

**Research Article**

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# Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture

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**Abstract:** My article underscores the intermediate existence of black American women between race and gender by stressing the role white patriarchy and black hypermasculinity play in the marginalisation of black female voices and the prioritisation of white women’s interests within and beyond mainstream feminist spaces. In order to legitimise this intermediate existence of black women, my article develops the triple consciousness theory (TCT). Inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness, TCT argues that black women view themselves through three lenses and not two: America, blackness and womanhood. Black feminists, TCT affirms, are able to reimagine misguided narratives of black womanhood in contemporary American culture by unpacking the complexity of this threefold consciousness. In *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay strives for the inclusion of pluralist voices in the mainstream feminist movement and in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses Afrofuturist tropes, reappropriation and gothic imagery to exorcise the generational pain of betrayal by black men and white women. With *Insecure*, Issa Rae radicalises feminist theory by critiquing archetypes attached to black womanhood and in Marvel’s Black Panther, not only do black women possess the unprecedented agency to shape their own identities on their own terms, there is also an existential reconnection with their past.

**Keywords:** white patriarchy, black hypermasculinity, white feminism

My study focuses on the exclusionary practices Black American<sup>1</sup> women endure within the categories of race and gender. Their intermediate existence between racial and gendered identities is uniquely underscored by the role white patriarchy and black hypermasculinity play in the marginalisation of black female voices and the prioritisation of white women’s interests within and beyond mainstream feminist<sup>2</sup> spaces. In order to legitimise this intermediate existence of black women,<sup>3</sup> my paper develops the triple consciousness theory (TCT). TCT, inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois’ double consciousness, argues that black women view themselves through three lenses and not two: America, blackness and womanhood. The phenomenon of three components wrestling in one body is emphasised in Gilles Deleuze’s fold concept. Deleuze, a central figure in postmodern French philosophy, reimaged the fold, a concept originally based on Kantian and Leibnizian principles, as the folding of design in human thinking. The Deleuzian fold is inevitably metaphysical, and the philosophising of its discourse is conducted in a manner that can seem detached from tactile sensibilities. My article, as a result, chooses to engage with Maria del Guadalupe Davidson’s interpretation of Deleuze’s fold because she frames the concept within the socio-historical and

1 The term “American” refers specifically to “United States-American.”

2 “Mainstream feminism” refers specifically to mainstream feminism in the United States.

3 “Black women” refers specifically to “Black American women.”

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cultural context of black American female experiences. Although folding is an internal lived-in existence in relation to one's self "instead of being a product of a relation to something else" (Davidson 130), it allows for engagement with the external in order to "unfold and merge, but not without new folding being created in the process" (Davidson 130). Similarly, Black women in contemporary American culture are engaging with a plethora of platforms such as superhero movies and pop music to "unfold and merge" with the three external components of themselves in order for "new folding," the production of new liberated and reimagined selves, to take place. The meteoric rise of these dynamic communication platforms in our contemporary time has given black women ample opportunities to navigate uncharted spaces and tell their unique stories to wider audiences. In the essay collection *Bad Feminist* (2014), Roxane Gay strives for pluralism in the contemporary feminist movement by legitimising outlier black female voices often ostracised from mainstream feminist spaces controlled by white women. In the visual album *Lemonade* (2016), Beyoncé uses Afrofuturist tropes, reappropriation and Southern gothic imagery to exorcise the generational pain of betrayal by black men and white women. At the conclusion of this "exorcism," she emerges on the other side with a newfound agency that is able to unpack past trauma and reimagine the narrative of black womanhood. With the HBO television series *Insecure* (2016 -), writer and actress Issa Rae has been able to radicalise feminist theory by critiquing archetypes attached to black womanhood and reimagining the identities of modern-day black women. In Marvel's superhero movie *Black Panther* (2018), not only do black women possess the tools to tell their own stories and shape their own identities on their own terms, but there is also an existential reconnection, through diasporic engagement, with their African ancestry.

W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, originally published in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), describes the phenomenon of two polarising identities residing in one body. African Americans, due to the physical and psychological anguish they have endured in America, often struggle to reconcile their black identity with their American identity. They are thus fated to view themselves through two polarising lenses: the black experience and the perceptions of the white world.

The Negro is ... gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others ... One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body (Du Bois 17).

