if it is possible for multiple representations of gender, there is also room for multiple representations of sex(ualities).

Sunny is the youngest person in the crew and has only recently "come out." She naïvely seeks advice and guidance from her friends on everything from masturbating to coming on to women. She lives at home with her homophobic and extremely religious mother who refuses to accept or acknowledge her sexuality. She spends the first season "coming out," resisting her mother's attempts to "pray her straight" and learning how to be her lesbian self. She tries on various gender identities, often mocking the hypermasculine or hyperfeminine examples in her cohort in an attempt to figure out what makes her most comfortable.

Between Women uses notions of masculinity and desirability to trouble heterosexual norms of attraction. By mimicking traditional and hegemonic notions of Black masculinity through their gender performance, the transgendered characters enact their masculinity through their language use (pronoun choices), slang, performances of having sex "like a man," (both literally and figuratively), and championing their "manhood" on their promiscuity.

The feminine lesbian women characters enact their "femininity" through their ability to pass as heterosexual, their feminine and passive sexual performances, wardrobe, and seeming desirability (and sometimes attraction) to both women and men.

Another example of the ways that they perform gender individually and as a group is the intentional ways they sometimes segregate themselves based on their gender performances, for example to participate in "girl talk" (at the beauty salon) or "man's talk" (on the street corner). Hypermasculine characters are introduced in ways that allow them to inhabit multiple spaces and roles in their relationships, maintaining black masculinity in all of them. While none of the women in *Between Women* would be considered (strictly) heterosexual, their sexual choices are queer.

Brooke is the hegemonically masculine and aggressive lover of Allison. She suffers from extreme control issues and a domineering personality that may be due to witnessing a violent and volatile relationship between her parents. Brooke's propensity for violence leaves her ostracized by the group of friends, and her girlfriend hospitalized.

In many ways Black women's sexuality has been largely limited to a pene-trable, vulnerable body, coconut to mahogany clothed, voluptuous, eager and supposedly insatiable. From breeder women in slavery to contemporary video vixens, Black women's bodies and sexualities have been externally manipulated. Black women's bodies have been marked 'other', unrapeable, and deviant (hooks, 1992; Collins 1990). When Black women own their sexuality and/or

name their desires, they are often labeled freaks, whores and bitches. Black women who do not prescribe to gender stereotypes and norms are generally called the same names and are culturally and socially punished.

We came to these tired, repeated representations seeking something new. We wanted to push against old imagery and see how digital media can offer new/nuanced performances of Black female sexuality and instigate new conversations. We are aware of the ways that Black women's bodies, and therefore Black women's sexualities, have been muted. Our experiences, politics, relationships, and needs have left us starving for wider representations that not only magnify experiences that we recognize, but that offer voice to the often silenced experiences of Black women who experience multiple marginalization. *Between Women* is an ideal site to interrogate these images because it simultaneously challenges and reinforces them through its presentation and performance of black female sex/uality.

Keeping in mind the complexity of visibility, like E. Patrick Johnson (2001), we desire a response to performativity that allows subjectivity, agency, and change, thus bringing forth "interpretative frames whose relationship is more dialogical and dialectical" (p. 11). Relying on Black Feminism, which privileges the everyday lived experiences of Black women, and Quare Theory, which privileges the cultural history and experience of black queer folk, we articulate a quare intersectional approach to mediated performances and representations of Black sexuality that allow for exploration of agency, identity, subjectivity, and embodiment in dialogic ways.

Queering Intersectionalty/Quaring Queer Theory or Quare Intersectionality

One of the limitations of queer theories is the exclusion of a race critique (Hammonds, 2004; Johnson, 2001), which results in an omission of issues centering on other modes of oppression, positioning queer as a normative and exclusive theoretical framework. Acknowledging the limitation of queer theoretical discourse, scholars created choices that are race and class conscious—quare (Johnson, 2001), womanist and transnational—kuaer (Lee, 2003), and inclusive of cissexual identities—queer heterosexuality (Smith, 1997). Despite such brilliant moves towards inclusivity by E. Patrick Johnson, Wenshu Lee, and Clyde Smith, queer theory continues to be criticized for its exclusivity, resulting in a scholarly brand of homonormativity. Normativity is a product of the oppressor's language. Our language privileges certain understandings of lived experiences over others that creates a dismissive and silencing approach to difference. However, by taking an intersectional approach to scholarship, we can begin to embrace the way sexuality moves within and through others facets of our identity.

