

Centering Black Feminist Storytelling: Examining Motherhood on *P-Valley* and the Dynamic
Dialogue Recirculated on Twitter between Showrunner, Writers and Viewers

Drew Morgan Lovett
Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

Bachelor of Arts in Communication, Journalism and Media, Shippensburg University, 2019

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Dedicated to the Black women in my life who celebrated and fed my curiosity of Black womanhood, educating me through literature, media and their life experiences.

To my ancestors whose Black feminist stories have been shared with me throughout my life, this is for you. Ase.

Thank you to my readers, committee members, Librarian Erin Pappas and fellow cohort members who encouraged and aided me throughout my thesis process.

I would like to recognize that this thesis was created on the land of the Indigenous Monacan and Manahoac communities who lived here for many generations. I would also like to honor the enslaved peoples who built the wealth and foundation of the University of Virginia.

Abstract:

P-Valley is a critically acclaimed show airing once a week on the STARZ network, created by Black playwright turned showrunner Katori Hall. It has gained widespread attention in the entertainment industry and has fostered ongoing conversations on Twitter because of its compelling storytelling centering the lives of Black women who work at a strip club in the Mississippi Delta rural town of Chucalissa. It garnered buzz due to its nuanced representation of Black femininity, agency and sexuality as seen in the show e vibrant discourse on Twitter by the audience who I conceptualize as a Black feminist refracted public. This public engages in discussions, critique and celebration of Black culture and the storylines that focus on the socio-political elements that influence Black women's everyday lives.

Drawing on Black feminist theoretical work as well as Black feminist media scholarship I aim to explore the concept of Black feminist storytelling and its recirculation on Black Twitter focusing on the dynamic discourse seen between the showrunner, writers room and the audience. Social media is a space for critical engagement, interpretation and connection and through engaging with *P-Valley* with a Black feminist lens, the show and its online discourse contribute to ongoing conversations about Black womanhood, intersectional feminism and the power of storytelling as a tool for social change.

Introduction:

***P-Valley's* Role in the History of Black Women Centered Programming**

Growing up as a Black girl in America in the early, middle and late 2000s I was hyper-aware of the fact that there were a limited number of shows dedicated to centering the lives of Black women on television. I was introduced to classic shows like *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992) *Living Single* (Fox, 1993-1998) *Moesha* (UPN, 1996-2001) *The Parkers* (UPN, 1999-2004) *A Different World* (NBC, 1987-1993) *Sister Sister* (ABC, 1994-1999) *Girlfriends* (CW, 2000-2008) *The Proud Family* (Disney, 2001-2005), *That's So Raven* (Disney, 2003-2007) *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), *How to Get Away With Murder* (ABC, 2014-2020) *Insecure* (HBO, 2016-2021) and *Pose* (FX, 2016-2020) by my older sisters, Mother and Black hairdresser— these shows allowed me to identify with women who looked like me while also contributing to a body of Black media scholarship that highlights the influence of these programs on the Black community (Cheers, 2018). During the mid-2000s to 2010s Black journalists and Black media professionals discussed a lack of Black female centered storylines and Black female led productions on television due to shifting perceptions of what network executives felt the public wished to see (Giorgis, 2021). Along with the fact that Catherine Hughes (TV One), Debra Lee (BET) and Oprah Winfrey are the only Black women who have risen to the height of being media moguls led me to ask the question (Cheers, 2018):

What happened to all of the Black shows? In other words— “Where the Black people at?”

In the last 6 years there's been an increase in Black female representation behind the scenes and in programming. Writers and producers like Shonda Rhimes, Ava Duvernay, Issa Rae, Quinta Brunson and Katori Hall offer a nuanced take on media creation and distribution where they strategically center their Black womanhood as a means of entertainment and education, there is an element of historicity that is integral to understand the evolution of Black

women centered television and their relationship with audience feedback. This led me to examine shows like *Julia* (NBC, 1968), the first show focused on the life of a single Black career woman on network television, featuring Diahann Carroll who herself reiterated the fact that her storyline was seemingly devoid of the authentic experiences of Black women, she states:

“At the moment we're presenting the white Negro. And she has very little Negroness” (TV Guide, 1968; NYT) reiterating that it is positive to have more diverse representation of Black people on television but that her character's trajectory was based on a white idealization of Black womanhood that ignored the socio-political implications of Black everyday life.

It's been 50 years since *Julia* (NBC, 1968) premiered and women like Rhimes, Winfrey, DuVernay, Hall have successfully made their mark in television history as unapologetic Black women who center the real lives of Black women in their storytelling methods. They contribute to what I conceptualize as a “Black Feminist TV renaissance” as they led a resurgence of Black women centered programming in the 2010's and beyond that has reached streaming platforms like Amazon Prime, Netflix, HBO Max or Starz and offers nuanced representations of Black women and girls.

The socially mediated nature of producer and audience interaction on sites like Twitter is also part of this renaissance as these sites encourage a ongoing conversation between viewers and those behind-the-scenes seen in recent Black female centered shows like *Scandal*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, *Insecure* and *P-Valley* (2020-). This increased viewership and fostered a community that debates, educates and relates to the stories depicted on the show through Black rhetorical and mediated tactics like signifyin' (Steele, 2021) As the demographics of the country continue to shift toward a majority of marginalized people I feel there is a need for a broader range of programs that reflect the true diversity of the American public. In the United States,

Black girls and young women are historically inundated with images of themselves proliferated in the media that reinforce negative archetypes rooted in the violent history of chattel slavery. Stereotypes like the strong Black woman who is emotionally, physically and mentally indestructible; the jezebel, a hyper-sexualized imagining of Black womanhood that deems them always “ready” and the welfare queen, a term describing a woman of color who abuses social services, was pushed by American conservatives in the 1980s serve as a few examples that Black women and girls aim to resist (Collins 2000, Moynihan Report, 1967).

Recent campaigns in the entertainment industry have highlighted a demand for more diversity in Hollywood from the writers room to greenlighting projects. Issa Rae, a Black female creator of web series turned HBO’s hit (*Insecure*, 2016-2021) went viral at the 68th Emmy Awards for giggling and telling a red carpet reporter that she's “... rooting for everybody Black.” It caused immediate backlash and celebration on social media, as Rae was representing her first hit show at the awards after completing a second season to much critical and social media praise only to be ignored by the industry. The video of her comment made the rounds on Twitter where users debated her reasoning for supporting “everybody Black.”

One tweet in the replies of culture magazine *Variety*’s video of the interaction read: “Isn’t that racist? Just asking. There are a lot of blacks that have won. What is the problem? One of the richest in the USA is Oprah=black”

This following gif of famed basketball player Shaquille O’Neal laughing was a reply to that comment:

Comically referring to the fact that Black supremacy is not a real concept and that supporting those of the same race is a political act not aimed in excluding others but promoting those historically devalued.

Another tweet read:

“Y’all big mad. There was a time in history when Black people couldn’t even attend the



Emmys. You damn right we rooting for all Black people!” The debates, discourse and memes surrounding Rae’s comments along with activist hashtags like 2015’s #OscarsSoWhite and most recently snubs of Black Women actresses and directors in 2023 Oscar nominations.

These tweets highlight the affective power of a Black Twitter public and how they’ve advocated for more diverse programming on social media. Through Black rhetorical tactics they are able to resist celebrating narratives that deem Black creators invisible. Rae’s comments came at a unique time when her show was getting more attention for its non monolithic representation of Black women as she centered Black women coming of age in Los Angeles (HBO,

2016-2021). In essence— Rae said the quiet part out loud and advocated for Black people to be recognized as serious media producers, directors, showrunners, writers while emphasizing a need for media that is “made by us, for us.”

The essence of my argument lies in the fact that Hall follows in the footsteps of previous Black women showrunners, writers and directors as she discusses the storylines on *P-Valley* through centering the Black female experience while engaging and educating viewers of the intricacies of Black womanhood in America. She has written specific episodes with the help of an intentionally chosen writers room that make it a point to counter stereotypes of Black rural women working outside of the formal economy. The way STARZ affords Hall and the writers room to use social media to further discuss their storylines and connect with viewers is unique due to the blurring of lines between producer, writer and viewers as they engage in ongoing conversations informing storylines and creating a community. I'll further examine the power of Black Twitter and their engagement with Black writers and producers in the following chapters which will include discourse surrounding *P-Valley* (STARZ, 2020-) a show written by a Black woman about Black women.

Katori Hall and The *PValley* Writers Room - STARZ and Streaming Affordances

Streaming services and social media sites are now the home of Black feminist stories like *P-Valley* and Twitter continues to be a site of audience engagement. After years of Black writers attempting to write white, meaning appealing to more hegemonic audiences and having their pitches revolving around people of color passed over by broadcast network TV executives there has been a recent resurgence in the popularity of Black women centered shows in the last 10 years. Women of color creators like Lena Waithe, Shonda Rhimes, Ava DuVernay, Michaela

Cole, Issa Rae and Katori Hall have been at the forefront of showrunning, producing, acting and creating production environments that are primarily Black while resisting the hierarchies of TV that too often ignore or stereotype Black women. These writers resist monolithic representations of Black women through countering stereotypical tropes that reinforce white supremacist, patriarchal ideations of womanhood which historically deem Black women unworthy and unladylike.