The scope and depth of Du Bois' double consciousness were unprecedented; its discourse on the schizophrenic dualism of black ethnic identity bypassed intellectual gatekeepers, percolated mainstream spaces and shifted, profoundly, critical and cultural rhetorics on race (Gallego 153). Although Du Bois' work on the polarity of black American consciousness continues to shape "contemporary understanding of African American life" (Mocombe 2), it must be highlighted that the concept is a literary reiteration of his own dualist patriarchal identity, an identity mostly preoccupied with the concerns of the liberal black Protestant heterosexual bourgeois male (Mocombe 2). The social identity of double consciousness attempts to find some semblance of power and equality within the framework of a political, linguistic and ideological American paradigm that dominates societies affected by Western Protestant civilisation and refuses to take into consideration the multiplicity of fragmented cultures and identities catalysed by this very domination (Mocombe 2). In brief, double consciousness reflects the capitalistic dominance of white American patriarchy and can therefore not represent the interests of minority groups that must remain marginalised in order for such a system to thrive.

Double consciousness specifically supplants the perspectives of black women. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the dawning of double consciousness is synthesised from the perspective of an African American boy and articulated as "a masculine African American dynamic" (Smith 38). Absent from the narrative is "the African American woman, or the woman of African descent, independent of a man of color, negotiating her own double consciousness vis-à-vis the color line" (Smith 38). While some might argue that Du Bois' "The Damnation of Women" is a black male feminist writing because it advocates for better living conditions for black women, the text is careful to prominently extol the values of the doting black mother, a woman very

much under the gaze and control of the black husband's idealised authority, "For Du Bois...the African American woman is the epitome of virtue—as long as she keeps her adoring gaze focused on an idealized African American authority" (Smith 40). Du Bois' double consciousness, and its sycophantic contemporary reimaginings, are therefore flawed because they do not represent the varied and complex interests of black women.

Ever since the ideological inception of America, white patriarchy, in a committed quest to sustain its values of white supremacy, hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, has utilised the conservation of dehumanising black stereotypes and the institutionalisation of systemic barriers to control, oppress and exploit all black bodies (McCabe 52). Black hypermasculinity, an offshoot of white patriarchy's hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative culture, has also targeted black women. The culture of hypermasculinity in the black American community traces its origins to the slavery era myth of the black rapist. This myth was created by the rural white south to justify "the brutal killing of African American men" (Benson 13). Eventually, "scores of black men...embraced the myth of the black rapist, as well as the baser patriarchal aspects of white south southern male power, such as violence, sexism" (Benson 13). This argument supports Rachel Luft's *Disaster Masculinity*, a theory used to describe hypermasculinity that is birthed from destructive environments and facilitates gendered oppression (True 46). A convincing correlation thereupon exists between black hypermasculinity and the marginalisation of black female voices in black spaces. Contemporary popular culture is crowded with instances of the erasure of black women in influential black spaces often commandeered by black men. Ta-Nahisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*, very much like Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, articulate black consciousness from the same masculine African American dynamic and the black female perspective is secondary and, particularly in *The Sellout*'s case, trivialised. Moreover, in the era of rampant police brutality against unarmed black bodies in the United States, black female victims get considerable less coverage than black male victims (The African American Policy Forum). Although the Black Lives Matter movement was founded by black women like Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, followers of the movement exhibit visible gender bias. While they marched rhapsodically for black male victims of police brutality like Trayvon Martin, their response to black female victims of similar police misconduct incidences, like Sandra Bland, was relatively muted (Alter).

The erasure of black women is also pervasive in and beyond mainstream American feminist spaces. Racist socialisation, bell hooks argues, has allowed bourgeois white women to deradicalise feminist theory and view themselves as "more capable of leading masses of women than other groups of women" (54). They thus prioritise the interests of white women over the interests of black women and other women of colour. The exclusion of black female voices in mainstream feminism is nothing new. First-wave feminism vehemently shunned women of color, and the womanist rhetoric of the 1970s and 1980s by writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker highlighted the modern reincarnations of white-centric feminism. Mainstream feminism, it is worth underscoring, functions as an ally for white patriarchy. As demonstrated by Donald Trump's presidential victory, some goals of white patriarchy (such as enforcing the "superiority" of the white race) can be very appealing to white women, "millions ... went to the polls for Mr. Trump on Election Day, including ... 53 percent of white women" (Chira). Trump's victory exposed, perhaps more eloquently than Morrison's womanist rhetoric ever could, the racist attitudes of white women and how easily they can negotiate with white patriarchy for greater agency.