Carolyn Nielsen (2011) calls for a particular focus on the multiple and complex identities housed within single bodies, and the ways in which we evalu-

ate, interpolate, and embrace identity as plural, fluid, and difficult to define, yet germane to communication theory. She notes that psychology, sociology, and law scholars explore intersectionality, however, communication, even within identity studies, only recently began to embrace intersectionality as theory and method. Recent studies published on intersectionality tend to focus on race, class, gender, and (sometimes) sexuality, almost unanimously, in that order. Dwight McBride (2005) reminds us of the catch-all phrase, and the ways in which "it has ushered in a kind of general malaise, a hardening of the heart, and even a glazing over of the eyes at the mere mention of that by-now-familiar tri-umvariate of race, gender, and class (sexuality is sometimes added as an after-thought), that one theologian has rightly called "compassion fatigue" (p. 5).

Queering intersectionality/quaring queer theory (quare intersectionality) means looking at sexuality and race, not as fourth dimensions or afterthoughts, but as pivotal to how we talk about identity. To quare intersectionality is to de-privilege certain intersections over others and acknowledge the agency of em-bodiment and experience. Quare intersectionality invites multiple stories of sex-uality and race that don't fit neatly into categories like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, heterosexual, asexual, intersexed (LGBTQHAI), or Black, White, Yellow, or Brown. Our silhouettes should allow for complexity. Scholars who undertake a quare intersectional approach embrace the multiplicity of iden-tity without emphasizing certain facets of identity over others, or silencing bod-ies based on rigid binaries. What quare intersectionality allows us to do is ana-lyze the multiple and layered representations of sexuality, race, gender, and class, among other facets of identity, as a whole, where all aspects of identity are fused into the discussion, versus separate from the embodiment of sex.

We use a quare intersectionality to look at *Between Women* because the show's format, themes, and characters engage in complex, intersectional narra-tives of Black womanhood and non-normative sexuality. We are looking at *Be-tween Women* using quare intersectionality as a method because if one only looks to race, she misses the nuances of class; if one only look to class he miss the nu-ances of race, and so forth. A comprehensive and intersectional approach is nec-essary to look at class, race, social aptitude, sexual experiences, beauty, religion, history, etc., simultaneously. Quare intersectionality queers masculinity and femininity. Quaring offers possible interpretations of narratives that claim every aspect of one's identity saying, this is ALL of who I am and it is ALL a part of me. This approach looks at hegemonic, Black, queer normative masculinity through a lens of class, race, sexuality, and geography at the same time. By en-gaging quare intersectionality we look at intersections without privileging one aspect of identity over another, which assisted us in teasing out themes of sexual performance as they relate to race, class, and gender.

Between Women brings non-normative sexualities to the forefront to allow for a complex reading of self and identity. This paper discusses what happens when

you add sexuality to the forefront. We argue that 1) you get more complex narratives, even though the scriptwriting is problematic; 2) when you allow sexuality to exist as a primary, rather than a secondary feature, it (positively) complicates all of the storylines. Following is a brief summary of the storylines in the first season of *Between Women* and a thematic analysis of intersectional moments occurring in the show that create space for non-normative identities to flourish, but also limit our understanding of gendered and sexualized identities.

Plot Summaries

Season 1 kicks off with all of the friends attending a party. We learn that Miller and Rhonda are a couple, but that Miller is unfaithful. We learn that Winnie and Mecca used to date, Brooke and Allison are currently dating, and Brooke has control issues. Sunny is searching for her sexual identity and freedom, Beautiful and Rae co-parent Beautiful's biological son, while Rae has started a new relationship with another woman. Throughout the first season, Sunny practices her lesbian identity but remains single, learns to masturbate, is the victim of a hate crime, and learns to cope with her mother's religious strategies designed to "fix" her sexuality.