Streaming services like STARZ allow for a diversity of voices— specifically Black voices seen in their initiative beginning in 2014 called #TakeTheLead. This strategy emphasizes how STARZ was committed to “... amplifying stories, by, about and for women and underrepresented audiences” (Solsman, 2021). In this interview with the services president, Allison Hoffman reiterates that their diversity initiative stating “We feel like being different is the key to our success” (2021) pointing directly to dynamic programming like *Outlander* (STARZ 2014-), *Power* (STARZ 2014-) and *P-Valley* (2020-). The company also holds what they call “Transparency Talks” where they discuss how to make TV more inclusive, it streams every Thursday at noon on the platform. Solsana talks about the diversity initiatives in Hollywood noting statistics from the 2020 UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report specifically focused on the fact that people of color make up 40% of the US population; they are only represented as lead actors and actresses 24% of the time. These numbers also point to the fact that Hall is an anomaly in the industry as only racial and ethnic minorities only make up 11% of broadcast showrunners and 15% of cable showrunners (2021, CNET).

STARZ is intentionally creating a space for content created for women of color featuring the stories of women and people of color. Although Hall was afforded this agency through the streaming service, it has taken the co-signing of prominent Black women producers and writers

to lay the foundation of what I'm calling a "Black Feminist TV Renaissance" as they continue to open doors for other Black women creators, producers, writers, actors and actresses. There is an inherently political aspect attached to this storytelling that is rooted in Black feminist thought. These streaming services allow Black women to express these narratives without fear of censorship from the hegemonic white public (Giorgis, 2021; Cheers, 2018).

The fact that *P-Valley* (2020-) premiered on STARZ, a premium cable channel and a streaming service could indicate creative and marketing freedom that is not unique to Black TV audience studies but highlights how Black creators projects are green-lit as they are able to discuss, expose and educate viewers about the nuances of Black life in a predominantly White society and industry. *P-Valley* is a prime example of the power of the #TakeTheLead initiative in that examines the intricacies of Black womanhood and everyday life in the Southern United States, this program centers Black women and how they negotiate Black feminist concepts rooted in their daily life. The writers and producers highlight the economic, political, social, spiritual, mental and physical realities of their intersectional lives. Specific episodes point to direct moments in the lives of Black women and girls where their race, gender, socio-economic status and ancestral knowledge are targets and tactics in navigating their everyday lives. Hall has articulated that she was very intentional hiring writers and producers as she wanted people who were able to see these rural Black southern female characters as human (Writers Guild, 2020). The diversity of the production sites, along Black feminist storylines and the outpouring of audience engagement on Twitter reflect an authentic way to deliberate modern narratives and representations of Black women in the media.

Showrunner, writer and producer Katori Hall's *P-Valley* (2020-) is an intriguing case study as it serves as a medium for Black feminist storytelling that is recirculated on social media

by a primarily fe Black female public. Hall has spoken in various publications about how she translated the play “Pussy Valley” to TV format, emphasizing the extensive research she completed visiting over 40 clubs, interviewing 40 women while highlighting her unique experience as a woman at a female strip club. She describes the dancers as athletes, not just objects of pleasure or sexual gratification which points to her reimagining of controlling images that reinforce negative stereotypes (Collins, 2000; Tinubu, ShowBizCheatSheet, 2020). She speaks about strategically choosing a diverse writers room as a way to offer viewers a more dynamic understanding of Black women in the rural South (Writers Guild, 2020). Hall and the writers room use the power of social media audiences and media marketing to their advantage. The audience affectionately called “The #PynkPosse” who tend to reply with their own personal experiences, memes and socio-political understandings of the storylines after each show further solidifying the importance of this media text to a Black female refractive public that uses social media tactics like hashtagging, memes, gifs and signifyin’ (Steele, 2021) to connect to the others and further discuss the Black feminist storylines projected in the show. This Twitter audience is continually engaged in meaning-making, community building and knowledge sharing of southern colloquialisms, Black nostalgia evoked through music performed on the show as well as in the soundtrack and theme song along with incorporating elements of Black resistance to the white supremacist patriarchy.

P-Valley (Starz 2020-) serves as a medium of Black feminist storytelling cultivating Black communities on-screen and online. Centering the lives of rural Black women on the show is what I consider a radical move that gives voice to how they navigate interactions with economic and socio-political issues rooted in their intersectional oppression that influences their Black womanhood.

@KatoriHall and The @PValleyWritersRoom Twitter threads posted from their accounts after the show serve as a means of identification, education and community building at a time when diversity is a hot topic in the entertainment industry, political discourse and the everyday lives as Black citizens.

After the protests during the summer of 2020, I found myself drawn to Black media as I wanted to educate myself informally as a means to offer myself a dynamic view of Black womanhood outside of my understanding. Coming from a small town in rural Pennsylvania my interactions with Black culture mostly came from the media or my family. I began absorbing Black literature from the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Michelle Obama, John Lewis, Eddie Glaude and many more activists and writers; I also immersed myself in programming that offered an unexplored avenue of Black womanhood exposing the socio-political factors that influence Black women as these writers storytell, educate, inform and connect their viewers leading me to the bright light that is *P-Valley*.

In the following chapters as I analyze two episodes from season 2 of *P-Valley* I will inquire how Hall uses Black feminist storytelling as a means to push forward a narrative that offers informal Black feminist theory and the reimagining of controlling images. I'll also consider how the audience uses Twitter as a means of recirculating, relating, debating and community building in connection to the storylines produced on *P-Valley*.

Black Feminist Storytelling: A Foundation of *P-Valley*

The concept of Black feminist storytelling is essential to my analysis because it interrogates the nature of everyday Black womanhood I aim to explore in this thesis. Black women have used distinct rhetorical tactics that center the experiences of Black women in the narrative Black female rhetorician describes this research as a way to better comprehend the

racialized and gendered lives of Black women. This form of storytelling centers the experiences of Black women, allowing them to tell their stories in their own words and their own terms. Black women rhetoricians like, April Baker-Bell have discussed “Black feminist-womanist storytelling” (2017) which she describes as combining the work of herself as well as Alice Walker (1983) specifically focusing on exposing the narratives of underrepresented groups of women as a means to challenge the dominant storytelling practices that tend to silence Black women. Aisha Durham also incorporates elements of Black feminist storytelling in her analysis of Boylorn’s book *Streetwater* where she incorporates the tradition of African oral narrative tying it to her own coming-of-age as a Black southern girl in the United States (2015). These texts inspired me to use this framework to conceptualize what I call a: Black feminist refracted public. Abidin (2021) defines refracted publics as a group that emerged in the late 2010’s that uses specific socially mediated tactics to further engage on online platforms while also building a Black feminist community. The Black feminist refracted public I conceptualize emerged prominently in Black television in the late 2010’s produced and written by women produced and written shows, like *Scandal*, *Insecure* and now *P-Valley*. The viewers of these shows engages with the storylines directly on social media, *P-Valley* is unique because the showrunner and writers talk directly with the Black feminist refracted public – framing storylines, offering trigger warnings and using Black rhetorical tactics to further connect with their audience, centering Black women’s lives in their narrative while recirculating informal Black feminist theory.

Methods

Through a textual analysis of two episodes from *P-Valley* I will examine the connection of the show to socio-political constraints and legal theory I will highlight elements of the narrative that are used as a means of storytelling that works to counter negative tropes about

working class Black women integrating the text of the episode with theoretical language and legal theory. I'll also complete a critical technocultural discourse analysis using the framework from media scholar, Andre Brock.

Brock's views of Twitter discourse as a cultural artifact will allow me to expose the nuances of function and cultural significance seen in the commentary surrounding the show. He emphasizes the influence of Twitter discourse highlighting the interwoven nature of technology in cultural representation and social scripts. I feel those behind the scenes in the television industry and the interaction with spectators is becoming more interactive thanks to the innovation of social media platforms, hashtags and community building. Brock's methodological framework is useful in that I aim to scan social media to screenshot discourse from Hall, the writers room and viewers engaged in an ongoing conversation that is nuanced due to the cultural significance of the show.

Twitter which historically affords marginalized groups like Black women the ability to express themselves, debate media content and create Black feminist enclaves that are ripe with discussion. Shows like *P-Valley* are immortalized now on precarious social media platforms through hashtags, these platforms continue to be spaces of contemplation, conversation and communication between Black viewers and those behind the scenes (2018). After collecting screenshots of conversations, memes and photos I will use Brock's methodological framework to critically examine how technology and culture intersect and contribute to a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between technology and culture in a modern society—specifically how they shape one another. My inquiry relates to scholarship that spans several disciplines including Black Feminist Theory focused on representation and historic ideations of Black femininity, Black music studies, Black TV studies and American legal theory. There is an

abundance of sources in each field with especially newer ones coming from Black media and TV studies that were easily traceable through bibliographies of prominent scholars from the field.