My article addresses the gendered limitations of double consciousness, and its tangible manifestations, by developing the triple consciousness theory (TCT). Analysis of the triple perspectives of black women is not a novel phenomenon. Concepts like Bonnie Thornton's "dialectics of black womanhood," Alice Walker's "the conditions of twin afflictions" and Frances Beale's "double jeopardy" have analysed, in great depth, the uncomfortable intermediate space black women inhabit at the intersection of race and gender. While TCT reinforces similar sentiments, its focus is the uniquely American and culturally specific psychological process of confronting and unpacking the messy contradictions of conflicting identities in order to produce new liberated identities. Black women, due to the physical and psychological anguish they have historically endured on both fronts of race and gender, are fated to view themselves through three lenses and not two: *America* (represented by the hegemony of white patriarchy), *blackness* (a racial space that prioritises the

interests of black men) and *womanhood* (a hierarchical gendered identity with white women at the top and black women at the bottom). Accentuating this threefold conceptualisation of black womanhood is crucial to understanding their marginalised existence in the intermediate space between race and gender. During the act of folding, Deleuze articulated, the marginalised individual has the ability to encounter an alternate self that is “different ... from the identity imposed by external, marginalizing forces” (Davidson 130). The self constructed by externally oppressive forces is a self in relation to others; the alternate self that is encountered, on the other hand, is a liberated self consciously conceived by one’s governing moral code (Davidson 130). This moral code, Deleuze asserts, can only be accessed when an individual has the self-awareness to “know thyself” (Davidson 130). To know one’s self entails a concrete understanding of the contradictions and nuances of one’s existence. Hence, the self cannot be liberated if it is not cognizant of the nature of its true reality (Gary and Philipson 37). TCT underscores the Deleuzian “know thyself” concept by demonstrating how black women in contemporary American culture are consciously confronting the suffocating parameters of their threefold consciousness before encountering the moral code to their alternate selves, their liberated selves and therefore their true selves.

The black American community tends to emphasise the leadership of “masculine warriors” due to its culture of hypermasculinity (Eaton 1). The mythic silent black woman is integral to the “success” of this community; she must invariably support its often male-centric causes because the “fate” of her race depends on it but she, and her interests, cannot be at the forefront because she will destabilise the masculine rhetoric of “organizational leadership and community organizing” (Eaton 1). Black women who therefore challenge the black community’s patriarchal tendencies are erroneously labelled as race traitors and are accused of being agents of white supremacy (white patriarchy and white feminism) (Dawson 144). Encountering the alternate selves, the liberated selves, demands of black women to challenge and navigate the three “external, marginalising forces” (Davidson 130) of their consciousness and because black hypermasculinity is one of these marginalising forces, its patriarchal tendencies must be confronted. Seeking the tools of reimagination offered by the alternate self cannot and should not be interpreted as abandoning blackness and black men; alternate selves, through the process of unfolding, merging and new folding, are both an external and internal amalgamation of black women’s experiences including their blackness and their relationship with black men. Thus, although their reimaged selves are undoubtedly new, it is a newness in negotiation with every facet of their blackness.

My article uses TCT to synthesise and analyse instances of this reimagination process in contemporary American culture. Writer and commentator Roxane Gay begins *Bad Feminist* with an audacious declaration, “I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy” (Gay xi). A “bad” feminist represents everything in opposition to the idealised values of “perfect” feminism. Gay, for example, occasionally enjoys the catchy music of black rappers who often use degrading language to describe women (Gay x). Hip hop, a black-created musical genre, is a significant part of black American history and culture. Rappers used hip hop, founded in the 1970s, to expose the harsh realities of the downtrodden black populace; the thematic landscape of hip hop music covered a multitude of issues such as the economic and existential hopelessness of poor urban black youths and the violent horrors of the “gangsta” lifestyle (Cosimini 252). There are also the economic opportunities and benefits, “hip hop has provided one of the few significant employment and wealth-generating opportunities for African Americans, and has employed them in unprecedented numbers” (A. Watson 182). Feminists, however, have taken hip hop to task for its misogynistic portrayals of black women as inferior, hypererotic and disposable (Gammage 8). While hip hop has arguably uplifted the black community, it also functions as a black patriarchal practice that physically, metaphorically and rhetorically marginalises black womanhood, “Bitches ain’t shit but hos and tricks,” Snoop Dogg on Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic*” (Gaunt 180). Hip hop is hence a contradictory experience for black women. Such messy contradictions are innate to the experience of black women in modern America, and by embracing the “bad” feminist label, Roxane Gay is acknowledging and unpacking the messy contradictions of her triple consciousness.