Throughout the season, each couple experiences drama. Mecca and Winnie move on to other relationships, Brooke and Allison suffer through intimate partner violence, Miller and Rhonda go through a nasty break up, and Rae and Beautiful get back together. Laced within these main plot lines are issues of domestic abuse, co-parenting, bisexuality, unwanted pregnancy, adoption consideration, sexual pleasure, fidelity, transphobia, religion, and how to cope with coming out. While we applaud the show for its ability to introduce themes not normally discussed on mainstream television, rendering these themes visible, we are also critical of the problematic themes that arise. Themes like heteronormative masculinity, isolation, visibility politics, homophobia, and Black women's sexuality inflate the background, filling it with noise and limiting the show's emancipatory potential, resulting in a queer brand of hyper-(in)visibility. In the next section, we outline some of the storylines that show promise for intersectional liberation, especially where sexuality, race, gender, and (sometimes) religion collide under the subheadings visibility, hyper-visibility, and invisibility.

Visibility

> *There is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship. Also there is no one kind of response to the pressures that lesbians labor under to survive as lesbians.*
>
>   -Cheryl Clarke, *Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance*

Between Women makes visible (black female nonhetero/sexuality) what mainstream media attempts to keep hidden. With the tagline, "go there if you dare," they humanize and actualize black lesbians in the series while acknowledging the taboo nature of their endeavor. They intentionally resist cultural attempts to mark black lesbians as deviant by normalizing and sometimes exaggerating their silenced lives, relationships and realities in an effort to distort distortions about black lesbian relationships and black women in general.

The visibility of black lesbians is groundbreaking. In a culture where representations of black lesbians are limited and routinely problematic, *Between Women* centers them and highlights (perhaps unelegantly) the mundane and extraordinary experiences of their lives. While there is an imbalance in the depth of characters and what we come to know about them *Between Women* is unapologetic in its attempt to give voice and representation to black lesbianism and to show multiple representations of them at various stages in their lives from coming out and into oneself, to the transition between occasional sexual relationships with men to exclusive sexual relationships with women. The existence of a show that was created by, for, and featuring black lesbian women makes them publicly discernible in a way they have not seen in the past. *Between Women* responds to the lack of widespread representations of Black women audiences have been craving by offering portrayals of Black and lesbian women that are transparent and empowering. By putting their sexual orientation front and center it challenges assumptions of deviance and/or difference in lesbian relationships. In fact the visibility confirms that lesbian women share experiential commonalities with heterosexual, bisexual and queer identified women.

The show offers plotlines that show complex intersectionality in the narratives of Sunny, Brooke & Allison, and Mecca. Sunny's character offers visibility in three distinct ways: 1) her ongoing process of coming out and claiming a lesbian identity; 2) the few experiences of homophobia represented in the show come through Sunny's experiences, both because of her mother's religious-based homophobia and the violent hate crime that results in bodily injury; 3) her burgeoning sexuality and curiosity about her body and sex, including the masturbation scene and her naïveté on how to kiss and seduce women. Sunny's experiences could be more complex by offering more options for gender performance than just butch and femme, but despite Sunny's lack of complexity regarding gender performance, her character offers possibility by showing the process of becoming. Sunny is presented as the "awkward Black girl" of the group, not only because she is the youngest and most naïve, but because she is recently out and is "becoming" a lesbian. Through her innocence, she asks her friends to "help her be a lesbian." Through this telling, we witness various ways to perform queer identity. Viewers witness a full background of her life outside of her friendships. Her story opens up dialogue that extends beyond sex and into areas

of life that so many marginalized bodies deal with, thus offering a glimpse at the intersections of identity and experience.

Another instance that creates visibility for previously silenced identities, experiences, and circumstances occurs in the troubling relationship between Brooke and Allison. Taboo subjects like domestic violence and mental health counseling find a way into Brooke and Allison's narratives. For the first time in a televised series, we see an actual same-gender loving couple engaging in violence, seeking counseling to help with recovery, and being honest about how a troubling past can lead to a violent future. Brooke breaks the normative rules of Strong Black women, or psychotherapy being for "white people" by seeking help and attempting to change her ways. Allison shows agency as a victim of intimate partner violence by leaving Brooke, seeking help from friends to hide and eventually recover. While this storyline perpetuates a failed hegemonic masculinity that thrives on violence, anger, and aggression, it depicts how domestic violence damages relationships, people, and histories, and the benefits of psychotherapy.