Literature Review:

Black Feminism: Media Black Women's History, Hip-hop feminism & Dirty south feminism

When discussing any form of Black Feminist inquiry it's important to trace the history of the experiences of Black women in the United States as they are unique compared to their Black male, White female and White male fellow citizens. The unique nature of their personal experiences is rooted in the lack of agency, respect, dignity and humanity afforded to them during chattel slavery specifically centering around Black female labor. I'll include Black feminist texts that expound on this topic and relate to the episodes that'll be discussed in my analysis Black feminist scholarly work like Collins' "Black Feminist Thought" (2000) and Hartman's "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors" (2016) along with legal theory and white papers spanning from the last 50 years trace the violent treatment of Black women beginning during the transatlantic slave trade and continually reiterated during historical periods including American chattel slavery, post-Civil War, Jim Crow America, The Civil Rights Movement and in recently during the Black Lives Matter Movement that reached a global peak in 2020. While I emphasize the devaluation of Black female affective labor, Hall and many other Black women behind the scenes have tried to project the nuanced relationship between African-American women and motherhood, focusing specifically on reproductive health. Hartman highlights the notion that Black women's reproductive labor and family separation were at the foundation of the economic development of the United States noting their physical and

literal labor were considered an integral element of American economic progress (Hartman, 2018).

This is further explored in episodes of *P-Valley* as Hall and the writers room aim to emphasize how Black female characters utilize their safe space at The Pynk while incorporating survival tactics rooted in the female African-American ancestry including rootwork and spirituality. Hall and the writers bring light to Black girls/women by tackling taboo issues like Black women's reproductive health and beauty standards highlighting the fact that lack of representation of women who operate outside of respectability politics (Gates, 2018) or the notion that Black women must adhere to white society as a means to conform to white ideations of womanhood.

Collin's (1990) term "controlling images" can be used to discuss the context of episodes further with this by exposing the stereotypical archetypes she calls "controlling images" that have evolved throughout time and depict Black people, specifically women in a negative light (1990). Recent scholarship from Nash (2021) has considered how the notion of being a Black mother is inherently political as it's become closely correlated with images of violence, crisis, support, empathy, community building and curiosity. She discusses alternative modes of Black motherhood and safe medical attention for Black mothers by conducting interviews with doulas of color that center Blackness in their medical treatment. Black maternal mortality has become a topic of significance after the "racial reckoning of 2020" and Nash highlights the stories nature of Black celebrity mothers like Serena Williams, Beyonce and First Lady Michelle Obama and everyday Black women who navigate "Mothering While Black" as they examine their experiences with motherhood and how it is still heavily disinvested in due to cultural archetypes

like the notion of the Welfare Queen an archetype seemingly tied to Black women taking advantage of social services, pushed by the Moynihan Report (1965).

This term deemed Black women as the sole reason for the destabilization with medical racism when engaging in reproductive healthcare differs from the treatment of other women. Although there are alternatives and advocates for Black mothers these texts highlight the precarious nature of Black African-American families revolving around their roles as Matriarchs in both their households, work and in their relationships. Being a “welfare queen” was reinforced by the Reagan administration who claimed Black women were abusing social services and irresponsibly giving birth to children. This was rejected by prominent Black feminist like Collins, Hartman, Angela Davis, bell hooks and many more who argued that the agency of Black women is at the core of American progress and economic stability. Demonizing them for their efforts only furthers Davis’ argument that capitalism and the disinvestment in social programs is the bedrock of the so-called “family crisis” Moynihan was trying to blame on Black single mothers, the prominent Black abolitionist and feminist reiterated that the only solution to this was socialism (1986). Recent scholarship surrounding Black motherhood from these pieces relate to Black Feminist media interventions that specialize in understanding Black women’s labor and activism in the digital age and discuss the changing capitalistic nature of Black motherhood that is historically trivialized.

Black feminist scholars like Moya Bailey, Catherine Steele and bell hooks have theorized about the nature of activism and resistance to hegemonic society on the internet, social media and within the media, specifically television and film. These texts from Black media scholars will add depth to the analysis of episodes featuring Black feminist theoretical concepts in an informal manner. Bailey explores the impact of social media and the recirculation of images on

these platforms as a form of resistance and re-traumatization depending on the content. Their concept of “misogynoir” is at the core of one episode that explores the notion that Black women are held to a different standard due to the nature and examples of hatred rooted in the intersection of race and sex (2021). Steele’s book *“Digital Black Feminism”* (2021) elaborates on Bailey’s argument through a historical synopsis of Black women’s digital usage from gossip blogs to social media activism that discusses the nuances of Black womanhood. Steele makes a point to highlight how women have been rendered invisible in the history of technology even though they’ve been an innovative group that learns to navigate technology outside of formal instruction for their own means of identity formation, creative expression and community building. I find her perspective refreshing and a point of reference within my study as sites of Black feminist discourse within the show and discourse online is at the core of renegotiating Black femininity, beauty, relationships and womanhood; her use of signifyin’ is integral to the critical technocultural discourse analysis as viewers use this uniquely Black rhetorical move as a means of verbal play and connection.

This relates to hooks’ piece “Black Looks: Race and Representation” (1992) where she talks about Black representation in the media and in understanding Black female spectatorship in the media. The famed Black scholar argues that the film industry in America reinforces a system of knowledge and power that maintains white supremacy. She argues in support of a Black feminist “oppositional gaze” where viewers look at content in a critically resistant way that challenges dominant visual representations and power dynamics in media. Hooks went on to quote *“The Technology of Gender”* by Terese de Lauretis who calls attention to “the power of discourses to ‘do violence’ to people and does this to show how stereotypes of Black people that often reinforce oppressive ideologies and stereotypes. Embracing the oppositional gaze is a form

of resistance and empowerment for marginalized groups and is used by spectators and Black creators behind the scenes. Her term “talkin’ back” refers to speaking as an equal to an authority figure and daring to have a different opinion. We can see this in the “Black Feminist TV Renaissance” of today where Black women creators, writers, producers and storytellers are essentially “talkin’ back” to hegemonic society through the proliferation of new media centering Black feminist storytelling that renegotiates Black beauty standards (hooks, 1989). This along with Collins’s term “self-definition” is at the core of my analysis as the dancers and owner of The Pynk engage in attempting to know ones worth outside of the unfavorable stereotypes of Black girls, women in the media. This doesn’t come without backlash or exploitation from production as one can see in literature about Black Television studies in the United States.

Literature like that of Maragh’s “Our Struggles Are Unequal: Black Women’s Affective Labor Between Television and Twitter” shows how Black women’s labors on social media, specifically social commentary, acceptance and sharing of stories is exploited by production companies and used as a means of advertising for shows. Although Maragh focused on documentaries, this theoretical analysis can be used to process the impact of Black women’s social media discourse on *P-Valley*.

Dirty South Feminism

Different sects of Black feminism have emerged over the course of the movement, including Hip-Hop Feminism and Dirty South Feminism (Johnson, 2021) these have made interventions within Black feminism that offer an empowering form of activism through examining Black women in the music industry and the impact of exotic dancers. Gwendolyn Pough highlights the history of Black female poets, orators, entertainers, singers and rappers and their relationships to what she calls “bringing wreck”— or disrupting the rooted degrading

stereotypes reiterated in mediums like music. Her emphasis on how Black female rappers challenge controlling images (Collins, 1989) is integral to her argument that these rappers use their dialogue to reverse the gaze of the hegemonic public and Black men in the music industry that often used Black women as “video hoes” and objects of pleasure. She along with Johnson (2015) make the argument that Black women within the music industry as well as dancers who perform to the music use it as a means to empower themselves and “bring wreck” to a white supremacist, sexist industry and society (Pough, 2004). Pough highlights the alternative ways that Black female rappers transform notions of class, race, sexuality and gender as a form of lyrical activism. She cites rappers from the early 2000s and views the changing nature of this genre and the impact of emerging Black feminist lyricists and rappers who use their art as a form of activism (Pough, 2007).

Johnson’s notion of “Dirty South Feminism” is relevant to my analysis as it explores the origins of the trap music industry as it emerged out of Atlanta in the early 2000s, it’s connection to luxury strip clubs, agency of Black women dancing in and directly relates to Kaluza’s (2018) assertion that making it in this regionally specific creative space and being successful is the equivalent of the “African-American Dream,” This form of “Black power” can be located in *P-Valley* as well as on social media trending hashtags. Gates (2018) states in her book *“Double Negative”* that Black culture is not monolithic, it’s nuanced as some people still adhere to elements of respectability while others engage in a more raw representation of Black personhood examining the political intersections that influence their everyday lives. She talks about the agency embedded performing these notions of Black identity and community that afford diverse representations of Black people in America. Her work is at the core of my analysis as I aim to

highlight examples of Black women seen as or breaking out of respectable ideations of womanhood and motherhood located in the Black feminist stories told on *P-Valley* (2018).

Hall's choice to create the show on the STARZ network is interesting as it is both a streaming service and a premium cable channel, I feel the fact that it premieres outside of cable TV shows that she is able to delve into more intimate and violent subjects. Media scholars like Aymar Jean Christian (2019) have made criticisms about networked TV as he argues that alternative forms of media making and viewing on the internet enables viewers to make their own viewing choices and allows creators the freedom to storytell outside of traditional modes of content creation and distribution. Christian offered case studies of web series written, produced and distributed by Black women and Queer people of color to tell stories from their own communities, this empowered viewers to engage with the storyline while sharing their own personal relations to the text.