The “bad feminist” label also epitomises black women’s experiences with mainstream feminism. Gay feels like a “bad” feminist because, as a black woman with a unique set of interests, she has been historically shunned by the white gatekeepers of feminist projects, “I decided feminism wasn’t for me

as a black woman ... because feminism has, historically, been far more invested in improving the lives of heterosexual white women to the detriment of others” (Gay xiii). This is, however, the extent of her pessimism. She believes feminism is flawed because feminists are people and people are innately flawed (Gay x). Expecting perfection from feminism is not only unreasonable, it is also sexist because men are never held to such unachievable standards. Lena Dunham, for example, has faced a barrage of passionate criticism over the years for the alleged erasure of black women on her HBO television series *Girls* (E. Watson 148). Dunham and her show are also recurrently accused of a special brand of “hipster racism” that uses awkward comedy to camouflage offensive comments about people of colour (E. Watson 150). Gay, unlike her black feminist counterparts, has a much kinder and nuanced response to Dunham in *Bad Feminist*, “It is unreasonable to expect Lena Dunham to solve the race and representation problem on television somehow while crafting her twenty-something witticisms and appalling us with sex scenes so uncomfortable they defy imagination” (Gay 58). While Gay is cognizant of *Girls*’ problematic elements, the dialogue cannot move forward, she affirms, if Dunham is held to unfeasible standards (55-58). Gay is not making excuses for the failures of white feminism. She possesses, disputably, more empathy than her peers because she operates from the “all people are flawed” principle. And because all people are flawed, she is willing to give white feminists another chance to reset and include “bad” feminists like herself in the feminist movement. What Gay is doing here, on a more profoundly existential level, is normalising and, in turn, reimagining the identities of “bad” feminists (black women, queer black women etc.). The feminist movement can only thrive, she believes, if every woman, regardless of colour and sexual orientation, has a seat at the table and respect for different strains of feminism, “feminism will better succeed with collective effort, but feminist success can also rise out of personal conduct” (Gay xiii). When black feminists like Gay embrace the “bad” feminist label and clamour for a seat at the table, they are normalising the messy contradictions of their threefold consciousness: a feminist fighting white patriarchal structures, a black feminist ostracised by white feminists and a black feminist challenging black hypermasculinity. This normalisation consequently stimulates reimagination because it attenuates the negative connotations attached to “bad” black feminists. Gay encounters her alternate self when she embraces the “bad” feminist label; the normalised “bad” feminist is a new self governed by her uniquely independent moral code, a moral code that operates beyond the parameters of external, marginalising forces.

Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade* is possibly popular culture’s most comprehensive elucidation of the threefold consciousness. The album’s prodigious journey, from the melancholic ballad “Pray You Catch Me” to the riotous call to arms to in “Formation,” is the prodigious journey of black women in America. *Lemonade* opens with Beyoncé crooning “You can taste the dishonesty/ It’s all over your breath as you pass it off so cavalier/...My lonely ear pressed against the walls of your world/... Pray to catch you whispering/I pray you catch me listening/I’m praying to catch you whispering/I pray you catch me” (Beyoncé). The lyrics depict a forlorn Beyoncé coming to terms with her spouse’s infidelity and praying he catches her eavesdropping on the details of his extramarital affair(s). When *Lemonade* premiered on HBO (April 23rd 2016), there were frenzied speculations about its possible autobiographical elements. From *Vulture* to *The Guardian* to *Slate*, different media outlets debated if Beyoncé was finally addressing the infidelity rumours that had long plagued her marriage to hip hop mogul Jay-Z. After a year and a half of these impassioned debates, Jay-Z somewhat confirmed *Lemonade*’s autobiographical elements during a sit-down interview with *The New York Times* by admitting the album functioned as a form of therapy for the couple (Baquet). Whether or not *Lemonade* is strictly autobiographical is inconsequential. What matters to my study is its reimagination of contemporary black womanhood.

Beyoncé’s agonising death in *Lemonade* begins with the infidelity of her black husband, the betrayal of the black man. In the prelude to the song “Sorry,” she says “So what are you going to say at my funeral now that you have killed me? / Here lies the body of the love of my life whose heart I broke” (Beyoncé). There is sufficient discourse on the generational abandonment and betrayal of black women by black men. As mentioned earlier, there is often the erasure of black women in influential black spaces commandeered by black men. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s notoriously sidelined black women and their interests (Werum 58), and followers of the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement do not give injustices perpetrated against black women the same importance as injustices perpetrated against black

men (Alter). Another example is the desirability of whiteness. Black men are more likely to marry a non-black spouse than black women; in 73% of black-white couples, according to U.S. Census Bureau Data from 2005, the husband is black (Hattery and Smith 50). Sociologists argue that some black men view a white spouse as a status upgrade because such close proximity to whiteness, they believe, offers copious socio-economic privileges (Judice 23). The desirability of whiteness is reinforced in *Lemonade* when Beyoncé's black husband cheats on her, arguably the world's most successful and beautiful pop star, with an unimportant white woman, "He only want me when I'm not there/ He better call Becky [a colloquial term for a "basic" white woman] with the good hair" (Beyoncé). The preference for white women by black men adds insult to injury because these are the same white women who exclude black women from participating in mainstream feminist projects.