Another silenced identity made visible through *Between Women* is Mecca questioning her sex assignment and choosing to visit a support group for women seeking to transition to men. Transmen and women have been largely absent from pop culture texts, especially television and movies, with the exception of the first transwoman character played by a transwoman in *Orange is the New Black*. Mecca is one of the first women to play a role in a developing plot line centering on sex reassignment, gender performance, gender dysphoria, and the processes of transitioning.

Hypervisibility

Between Women offers a rearticulation of controlling images around Black womanhood and manhood. These problematic representations offer tropes of Black women and men rendering them hypervisible and therefore recognizable in the context of the series. Rhonda, who we meet in the opening sequence of the first episode, is the angry Black woman and Sapphire. It is implied that her loud, abrasive, attitudinal nagging and insistence on getting married is what drives Miller to infidelity. Winnie is presented as a Jezebel because of her indiscriminate sex with both men and women, and while promiscuity is celebrated (culturally) and accepted among the transgendered men in the series (Miller, Mecca) it is seen as a flaw in Winnie's character that is punished with an unwanted pregnancy. Miller and Mecca are hypersexual and hypermasculine, reverting to representations of Black men and Black masculinity as promiscuous, sexually insatiable, and unfaithful. Rae, who also presents as masculine, deviates from stereotypical notions of black masculinity because of her interest and investment in monogamy and co-parenting. Rae's unemployment and inability to "head" the

household, however, deems her the "lazy, deadbeat, well-meaning but good-for-nothing" black representation that looks for women to take care of her. Allison, in comparison, is desperate to be needed, respected and revered in her relationship making her masculine representation violent and manipulative, grounded in insecurity and expressed through acts of aggression and control. Beautiful is the bitter single "bad" black mother whose irresponsibility leads to an accident that could have cost her child his life. Finally, the show perpetuates a heteronormative fantasy in the season finale, which results in a double wedding between Rae and Beautiful, and Miller and Natalie. We question why marriage continues to be displayed as a marker of an authentic relationship, especially when the plot lines leading up to both marriages are unbelievable. In the premiere episode Rhonda mentions that gay marriage is legal, but the timelines, certifications, and processes for a legal ceremony are absent from the show. We see a fairytale whimsical white wedding without discussion of the trials and tribulations (both personal and institutional) it takes to get there for same-sex couples. Opening lines of discussion regarding these struggles represents a wonderful opportunity for dialogue.

These hypervisible representations are recognizable because of their prevalence in mainstream and popular culture. While tropes are difficult to ignore *Between Women's* attempt to offer representations of black lesbians did not expand representations and/or create nuanced depictions of black women, but rather recycled problematic and stereotypical images of blackness adding a layer and lens of sexuality.

Invisibility

We also noted invisible plots, characters, and themes in *Between Women* that could offer fuller and more diverse representations of Black lesbian experiences. The show is communicating, through visual imagery and telling, a normative Black lesbian experience that privileges the butch/femme dichotomy. In mainstream lesbian depictions, butch narratives are all too often invisible; thus, space to interrogate the experiences of butch lesbians alongside stories of becoming represent possibility. However, strict gender stereotyping of the characters trivializes femme narratives and demonizes masculinity in very particular ways. One example is sexual intercourse.

One area of the show that leaves a lot to be desired is the depiction of sexual activity. While most shows featuring queer characters only allude to sexuality, pleasure, and desire via editing, cutting to a different scene at the moment of consent, or sexual innuendo, *Between Women* is bold in its depiction of actual sex. However, sex scenes are extremely heteronormative. The majority of masculine characters control the experience, and engage in behaviors that privilege phallic symbols of power, like large dildos, Magnum condoms, and the missionary posi-

tion. Lesbian sex comes in many varieties, but the show focuses on heterosexual mocking to depict masculine women pleasing feminine women. We acknowledge, however, that in a community where sexuality is central, being different is difficult, especially communicating an identity that is betwixt and between. Perhaps as the show continues to develop, it will be more liberal in its depictions of lesbian sex, allowing for a more fuller telling of what women (can) do to please each other.