The fact that this show displays Black women outside of the normative workforce carving out success for themselves while resisting white supremacist patriarchal ideations of femininity for Black women was bound to be a source of commentary yet I don't know if anyone could predict the popularity of it on Black Twitter. Meredith Clark defines this digital enclave as "... a temporally linked group of connectors that share culture, language and interest in specific issues and talking about specific topics with a black frame of reference" (2018). I use Clark's comprehension of this Black digital group as well as Abidin's (2021) notion of "refracted publics" asserting #ThePynkPossee as a public that engages through tweeting contemplating, relating and debating the Black feminist centered storylines in *P-Valley*.

The audience discusses the storylines with fellow viewers as well as directly with the accounts of showrunner Katori Hall and the writers room. This expounds on the affective nature

of Black audiences (Brock, 2018) as the users engagements on the platform with the writers, producer and showrunner expose a dynamic relationship that I will further explain blurs the lines between the private and public (Abidin, 2021). The stories told on the show as well as the industrial choices made by Starz have enabled the dynamic dialogue between Hall, the writers and viewers.

Examining *P-Valley* episodes and the paratextual discourse surrounding the show allows me to shine a light on the impact of those behind-the-scenes and the Twitter community that has formed revealing the socio-political context of the storylines. There is an opportunity to highlight how streaming services afford Black feminist storytelling and recirculation on social media platforms that is political, powerful and relatable which I will demonstrate in the following chapters.

Chapter 1 will include a synopsis of the political implications of *The Pynk*, highlighting the importance of trap music and explaining the narratives behind the main characters of the show. Chapter 2 will discuss Season 2's "Jackson", an episode that grapples with reproductive health, Black womanhood, Black memories, nostalgia and legal theory. The final chapter explores the storyline of Keyshawn, a prominent character, her experience with colorism as a dark-skinned Black woman, the challenges that surrounded her interracial relationship as well as her encounters with domestic violence.

Chapter 1: Politics of the Pynk: Chucalissa, Black Nostalgia and Economic Development

"You ain't just bought yo'self a club, you done bought yo'self some history... oh, this place is full of haints and unsung melodies chile..." - Uncle Clifford played by Nicco Annan

Introduction: Welcome to The Pynk

The Pynk is the only strip club that's allowed to operate in the fictional rural Mississippi town of Chucalissa. It is frequented by athletes, politicians, neighborhood gangs, up and coming musicians and everyday citizens who wish to gaze upon the beautiful women of The Pynk known for performing acrobatic, sensual dances every night as long as they can keep the lights on. The club is owned by Uncle Clifford and was passed down to him by his Grandmother (Grandmuva as he calls her) Ernestine who ran the club during the height of dynamic change in the United States. Uncle Clifford serves as an economic and non-professional political go-between as a non-binary individual who works to ensure the success of the club as well as the progress and eventual "graduation" of his "girls." Clifford offers advice, infamous rules and refuge to his employees while constantly politicking with outsiders including the Black church members, police and interested buyers who are eager to close down the club for religious, economic and political reasons.

The Pynk is a stand in communal center or hush harbor (Kynard, 2010) for Black women as there is much more to *P-Valley* than watching strippers "get to the bag," Hall and the writers room have tackled taboo subjects that center the nuanced experiences of Black women in the Mississippi Delta. The writers room itself was intentionally chosen by Hall as a means to influence authentic and non-monolithic storylines centering Black women, the demographics of the writers is not publicly available but Hall talks in an interview with the Writers Guild Festival (2020) about the fact that she needed to hire people who like to "break the rules" who wish to tell stories from the Black female gaze. The directors/writers were primarily female but varied in age yet shared a lived experience of being a female in this world and that was important to Hall in terms of artistic choices and storytelling.

These choices would be on full display after a 2 year hiatus from the first season, *P-Valley* was back during the summer of 2022 and thankful fans cheered online yearning to loyally “go to #ThePynk” on Friday night at midnight:



No time is wasted in engaging in Black feminist storytelling on the show, the catchy theme song “Down in The Valley” sets the mood and is sung by Jucee Froot, a female southern rapper whose lyrics paint a picture of life for Black women strippers in the South:

*“These n*ggas grind hard but these bitches grind harder climbing up the pole just to get to the bottom, the crowd below stay ready for the show, the pimps the dough, don’t let it take your soul”*

She follows in the historical footsteps of Black musicians who sing about Black daily life and emphasizes the motive of the dancers which is to make money and leave dancing and the informal economy. When Froot utters “*don’t let it take your soul*” she could be referencing ego and the darkness of nightlife in “The Dirty South.”

The phrase Dirty South emerged in the 1990s as a term identified in Southern trap music culture which originated from a subgenre of hip-hop that was originating in American states like Virginia, The Carolinas, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida and Texas. It references the dark history of the region as it is forever tied to the horrors of slavery and has a distinct consciousness for African-Americans across the country (Johnson, 2015).

Memphis, Tennessee native Froot, opens the beginning of each episode as she exposes the reality of Black women's lives while integrating musical styles like trap that came out of this

region and continues to impact Black listeners (Kaluza, 2018). She raps while b-roll of Black children, Black men on horses and empty “trap” buildings contrast images of white crosses, a congregation singing symbolizing the power of the Black church and as day turns to night neon hues highlight strip clubs signs, liquor stores while dancers get ready “for the show” perfectly placing their hair and makeup, in the next scene the audience is invited into the club where money is thrown, smokes being blown and of course dancers perform tantalizing athletic feats on the pole.

Cultural Context of Chucalissa Music

The theme song director incorporated many different symbols that dominate Black life in the Bible belt while hinting at the popularity of strip clubs invoking Johnsons’ “Dirty South Feminism” which highlights the agency Black women are afforded through dancing and situating themselves at the center of southern rap lyrics and music history.

The essence of trap music is embedded in Black southern culture and is especially prominent in strip clubs. Trap music is a creative outlet and an alternative way to fulfill what Kaluza calls the “African-American Dream” emphasizing the notion that Black southern musicians imagine their artistic work as a ticket out of systemic oppression. Music is used throughout the series in order to set the mood of scenes as well as to highlight the storylines of Lil Murda and Uncle Clifford's love story which exposes the cultural and societal pressures surrounding LGBTQ+ relationships while coming up in the Black music industry (Kaluza, 2018).

Froot’s use of “Dirty South Feminism” (Johnson, 2015) continues as she centers Black women in her discourse and exposes the nuanced reality for these Black women dancers:

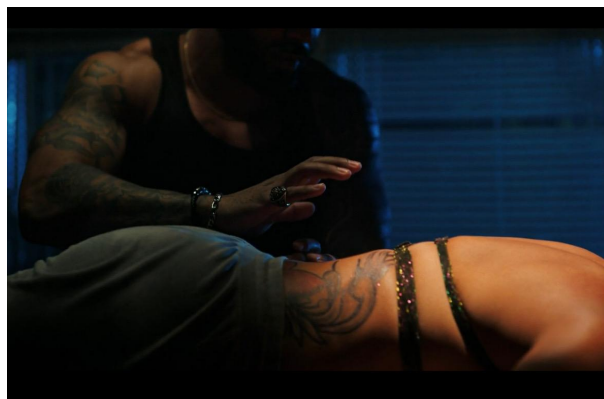
“Can’t fall now, but whatever goes up must fall; What you do, when the power out? Kids hungry, can’t do nothing but scream shout. We all choose to live but it’s different routes; Take the shit with shine, gotta make it count, when you live and die by the paper route, spend a dime just to make it out”

Here again she highlights the darkness of these dancers' lives with “we all choose to live but it’s different routes,” Froot emphasizes systematic disparities that are rooted in the disinvestment in these communities during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow Era that only African-American women can uniquely understand. The lyrics note the strength and agency of these women both physically and mentally as she discusses motherhood and those who are just trying to survive and “make it out.” She unknowingly references the political policies that have villainized Black women, especially Black mothers, who were blamed for the “destruction” of the Black family due to African-American family structures being uniquely matriarchal, thus in white male politicians' eyes they were essentially emasculating Black men (Moynihan Report, 1960). These women had to find ways to support their families, regardless of the victimization of Black men and the effects of misogynoir, many found jobs outside of the formal economy working in professions outside of the service industry and opting for employment that is deemed illegitimate in the eyes of everyday workers. Sex work is one of the oldest professions in the world and Uncle Clifford prohibits sexual activity at the club yet it cannot be denied that stripping can be a gateway to sex work as seen in the series (Harris, 2016).

The politics of *The Pynk* are complicated in that many of the women enjoy making money quickly, it’s a place of communal Black feminist and Black queer thought seen in the interactions between the dancers and Uncle Clifford. The women love to be admired and perform yet many of them are forced to have multiple streams of income (whether legal or illegal) or are

working to leave The Pynk and become so called, legit. Mercedes is a prime example of this as she has been the main headliner at the club for several years who planned to retire at the end of season 1. She is known for her powerful dancing, she is renowned and people come from all over “The Dirty Dirty” (Dirty South) on her night to see her work. She almost seemingly makes it out of the club scene at the end of the season until her mother, Pastor Woodbine guilts her into “donating” her stripper money to the church. Woodbine buys the building Mercedes wishes to turn into a studio opting to transform it into her church, free of the Black patriarchy she was battling at her previous church.