Beyoncé's agonising death happens when, like Shakespeare's Ophelia, she sinks beneath the water surface in a beautiful ethereal gown, her mass of hair moving soothingly in quiet waves. Finally coming to terms with her husband's betrayal has profoundly changed her. She can no longer be the woman she used to be, so she has to die. But she does not stay dead, "Unlike the drowning of Ophelia, Beyoncé conquers the water" (Dam). She resurrects triumphantly, in a bright yellow gown, as the Yoruba Goddess Oshun and begins, with confident strides, the laborious journey to her new self. Beyoncé, in this instance, uses Afrofuturism to subvert expectations of European iconography. The visual allusion to Ophelia tricks us into thinking we are in a familiar story. By morphing from Ophelia to Oshun, she is using Afrofuturist tropes (the fusion of Western and non-Western mythologies) to boycott traditionalism and tell the unique narrative of black women's threefold consciousness. Beyoncé's folding process begins when she allows herself to come to terms with the external, marginalising forces of her being: betrayal by black men (metaphorised by infidelity), betrayal by white women (metaphorised by "Becky" sleeping with her black husband) and being abandoned by both "allies" to face the full might of white patriarchy alone. The weight of this revelation is too soul-crushing, so she must die only to be reborn as a new woman, a stronger woman, armoured with the self-awareness to access her alternate self.

The highs and lows of Beyoncé's laborious journey to her new self are mimicked by her hypnotic vocals as she moves in and out of different musical genres, crooning, growling and exorcising the generational pain of betrayal. In the country song "Daddy Lessons," she reminisces about her father training her as a young girl to "shoot" bad men, the kind of men like her husband who would eventually betray her. We see flashes of her alternate self when she boastfully sings about her newfound agency in "Don't Hurt Yourself," a track fused with rock and soul elements, "Who the fuck do you think I is? / You ain't married to no average bitch boy/...And keep your money, I got my own/...Motivate your ass call me Malcolm X/ Yo operator, or innovator" (Beyoncé). Beyoncé's use of country and rock music here is consequential. These are both black-created genres that are now dominated and policed by white artistry. By choosing the country and rock as mediums to navigate the messiness of her threefold consciousness, she is using reappropriation, the act of reclaiming one's appropriated culture, to audaciously challenge the hegemony of white patriarchy and, by default, its agents. Reappropriation gives her the strength to assert the validity of her reimagined self. She is no longer a disciple of symbols of black male leadership like Malcolm X. She is Malcolm X, the operator, the innovator.

Beyoncé's reimagined self is fully realised in the unapologetic pro-black anthem "Formation." While dancing in the corridor of an antebellum mansion, she sings about loving her daughter's naturally kinky hair and her "negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils" (Beyoncé) under the proud gaze of regal portraits of black women hanging on the walls. The tribulations and triumphs of the antebellum South's nameless and forgotten black women are immortalised in these meticulously painted portraits. Beyoncé is, once again, subverting expectations of European iconography. Such portraits usually associated with European aristocracy now feature various colours and indentations of black female experiences. Beyoncé, who is of Southern origins (Alabama and Louisiana Creole), also reimagines the history of her ancestry by reappropriating the gothic imagery of the antebellum South. The antebellum mansion in "Formation" belonged to a slave master who probably owned Beyoncé's ancestors, but here she is, stomping on its floors, hanging her female ancestors on its walls, subverting its authority and forging a reimagined family history that is divorced from the gaze of white patriarchy.

But will the self-awareness of this new reimagined self continue its journey alone? Beyoncé soon encounters an unexpected surprise: the penitent black man. Her black husband seems to have undergone a metamorphosis of his own; he comes to her in the heartbreaking ballad “Sandcastles,” reformed, humbled and pleading for another chance. The vulnerable visual of Jay-Z, the hypermasculine hip hop mogul who once boasted about having “99 problems but a bitch ain’t one” (Jay-Z), bowing down in submission and kissing Beyoncé’s feet is jarring and transformative. This visual is, in brief, the deconstruction and breakdown of black hypermasculinity. The reformed black husband has finally realised the worth of the black woman and in “All Night,” Beyoncé apprehensively decides to give the love of her life one more chance to prove he is worthy of redemption, “Baptize your tears and dry your eyes/...Give you some time to prove that I can trust you again” (Beyoncé). Whether or not the black husband deserves her redemption has been hotly debated by cultural critics. This is another argument my study finds inconsequential because what pertains to my thesis is the reimagined self and the layered dimensions of its self-awareness.