We also note a lack of characters that are not Black lesbians. Not all Black, queer women identify as lesbians, however, all of the women on the show do, with the exception of Winnie who feels forced to hide her "side" relationships with men for fear of being ostracized. Other than the Black lesbians, there is only one other non-lesbian character, and that is Eric, Winnie's gay best friend. Black lesbians do not live in a vacuum with only Black lesbians. Black lesbian lives are full of characters, both heterosexual and queer, from various facets and walks of life. In fact, it is the range of characters present in Black lesbians lives that make the on-going processes of coming out (Adams, 2011), deviance (Cohen, 2010) and becoming such rich sites of exploration. Instead, *Between Women* showcases transmen, butch lesbians, and femme lesbians infatuated with heterosexist phallic fascination. This is not something we would expect in a series featuring the lived experiences of Black lesbians.

Finally, we notice a lack of raced themes. In 2013, when USA Today announced that *Best Man Holiday* was a race-themed movie, Black Twitter blew up, and justifiably so. Just because Black and queer bodies are present in a film doesn't mean that those bodies' struggles with institutionalized racism, sexism, or classism among other forms of domination are present, discussed, showcased, interrogated, or challenged. We have to speak these struggles into our productions versus taking for granted that our skin tells a particular story. In *Between Women*, there is an obvious lack of discussion around issues stemming from racial, sexual, or gender differences. The show broaches a moment to discuss gender differences with Mecca's transition but falls short of exploring any deep subjectivity, however, and it never showcases race specific issues.

Hyper-invisibility

The combination of the missing stories alongside the perpetuation of stereotypes brings us to a moment of theorizing. When bodies are marked absent and present simultaneously, it results in a fourth form of visibility, hyper-invisibility. Hyper-invisibility describes a space where bodies are visible, but in limited ways that tend to mark those bodies even more invisible. When a single show or story renders bodies both hypervisible and invisible at the same time, it creates a space of hyper-invisibility where the stereotyped body is so visible that the rest of the body literally becomes invisible. The real is replaced with fiction, and the fiction

is so powerful it does not allow the real to exist. The body is hyper-invisible. Hyper-invisibility can explain the skewed representations of hyper-sexualized or angry Black women's bodies in media, as well as overly feminine and emasculated gay Black men, among other identities (Johnson, 2013). While these representations ring true for members of each population, they are not all there is to our bodies. However, once bodies are marked hyper-invisible, consumers tend to only see those identities as not only true, but normal, viable, and expected, resulting in mediated interpersonal interactions where stereotypes and violence abound. Future research should look for moments of hyper-invisibility in popular culture texts, and also moments of creating future (Calafell, 2005; Young, 2010) that allows bodies a space to perform in ways that are more consistent with actual lived experiences, thus rendering bodies visible in productive ways.

Concluding Thoughts

While the hyper/in/visibility of *Between Women* presents alarming and subtle problems, we recognize the necessity of such a show and the possibility inherent in the show's formatting and platform (YouTube). Digital spaces offer un-patrolled freedom for directors, writers, and producers to choose what stories to tell, how to tell them, and where to tell them. While some of the stories in *Between Women* perpetuate harmful stereotypes about gender and sex, they do allow for more discourse regarding intersectional identities. There is something powerful about communicating our intersections in representation. The characters communicate their intersectionality in significant ways. Brooke communicates who she is, beyond her sexuality, through counseling; Winnie communicates who she is (as a bi or pansexual Black woman) through the confessional; Beautiful communicates her insecurity through the ways in which she is chastised by significant others, particularly as it relates to her son; and Natalie communicates who she is through her secret meetings with Mecca. Not despite these important moments, we also remain cautious for how *Between Women* participates in making black women's sexual bodies hyper-invisible. This show allows other bodies to fantasize about what black lesbians do, think, and feel in limiting ways. Due to the lack of representation in popular culture, we encourage the creators to push towards creating future and locating the nuanced and out loud differences of our lives.

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