After a fist-fight with her Mother, Mercedes enters season 2 back at The Pynk. She’s having trouble performing as she did in the past after getting caught in the crossfire of a shooting that injured her shoulder. She is healed by a Black rootworker, highlighting the practices and tactics rooted in survival during chattel slavery still used today by African-Americans as a means of healing and distinct Black knowledge. The Pynk is a place of community, healing and at times darkness but that is the reality of Black womanhood in America.



Diamond (above, Tyler Lepley) performs rootwork to relieve Mercedes’ shoulder pain (STARZ, *P-Valley*)

Season 2 was full of heavy topics that highlight aspects of Black womanhood which uniquely impact them socially, politically, economically and physically. The show is placed in an

inherently Black feminist context as it discusses topics that Black women navigate in their daily lives relating directly to the Combahee River Collective's Statement these women engage in political resistance as a means of liberation simply by existing in a society that deems them invaluable because of their raced, gendered lives (1986). The shared reality and connection to politics is evident in the first season that aired one month after the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in June of 2020. The diverse writers room made a choice to create a world that reflected the current political reality and intentionally wove Breonna Taylor and George Floyd's stories as well as Covid-19 within the context and commentary of all of the characters.

Chapter 2: Black Motherhood and the Recirculation of Storylines

Highlighting Reproductive Healthcare

“All those pro-lifers only be pro-life until the baby is born” - Mercedes

Season 2 followed in this precedent as it aired during a politically charged moment in American history that was highlighted on Episode 7 “Jackson” which streamed exactly one month after the United States Supreme Court overturned Roe vs Wade, the precedent that made abortion legal in the country. This episode follows various storylines including Covid-19, Black spirituality, suicide, the AIDS epidemic, domestic violence but most prominently Black women’s choices revolving around reproductive health care, specifically: abortion rights. Mercedes and her estranged pregnant 14 year-old daughter Terricka drive to the capital city of Mississippi in order to receive reproductive care as flashbacks of Mercedes’ lack of choice or agency over her body haunt her like a so-called, haint– another word for a ghost. After entering the reproductive health center to loud protestors, she encourages Terricka to think about her choice practically and logically dispelling myths and learning about state mandates afterwards they stay at a motel where they encounter a single mother struggling to gather her screaming children by the pool which starts an interesting conversation between the Mother and daughter:

Mercedes: “Take a look in that crystal ball right thurr, ‘cause that’s about to be your future...

How am I gonna be a grandmother at 30?”

Terricka: “Would it really be that bad?”

Mercedes: “Ask me when you thirty.”

Terricka: “It could be nice, you’d be there for everything you missed with me,”

Mercedes: [Turns to Terricka] “... but is that what you really want?”

Terricka: “I ain’t sure, sure... I’m still thinkin’”

Mercedes: “Don’t you wanna go to prom? Don’t you wanna see the world?”

Terricka: “Probably. Where would I even go?”

Mercedes: “Anywhere you want! Paris, Dubai, China even”

Terricka: “You ever been to China?”

Mercedes: “No.”

Terricka: “No dude ever offered to flew you out?”

Mercedes: “No they did. But I turned it down. ‘Cause I would’ve been too far away from you.



Mercedes talks with Terrick after her first consultation at the clinic (“Jackson,” 2022)

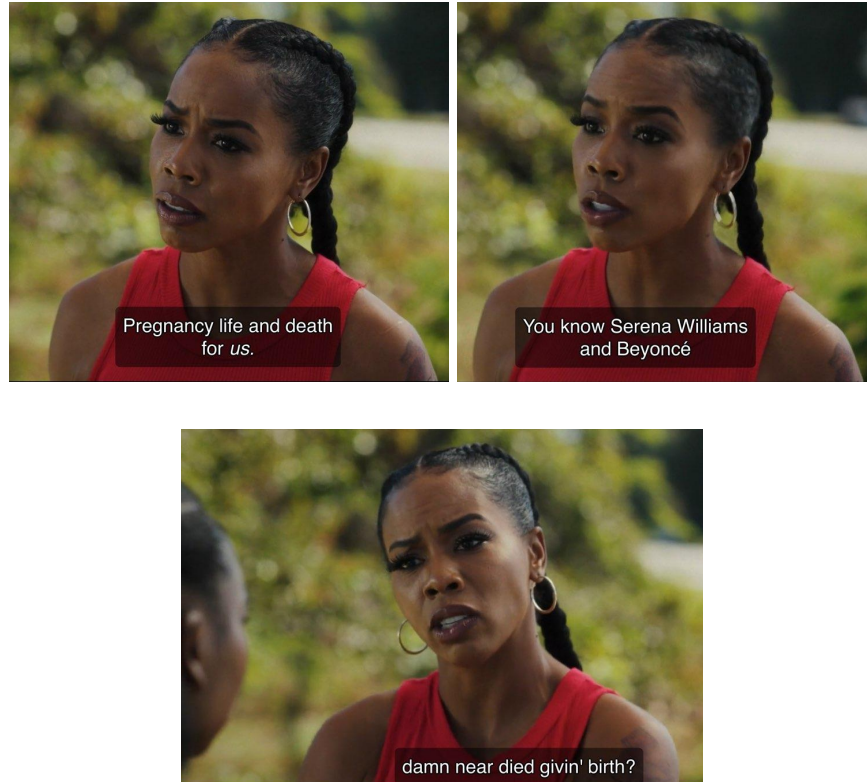
This scene is powerful as it shows the complexities of Black motherhood in the South from having to drive to a metropolitan area to receive quality health care, exposing viewers to abortion “facts” spewed by professionals who are mandated by the state government to tell girls and women about risks, to their genuine conversation spurred by viewing the everyday occurrences of modern motherhood. Mercedes’ and Terricka engage in a Black feminist rhetoric that is unique to the South where they both use African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a means to connect with one another, their distinct verbal choices like “thurr” or “wanna” or “flew out” are historically deemed as “incorrect English” yet Black rhetorical scholars like Barbara Christian argue that this language should be studied and upheld as a unique intervention in English vernacular, she emphasizes we should reject white elitist rhetoricians and academics notion to set the standard for what is considered theoretical or “correct” language (A Race for Theory, 1988).

The mother-daughter conversation highlights the essence of choice that has not always been afforded to Black mothers, beginning during American slavery Black women were used for their reproductive power as a means to populate and ensure the progress of the American economic system. Their families were torn apart, separated, terrorized— women were raped by slaveowners only to continue to be trapped in an on-going cycle of exploitation, abandonment and violence. Even then, Black women resisted the white patriarchy, incorporating spiritual practices and their own ways of aborting as a means to resist slavery and the burden of condemning another soul to the horrors of their reality in the 1800-1900s. From slavery to modern times Black women have shared knowledge of midwifery and abortion as a secret knowledge that has evolved into a rallying cry for those who advocate for Civil Rights and women's rights, this is exemplified in the commentary of prominent Black male leader's like W.E.B Du Bois who stated: “the future [African-American] woman.. must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion." He was joined by other Black historians like J. A. Rogers, who wrote, "I give the Negro woman credit if she endeavors to be something other than a mere breeding machine. Having children is by no means the sole reason for being” (Ross, 1992).

These moments along with the fight for freedom of privacy and women's reproductive rights that continues today are essential to understanding the context of this episode. Mercedes' was not offered a choice simply because her Mother considered herself seemingly saved by God, as a former sex worker herself she joined the Black Southern Baptist church and adhered to a conservative Christian ideology that condemned sexual activity, pleasure and women's agency. Mercedes' idea to allow Terricka to drive to either Jackson, for an abortion or Chucalissa, to start a family shows a distinct moment of agency that would not have been legally afforded or economically feasible to Black women 100 years ago.

Scholars who investigate the complex experiences of Black motherhood and reproductive health care have interviewed Black women who claim that social and political influences like the Black church, a predominantly white patriarchal system and an overall lack of quality health care for people of color across the country complicate the element of so-called choice. Abortion in the Black community is seen by some as “common and necessary” as the essence of choice is complicated further by structural racism and systemic oppression (Brown et al, 2022; Nash, 2021). This is highlighted in the scenes with Mercedes and Terricka, as Mercedes contemplates that she had no choice but to have her baby and essentially watch from afar while another family raised her child because of her age and her chosen career as a stripper. She offers Terricka intergenerational wisdom to “*get serious ‘bout this*” which is knowledge that is unique to Black women as they exclusively navigate a raced and gendered life in a white supremacist patriarchal society.