The strong black woman archetype is obstinately prevalent in popular culture; it is a narrative that conceptualises black women as indestructible, independent and almost superhuman (Patton and Croom 7). A surfeit of scholars has problematised the implications of this narrative. Being superhuman means, the black woman is void of the tender sensibilities associated with the human experience. She is, as a result, deprived of empathy, and she ironically becomes subhuman (Patton and Croom 7). The strong black woman archetype, others argue, is simply nothing more than a modern rearticulation of the offensive mammy stereotype (Boylorn 137). The mammy’s strength stems from “her ability to endure the hardships of slavery (including prioritising the needs of white families over her own) and sustain her biological family after slavery (oftentimes as a matriarch and in the absence of black men)” (Boylorn 137). The strength of the modern black superwoman stems from very similar circumstances because she is expected to support social orders (black hypermasculinity and mainstream feminism for example) that prioritise the interests of others over her own (Boylorn 137). Her objections, if she is “radical” enough to ever utter them, are trivialised because as an indestructible extraterrestrial being, she is expected to endure whatever ordeal she encounters (Boylorn 137). The strong black woman is also always portrayed as having a negative attitude (Patton and Croom 7). Exaggeratedly sassy and uncouth depictions of her persona consequently shape popular culture’s perceptions of black womanhood. On *Insecure*, Issa Rae radicalises feminist theory attached to the indestructible woman narrative by reconceptualising black women as insecurely female, insecurely black and, most importantly, insecurely human.

*Insecure* chronicles Issa Dee’s, the 20 something protagonist, awkward attempts at navigating love, work and friendship in modern-day Los Angeles as a black woman. Issa Rae, *Insecure*’s creator and lead actress, candidly spoke about the restrictive categorisation of black women in popular media, “I don’t want to invalidate anybody’s black experience. But it seems to me [on television], we’re either extremely magical, or we’re extremely flawless. But we don’t get to just be boring ...it’s a privilege to be able to be boring” (Mohdin). Issa Rae references the superhuman black woman archetype with the “magical” comment and refers to boring as a “privilege” because black women are scarcely afforded the opportunity to be normal beings. While “extremely flawless” black women surely do exist, their experience should not account for the entirety of black women’s diverse experiences. With *Insecure*, Issa Rae extends the parameters of black female identities by accessing a quirky alternate self that is independent of tropes and archetypes. The most memorable moment in *Insecure*’s pilot episode is the scene with Issa Dee staring at a mirror in a green sequin dress. She is getting ready for a night out with her best friend Molly, and she attempts to inflate her self-confidence by trying out a plethora of personalities and bold lipstick colours. As she journeys through familiar archetypes, the hypererotic black woman, the confident black woman etc., and finally settles on going out as herself, plain and awkward Issa with lip balm instead of bold lipstick, her insecure self is legitimised. In this simple yet powerful scene, *Insecure* uses the universal thread of connected experiences to humanize, and ultimately reimagine, black womanhood; we have all been that girl who dreamily stares at the mirror wishing she were a more confident version of herself but has to snap out of her reverie to face the chaos of the world as nobody else but herself.

Like Beyoncé and Gay, Issa encounters her alternate self by unloading the messy complications of her threefold consciousness. White-dominated office spaces on *Insecure* are juxtaposed with Issa’s relationship

with her best friend, Molly. The white hegemony of these office spaces strip Issa and Molly of their agency and reduce them to archetypes. In Molly's law firm, for example, her white boss asks her, using coded language, to talk to a new black female addition to the firm (Rasheeda) about toning down her sassy and boisterous persona. Molly is miffed, but she succumbs to pressure from her boss and talks to Rasheeda. She later vents to a date about the incident, "I'm not the black translator here to tell coloured folks when Massa say they done wrong" (*Insecure*). Because Molly and Rasheeda are both black, it is assumed they speak a singular rudimentary language. This scene, also simple yet powerful, exemplifies how the white gaze reduces black identities to a singular experience with no elasticity for nuance. Issa and Molly's friendship, on the other hand, forges a space beyond the hegemony of external, marginalising forces like the white gaze. *Newsweek* described *Insecure* as "one of the very few shows to ever depict 'great black female friendships' on TV" (Williams) and what makes this friendship great "is...its ability to take two distinct black females, each with their own complex lives, and bring them together" (Gyarkye). There's a pivotal scene in season 1's finale: both women, consumed by the malice of their insecurities, have severely hurt each other but when Issa's indiscretion costs her boyfriend, Molly rushes to her aid. Both women utter no words. A sobbing Issa simply rests her head on Molly's lap, and Molly cradles her with concerned tenderness. In this scene, black women are neither superhuman nor subhuman. They are afforded the "privilege" of normal human emotions, and they are therefore reimagined as human.