In the following screenshot from the episode she hints at the reality of Black reproductive care:



Mercedes' talks with Terricka on the way to Jackson, MS (STARZ, *P-Valley*)

Here she discusses the Black maternal mortality rate which points to medical research that confirms Black women have higher rates of pregnancy-associated morbidity and mortality in the U.S. Mercedes' included two of the most famous Black American women in popular culture: retired tennis superstar, Serena Williams and singer Beyonce Knowles this highlights that it doesn't matter how much money one has, Black women are at a higher risk when receiving health care due to institutional systemic oppression (Brown et al, 2022). The fact that this is all occurring in the state of Mississippi makes this all the more political and complex as the state is known for performing experiments on Black women from 1920-1980 where they involuntarily sterilized mostly poor Black women in the state, Civil Rights leader Fanny Lou Hamer experienced it and called it a "Mississippi Appendectomy." Like Mercedes, conversation with Terricka is tied to historical and political phenomena that many young Black girls, women have

to come to terms with when thinking about engaging in sexual activity, motherhood or reproductive healthcare.

Mercedes' wisdom allows her to reflect on her relationship with her Mother and she makes it a point to allow Terricka the agency to make a choice that will change her life forever. Patricia Hill-Collins discusses the notion of self-definition which emphasizes the journey from internalized oppression to a “free mind,” Black feminist scholarship discusses this as allowing Black women the space to name their own reality as a means of resistance to a white patriarchal system that deems them invaluable. Her discussions and eventually allowing Terricka to ultimately choose emphasize a Black feminist consciousness that is being developed in both characters' stories (2000).

In the following section I'll discuss the cultivation of a Black feminist refracted public on Twitter that engages in recirculation of *P-Valley*'s storyline. I will also discuss the blurring of the private and public with showrunner Katori Hall and The *P-Valley* writers room Twitter accounts that describe episodes, writing tactics while fostering community online.

Black Twitter and Black Feminist Refracted Publics

There is an interesting phenomenon occurring on Black Twitter regarding second-screening and a blurring of lines between showrunners, producers, writers and audience interaction. *P-Valley* and the discourse surrounding it are an extraordinary example of the changing nature of publics on social media and dynamic engagement happening between those who are usually deemed behind-the-scenes. Before getting into the exchange between audiences and writers it's important to define Black Twitter and its effects on society. As stated previously the term was first coined by media scholar Meredith Clark described the emergence of Black Twitter as first being mocked, then developed into a space where Black people could discuss,

debate issues within the community, essentially acting as gatekeepers for news that centers the Black experience (2018). These unpaid laborers were essentially working as journalists focusing on Black issues and Black media and we can see this as an element of agenda-setting that is an on-going reciprocal conversation in relation to the show seen in the hashtags: #PValley and #ThePynk.

Black Feminist Refracted Public

Viewers of *P-Valley* are a distinct corner of Black Twitter that loyally watches and tweets along during the airing of episodes. The essence of second-screening is at play here as the audience simultaneously engages in the Black feminist storyline evoked on the show while interacting with fellow viewers. Second-screening is defined by Williams et al as a Black Social TV phenomenon that occurs at first with the recirculation of memes after an episode of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. The authors along with Harris, Coleman's piece (2018) theorize that this occurs because Black viewers and users are among the highest to engage with television and social media emphasizing the use as a means of connection and a way to counter negative portrayals of Black women on TV (2014).

I'm arguing that this group of watchers could be defined as a Black feminist refracted public. Abidin (2021) describes refracted publics emerging in the 2010s as a contrast to networked publics (boyd, 2010) and emphasizes the changing nature of interactions between audiences on social media platforms. Abidin highlights different aspects of a refracted public emphasizing concepts like silosociality and the effects of alternating between the public and private that are at play within #ThePynkPossee. These two aspects of her theory are essential to understanding the Black feminist refracted public which acts as a silosocial public where the

content shared is communal and localized which is seen in the content circulated surrounding episodes of *P-Valley*.

The showrunner, producer and writers room alternate between being private and public as they engage with their audience like they themselves are part of Black Twitter while emphasizing the intention of storylines including socio-political context that is often debated or related to. The *P-Valley* viewers on Twitter are a Black feminist refracted public that exchanges personal stories, debates storylines, recirculates memes and engages in informal Black feminist theory.

In the following section I will include the discourse from viewers as well as the Katori Hall and the “P-Valley Writers Room” highlighting the intentional Black feminist storytelling that is essential to the Southern gothic dramas recirculation and overall comprehension seen in shows like *P-Valley*.

The cultural artifacts that emerged from this episode on Twitter are ones that can be analyzed using CTDA as a means of breaking down the loaded cultural meaning behind the tweets. Many viewers discussed this episode as it was a nuanced take on the abortion debate in America, airing mere weeks after the 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe V Wade*—essentially getting rid of a woman’s right to choose her reproductive future. The tweets from the users, writers and showrunner offer a nuanced view of the issue sharing legal theory and personal stories to connect and frame the show.

The showrunner is rarely a face of the show, Hall intentionally enters the conversation and directly addresses the complexities of abortion in the Black community. She emphasizes the “‘complicated circumstances’ ” revolving around the role of religion in Mercedes’s life that influenced her mother, Pastor Woodbine to force her to relinquish custody of her child to her

baby's father. Hall notes the intention of the writers room and symbolism that colored the episode in the following thread:





These tweets from the creator and the writers room display the investment in audience feedback as they prompt and discuss the socio-political nature of the storylines in a public forum. This is exciting to fandoms as they can hear directly from the creative minds that made the show, little do they know as they are relating to the content they are also engaged in informal marketing for production who take the commentary and implement it in advertising strategies and future storylines (Maragh, 2016). The writers connect their writing process to political issues that

plague the public as a means to steer conversation thus blurring those lines between fandoms and producers. This element of unpaid labor doesn't stop the community from signifyin' with one another as viewers consider their personal experiences with reproductive healthcare services while highlighting the complexities of making this choice as a Black woman, due to a domino effect that can influence social, religious standing and respectability especially enforced in the Black Bible belt (Steele, 2021). The following tweets show how users make witty remarks and debate Black feminine culture in reference to *P-Valley's* Black feminist storylines:

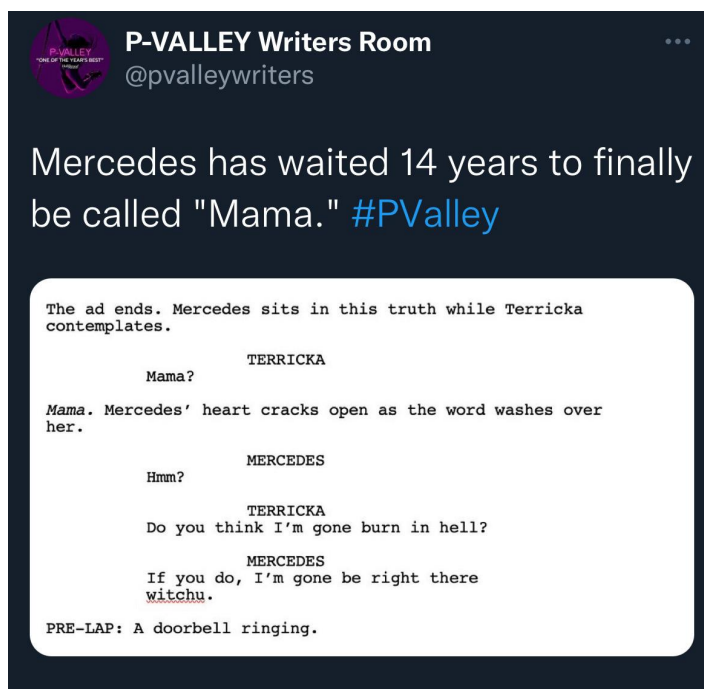


Comments like “... this shit was so real” and “... loved seeing Black folks havin real talk about it” are indicators that this episode was exceedingly popular and that the writers were able

to tap into the nuance of this conversation in the Black community. Other comments emphasized Hall's attention to the historical context that follows Black motherhood in this country. This is multifaceted conversation in the Black community as the church along with the pressure of respectability politics have weight in their decisions whether it is an unconscious or conscious. In the following tweets P-Valley twitter accounts and writers discuss the dynamic nature of the storylines framing the narrative of the episode further online:



These tweets exemplify the educational nature of Black feminist storytelling as the writers and viewers are able to further expound on Terrick and Mercedes' storyline. The use of signifyin' and becoming self-defined are employed by users and the writers as they take from their own experiences in order to confer with the characters moral dilemmas (Steele, 2021). The writers room including the following image exemplify the blurring of lines as they show a literal script from the show that is used to emphasize the changing nature of Mercedes' and Terricka relationship:



The above tweet and the following again blur the private from the public as the writers room exposes their processes and research in writing the episode and their means of framing the abortion narrative (Tewksbury, Schuefele, 2009):



In this instance the writers room pushes the viewers in the direction of other media that will influence their Black feminist consciousness and understanding of the episode exploring a film that directly discusses the issues in Black reproductive care in the state. The “Jackson” episode affords agency to Black women in the storyline and online as it reiterates diverse perspectives that are essential not only in this conversation but also in women’s legislation. The following tweets explore the Black feminist refracted public response to the episode where they share varied opinions on the topic:



These tweets show the different responses to the episode, as some viewers thank Katori Hall for covering a taboo subject, others begin to sexualize Terricka further with “she hotter than fish grease,” emphasizing Mercedes need to watch her and chastising her for singing “WAP” on the way to the clinic which is a rap song that celebrates Black female sexuality, reverting the male gaze and reclaiming one's body (hooks, 1992). They also mention the “accuracy” of the moment when Mercedes and her daughter enter the clinic highlighting the pressure and fear imparted by anti-abortion protestors but also shining a light on legally mandated “old wives tales” told to women and nurses as a means to discourage patients from making a choice.

Regardless of the socio-political noise Mercedes gave her daughter an agentic option where in that moment she was given the independence to make the decision about the trajectory of her life, all while enlightening her daughter on the realities of Black womanhood and adulthood. The viewers are engaged in an essence of Black feminist theory that allows them to reconsider controlling images, white male gaze and engage in political thought outside of the mainstream news media in reference to the episode.

Hall and the writers room's framing of events allows for them to gatekeep the content of the show much like a journalistic organization. Framing theory can be used in this context as it is used in mass communication and is related to agenda-setting theory in that it describes the effects the media has in presenting a topic to the public within a specific context. The packaging of specific events encourage or discourage interpretations from audiences who bring their own cultural frames or life experiences to the table when viewing media. This can affect audiences personally and this specific Black feminist refracted public is uniquely situated in that they can talk back to the gatekeepers and engage in further conversation (Schuefele and Tewksbury, 2007; Framing The News, 2009).

Conclusion

Hall's Twitter trending show *P-Valley* is at the forefront of the "Black feminist TV Renaissance" that is occurring on platforms like STARZ who are at the forefront of diversity initiatives in the media industry. This is seen in the discourse that is recirculated on social media platforms like Twitter by Black women which permits agency to marginalized audiences whose lives have been historically ignored. Through Hall's incorporation of Black feminist storylines, a diverse writing room, creation of behind-the-scenes accounts on social media as well as engagement with the audience a new form of Black Social TV and second-screening is emerging.

The socially mediated conversations revolving around episodes not only steers viewership but it also influences the fandom to relate personally to the content both educating and entertaining one another within a community that can be conceptualized as a Black feminist refracted public. The show has been renewed for third season which will no doubt garner attention in the entertainment and social media industries as the show highlights the political and social implications of Black representation weaving in situated knowledge that are rooted in chattel slavery survival tactics and the overall disinvestment in Black women in southern communities. Twitter users have discussed this emphasizing the informative nature of the show and reiterating its importance by hosting “re-re-watch parties” as they contemplate the impact of covering socio-political issues that directly address their everyday lives from a lens using Black feminist rhetorical tactics like signifyin’ while “behind the scenes” actors like the writers, producers are engaged in agenda-setting and framing the intention behind episodes.

**Chapter 3: Domestic Dissonance of Dark-Skinned Black Women:
Colorism, Domestic Violence and Audience/Producer Recirculation Through a
Black Feminist Consciousness**

“Is there anything better than finally being seen for the precious gem that you are after a lifetime of feeling invisible?” - Uncle Clifford

Introduction

This chapter will explore season 2 episode 5 which follows the story of Keyshawn known at The Pynk as “Miss Mississippi ” a beautiful Black woman whose sultry moves rivaled Mercedes popularity in season 1. This storyline is powerful in that it examines the intersectional realities of being a dark-skinned Black woman in modern America. Keyshawn is experiencing domestic violence and misogynoir (Bailey, 2021) that affects her everyday Black womanhood and motherhood. Her interracial relationship makes these issues all the more complex as she navigates feeling validated by the white gaze, then abused by her husband, empowered by dancing at The Pynk and eventually disempowered by her husband's abusive and manipulative actions. Although Loving v Virginia dismantled the institutional racism interracial couples experienced, the push to conform to this legislation is still ever-present in Keyshawn and her husband's relationship. Her journey to independence is fraught with setbacks that Hall and the writers room further contextualize via Twitter, incorporating legal theory while also allowing viewers to share their own personal experiences regarding the narrative.

Episode synopsis

Keyshawn is introduced at the beginning of the show disrupting a “Pynk” family meeting clutching her newborn biracial baby while sporting a new bruise on her face hinting at the domestic violence she’s experiencing with her white husband Derrick. The first season highlights

Keyshawn's dream of being discovered, thus making it out of the strip club. The writers highlight the jealousy, violence imparted on her from fellow dancers as well as her husband who resents her because she's the only one bringing income into the home. Hall places Keyshawn and Derrick's story in an interesting context that is both stereotypical and counter-hegemonic in that the characters reiterate "controlling images" as well as depicting the lives of Black Mississippi delta women working outside of the formal economy to sustain financial stability and empowerment (Harris, 2018). Keyshawn could be viewed in terms of Collins idea of "controlling images" (2000) in that she is depicted as a strong Black woman who is the matriarch of her family yet her husband Derrick – a white man is relegated to being a "Sambo" which is a trope that has plagued the characterization of Black men as lazy and financially dependent. These stereotypes that were rooted in slavery and then proliferated in the media were then broadcasted by politicians like Patrick Moynihan who argued that Black women, much like Keyshawn were essentially emasculating their male partners leading to broken homes in the Black community thus thrusting her family into the welfare state (1965).

P-Valley uses this relationship as a means to push back and also highlight the reality of Black motherhood, domestic violence, colorism and internalized misogyny and racism. Although these terms may not be understood at an everyday level to all Americans, they color the lives of Black women and girls on a daily basis as they navigate their lives that are inherently political as our mere existence is resistance to white supremacy and the patriarchy (Combahee River Collective, 1986).

The end of the first season marked a major turning point when an altercation between Derrick, Keyshawn's husband and Diamond, the bouncer at The Pynk who is a war veteran and also Keyshawn's mutual work crush. As the bouncer he protects the ladies but also helps heal

their wounds with spiritual remedies and in that way he and Keyshawn are very familiar with one another due to her bruises from her husband. Surprisingly Keyshawn defends Derrick during the fight by pointing a gun at Diamond mid-fight with Derrick in the bathroom after being called a racial slur. Keyshawn is breaking Uncle Clifford's rule and she is dismissed from The Pynk for her actions.

This scene was emotional and briefly highlights their Daddy' Drama at Home– especially if he white " highlighting the fact that The Pynk is a safe space for women to be free of the intersectional oppression that is present in their everyday lives.

The audience isn't privy to the entirety of Keyshawn's story until the second season in the fifth episode where she and Derrick's backstory is explained as Hall and the writers room trace her high school experience to present day post-Covid touring with Lil M psychological effects of being a Black man who has experienced combat. In the following season this sense of PTSD is further explored as the writers recognize the death of George Floyd exposing how the threat of police violence and precarity of death is always in the back of one's mind as a Black citizen.

Overall, this altercation violated Uncle Clifford's rule #45.22 for the dancers leading to Keyshawns dismissal:



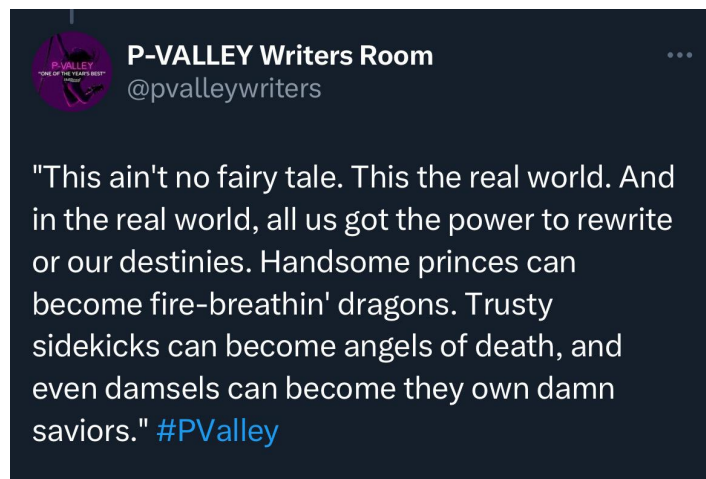
In this scene he reiterates to “Leave Yuh 'BabyDaddy Drama at home, especially if he’s white.” The episode itself correlates with modern American social contracts, especially those that have been influenced by legislation and Black feminism yet still lacks cohesion in the South. These concepts expose the nuances of existing as a dark-skinned Black woman in a seemingly misogynoiristic society that historically categorizes them as a racialized and gendered beings who are surveilled by a white supremacist, patriarchal majority (Bailey, 2021).

Motherhood has a significant role in Keyshawn’s storyline as the episode exposes the absence of her biological mother with no explanation, the strained relationship between herself and her biracial step-mother, Chanisse and how these moments influenced her decisions in relationships and child-bearing. The commentary that surrounds this episode of *P-Valley* was predominantly supportive of Keyshawn’s yearning for financial independence and freedom from an increasingly violent situation; Hall, the writers room and director utilize this storyline as a way to explore the joys and lows of being a dark-skinned Black girl and woman in America.