Issa's uneasiness with black hypermasculinity is illustrated by her relationship with hip hop. As discussed earlier, although the lyricism of rap music played a significant role in uplifting the black American community, it also notoriously defames and dehumanises black women. Issa spends a great deal of her time rapping to her reflection in the mirror. She uses the lyrical charisma of hip hop, in moments of trepidation and indecisiveness, to conjure up more confident versions of herself and while these new confident selves are seldom materialised, they are important because they allow her to confront her insecurities. Hip hop culture, it is important to reiterate, is influenced by the countless narratives of black American experiences. Roxanne Shanté for example, a black woman from Queensbridge, New York City, is widely regarded as a hip hop pioneer (A. Brown). Roxanne's visionary song "Roxanne's Revenge," released in 1985 when she was just 14, is a bold response to "Roxanne, Roxanne," a hit song by male hip hop trio U.T.F.O. (A. Brown). Although U.T.F.O.'s song is about an unrelated Roxanne who rejected their romantic advances, the point of view of this titular character, her version of events, is absent from the male-authored lyrics. Roxanne Shanté, the rapper, in her hit song "Roxanne's Revenge," cheekily and courageously asserts the female point of view by assuming the persona of U.T.F.O.'s Roxanne and lambasting the looks and talents of the male hip hop trio.

Well, my name is Roxanne, a-don't ya know/ I said I met these three guys, and you know that's true/ A-let me tell you and explain them all to you:/... He ain't really cute, and he ain't great/ He don't even know how to operate/ He came up to me with some bullshit rap:/... Because my name is Roxanne-a, and I came to say/ I'm conceited, never beaten, never heard of defeated (Shanté).

"Roxanne's Revenge" was a revolutionary statement from such a young girl. Not only was she challenging the hegemony of black men in hip hop spaces, but she was also creating a platform for unrepresented black women within hip hop's hypermasculine culture. "Roxanne's Revenge," according to *Rolling Stone*, is "one of the toughest voices hip-hop has ever heard" (Rolling Stone) and as "young Shanté discovers her talent, she slays men twice her age with uncanny wit and instinct" (A. Brown). Shanté's sharp rhymes influenced a legion of rap artists, including male hip hop legend Nas, and her story confirms Black women's integral contributions to the legacy of hip hop (P. Brown). By using the language of hip hop to navigate various dimensions of her self, Issa pays homage to the female pioneers of hip hop and reimagines the genre as a form of rehabilitation for insecure black women like herself. However, her cognisance of the marginalisation of black women in hip hop culture is reflected in her bad rhymes, "Her raps, always self-written, are bad. The words fumble out, inflected at odd points, and connected by clumsy, simple rhymes" (Kearse). This clumsiness, in addition to mirroring indecisiveness, also speaks to the clumsily uncomfortable space black women occupy in hip hop's misogynistic and hypermasculine culture. With *Insecure*, the reimagined

insecure black woman is allowed to simultaneously confront hip hop culture's debasement of black womanhood and celebrate her positive contributions to the legacy of the genre.

Marvel's *Black Panther* feels like a culmination of the efforts of Gay, Beyoncé and Issa Rae because its distinct and diverse female characters exist in a reimagined reality without external, marginalising forces. Directed and co-written by Ryan Coogler, a black male feminist (Kang), *Black Panther* is set in the fictional and uncolonised technologically advanced African nation of Wakanda. Colonialism, using the interpretive TCT lens, is an external, marginalising force obstructing access to the alternate selves of colonised communities. Because Wakanda was never colonised, its selfhood was never externally mandated by the marginalising forces of imperialism. Wakanda thus represents an almost utopian society with zero to minimal obstruction to encountering the alternate self. Released in February of 2018, *Black Panther* achieved unprecedented critical acclaim for a superhero movie (97% on Rotten Tomatoes), exceeded box office expectations and became, in a mere matter of months, an electrifying cultural phenomenon (McClintock). The women of *Black Panther* are arguably the movie's breakout stars. From *Time* to *The Washington Post* to *MTV* to *Cosmopolitan*, popular culture commentators are full of praise for the dynamic and fierce black women of Wakanda who fundamentally challenge the notion of strength. T'Challa, the king of Wakanda, is protected by the Dora Milaje, an elite team of all female warriors. Strength, for the Dora Milaje, is not necessarily about physicality; it is more an amalgamation of values like commitment, strategy, collaboration and passion. When they take on Erik Killmonger, the movie's villain with now enhanced superhuman powers, they hold their own not because their raw strength matches his but because their committed fighting techniques are strategically collaborative. When these toned and slender-framed women, driven by a profound passion for their homeland, decisively point their spears at the mammoth male warriors of the Jabari tribe during a packed coronation ceremony, no one raises a quizzical brow. The message to audiences is clear: this is a society with a broad-minded conceptualisation of what black womanhood is. And then there is Okoye, the fearless general of the Dora Milaje, who is irrevocably bound to the values of Wakandan tradition not by force but by free will. Her nationalistic loyalty to Wakanda often places her at odds with male authority, including the king himself, but, in every instance, her beliefs never concede. Her purpose is defined by her independent moral code, however irrational it might seem at times.

Okoye's adherence to tradition is contrasted by Nakia's insurrectionary spirit. Nakia, a Wakandan spy and T'Challa's ex-girlfriend, wants Wakanda to abandon its isolationist policies and play a bigger role in global affairs. At the start of *Black Panther*, we see a disguised Nakia on a solo mission to liberate captured women and children from armed rebels in Northern Nigeria. T'Challa intercepts her mission but before he can explain why she irritatingly asks "What are you doing here? You've ruined my mission!" (*Black Panther*). Her fervent belief that Wakanda has a moral obligation, due to its profuse wealth and technological advancement, to step out of the shadows and help other countries in need is the source of discomfort in her romantic relationship with T'Challa. Like Okoye, Nakia is defined by her own independent moral code, even if it means putting her at odds with the king and/or her lover. *Black Panther* weaves a bigger theme of Pan-Africanism by connecting the African female diaspora to their African roots. Although Wakanda is a fictional country, its conception is very much in conversation with actual elements of African culture. The Dora Milaje, for example, mirror the Dahomey Amazons, a group of elite female warriors in the Ancient African kingdom of Dahomey, a kingdom that embodies the glorious past of pre-colonial African civilisations (Goldstein 63). Making such parallels in a big budget Hollywood movie is significant because it markets, worldwide, a reimagined perception of black womanhood. Most importantly, these parallels utilise diasporic engagement to reconnect black women with empowered versions of themselves that were intentionally eradicated over centuries by the whitewashing of history (Christian 154). The centuries-long whitewashing of sophisticated African civilisations, scholars argue, was systemically orchestrated by Eurocentric power structures in order to justify the demonisation and exploitation of black Africans (Tehrani 67). The existence of empowered characters like Nakia and Okoye, modelled after empowered African women in actual pre-colonial black cultures, is thus momentous because they challenge altered narratives of black American ancestry. But make no mistake, *Black Panther* is T'Challa's movie, and all the women are indisputably supporting characters. Moreover, the anti-isolationism conversation at the centre of *Black Panther* is fully dominated and realised by the charismatic male villain, Erik Killmonger. Some

black feminists find this problematic because not only is Nakia the first character in the movie to verbalise the unethical implications of isolationism, she, unlike Killmonger, uses more humane and strategic methods to achieve her anti-isolationist goals (Kent). With that said, *Black Panther*'s triumph is the ability of its black male director, Ryan Coogler, to craft empowered black female characters in a story about the existential ruminations of an empowered black male protagonist. The men and the women both get their due, and this is important to emphasise because black hypermasculinity views black feminism as a dubious movement that undermines the agency of black men (Collins 175). The empowered black woman, *Black Panther* demonstrates, is not synonymous with the unpowered black man.

Du Bois' double consciousness, although greatly revered and often used to shape "contemporary understanding of African American life" (Mocombe 2), prioritises the concerns of the liberal black Protestant heterosexual bourgeois male (Mocombe 2); it is, therefore, unable to articulate the marginalised existence of black women in the intermediate space between race and gender. My study addresses this limitation by developing TCT. Black women, TCT claims, view themselves from three lenses and not two: *America* (epitomised by the systemic sovereignty of white patriarchy), *blackness* (a racial identity dominated by the patriarchal attitudes of black hypermasculinity) and *womanhood* (a gendered category that prioritises the interests of white women to the detriment of black women). Unpacking the messy contradictions of this threefold consciousness allows black women to access alternate selves with the narrative apparatus to reimagine skewed perceptions of black womanhood. My study uses TCT to demonstrate how black women in contemporary American non-fiction (Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*), music (Beyoncé's *Lemonade*), television (Issa Rae's *Insecure*) and film (Marvel's *Black Panther*) are legitimising their intermediate existence, accessing their alternate selves and reimagining their identities. The range of these genres, and how effective they are being used to challenge patriarchal hegemonies, reflects this era's democratisation of thought. You no longer need to be an accomplished and celebrated male erudite like Du Bois to redefine culture. With a single tweet alone or even a pop song, you can garner hundreds and thousands of fans and shake the status quo to its core.

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