White Knights Season 2, Episode 5:

This fifth episode of the second season followed several others that were full of instances of Black feminist storytelling and everyday life. Showrunner Hall, the writers room and director

of this episode Pamela Romanowsky focused on Mississippi's dismissal from The Pynk, going on tour with local Chucalissa rapper and friend Lil Murda after their music video emerged as a viral hit during the pandemic and the effects of intimate partner violence. The episode's name "White Knights" is ironic and plays on a notion of fairytale and delusions experienced by Keyshawn. This is seen and hinted at various times by the narrator, Uncle Clifford as shown in the following quote from the writer's room:



The show begins with a trigger warning note that warns the audience of explicit content including scenes involving "trauma, sexual violence and domestic violence" for those who may be triggered by the violent relationship depicted in storyline between Keyshawn and her husband Derrick along with their two small children. Throughout her narrative Keyshawn is represented as continually falling into controlling relationships with her husband and manager, yet she exudes a feeling of freedom and makes it seemingly out the mud-- as Lil Murda would put it in season 2 when she successfully convinces Derrick to allow her to embrace tour life.

The "Dirty Dozen" tour she joins was a chance for Lil Murda to perform in major cities in the Dirty South and served as a source empowerment, employment and liberation for Keyshawn because for the first time she was able to develop an element of "self-definition" she's

not afforded at home with Derrick (Collins, 2000). Finally she's able to understand and determine her existence outside of the white gaze that is embedded in American society and her husband as she's showered with praise and endorsement deals on tour all linked to her dancing and beauty. Sadly, this moment of freedom is thwarted when she witnesses aggression from their security who triggers her fear of abuse and is subject to sexual harassment from her manager thus ending the experience— sending her back to a life of live streaming her dances at home only with the permission of Derrick.

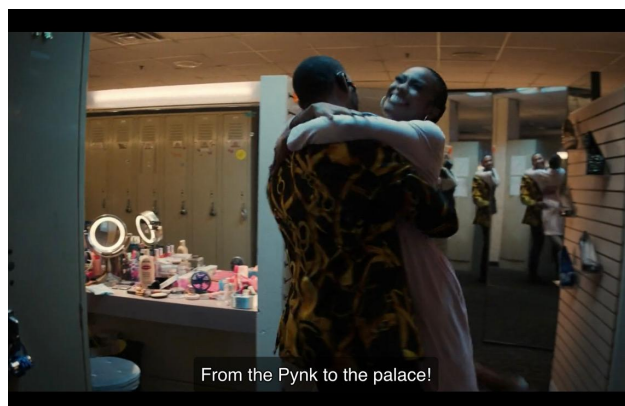
It's important to note that before her notion of self-definition is interrupted she could be conceptualized as the “Strong Black woman” providing for her family which speaks to Uncle Clifford's narration of her life where he foreshadows more difficulties a Clifford asserts “She's a legend... or at least she could be. But legends ain't born. They built. Forged by time and pressure like diamonds. "Fore we know where she going, we gotta know where she came from.” This ushers in a flashback that explores her evolution from the streets of Chucalissa to the pole at The Pynk, life on the road on the “Dirty Dozen” tour and back to her so-called home with her family.

Uncle Clifford opens the episode in a way that mimics fairytale storytelling with a twist as he sings: “We're about to enter a land far, far away from P*ssy Vall-ay... ay, ay, ay ayyyyy”

The city-scape is warped and the audience is taken to a club where prominent stripper Joseline Hernandez, a Black female reality star known as the “Puerto Rican Princess” is hosting a “Legends Ball” in Atlanta, the center of trap music and Black strip club culture:



She began her career as an exotic dancer and this is emphasized by Uncle Clifford who narrates the episode characterizing her as a “fairy-god muva” who is bound to bless Keyshawn adding to the fairytale metaphor revisited by the writers developing Keyshawn’s storyline. Clifford describes “Miss Mississippi” as “one of the most bangin’ backwood beauties of all... Keyshawn Harris.” Although he says this she hasn’t always believed she was a “bangin’ backwood beauty” and during this episode the audience is taken on a journey of to her past and present, presenting her approach to self-definition (Collins, 2000) the impact of respectability politics and how she’s navigated misogynoir in her life and romantic choices (Bailey, 2021). After performing at the ball she is informed by her manager that she’s made a deal for a wig line and enthusiastically hugs him exclaiming:



“My bank account gonna be litty in a bitty” at this moment she experiences financial independence that will then be used to control her, mirroring her abusive relationship with her husband. Her continual use of AAVE (Christian, 1987) highlights the way writers and Hall aim to authentically represent Black women’s rhetorical practices in the Mississippi Delta. Also, Keyshawn’s economic freedom relates directly to Johnson’s concept of “Dirty South Feminism” that affords Black Southern women dancers agency that they aren’t able to take advantage of in

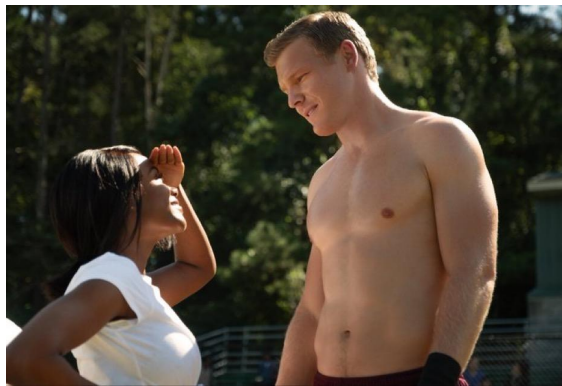
the formal economy as they reframe respectability and representations rooted in the sordid history of the American South (Harris, 2018; 2021).

The audience is then taken back in time to her high school years to a scene that traces the origins of her love for performing and dancing when she tries out for the local high school cheerleading squad. Keyshawn is new to the district and moved to Chucalissa when her father married her biracial step-mother Chanisse— gaining two step-sisters in the process. This scene is formative for she and Derrick’s relationship as she is taunted by fellow Black students for her dark-skin as well as an assumed promiscuity rooted in an the “jezebel” controlling image that insinuates Black women are objects of sexual desire and reproduction (Hartman, 2016). The following scene shows the levels of misogynoir Keyshawn was subjected to as they make fun of her skin tone:



Keyshawn meets Derrick at cheer tryouts in high school ("White Knights," 2022)

She ignores them only for Derrick– a base on the cheerleading squad beats the bullies nearly unconscious in her honor or maybe because they called him “white boy.” This is clearly a red flag and reflects a naive understanding of healthy relationships that will color their relationship. Keyshawn seems smitten that her future husband valued her enough to hurt others for her, she doesn’t make the squad yet still keeps a close relationship with him– she considers him as one of the only people to see her for who she is in school.



The metaphor of the fairytale is reintroduced when Keyshawn is at home with her step-mother and her two step-sisters and she is relegated to straightening their hair to prepare them for a pageant. She unknowingly burns the ponytail of LaRonica leading Chanisse to scream in horror as she states that her daughters hair is “the one thing that makes her beautiful” reflecting unconscious ideals surrounding colorism and internalized racism that values white beauty standards including: long straight hair, lighter-skin and softness to which Keyshawn is excluded from because of her dark-skin and shorter hair (hooks, 1992). Her step-mother further diminishes her self-esteem, essentially categorizing her as the Black Mammy described as an asexual servant with no prospects of progressing (Collins, 2000) as she hints to Keyshawn that she should go to cosmetology school instead of aspiring to go to a 4-year university like her step-sisters, she again reinforces a notion of misogynoir that is projected by those from outside

and inside the community (Bailey, 2021) as she intimates that Keyshawn's life trajectory cannot mimic her light-skinned step-sisters.

The turning point of this episode is during the winter formal known as the "Mistletoe Christmas Dance" which is discussed at school lunch as "The Cracker-Toe" and the "N*ggah-Toe." Keyshawn's step-sister explains that the white children's parents throw a separate ball "on somebody's plantation" which brings light to the fact that the school district hasn't socially accepted *Brown v Board of Education* leading to segregated activities. Uncle Clifford further exposed the everyday-ness of this racist social contract when he talks about the layered context of a scene in which Keyshawn walks home in the rain and Derrick offers her a ride in the following quote: "The color line was the inheritance of every 'chile in this lil' Mississippi town, forever, like a tattoo; but humans love what's forbidden 'chile, they wanna taste it... conquer it" he says.

This quote discusses the political and social nature of their relationship exposing aspects of control and community surveillance that will emerge throughout their relationship. After picking her up, Derrick takes her to a diner where he tells her of his future plans: to go to Ole Miss on a cheerleading scholarship along with disclosing the physical abuse he endures from his father. She empathizes with him while metaphors of him being Prince Charming continue to pepper their conversation, all is well until Keyshawn interrupts his fantastical plans of taking her out in Jackson on a river-boat in Jackson when she asks "... that all sounds great *but would you take me home?*"

He responds to her by promptly changing the subject and their mutual silence speaks volumes about the tension still present in Southern towns like Chucalissa where race relations seem stuck in the 1960s.

The Supreme Court struck down anti-miscegenation in 1967 that prohibited marriage between people of different races and it is assumed that the entire country embraced this law as a fact. Yet this relationship highlights the push and pull still noticeably tied to a gendered, racist social contract considering only 12% of Black women marry outside of their race (Cheers, 2018). This season tells the story of Black women surviving in the rural South during a historic year where the lives of Black people all across the globe were highlighted due to the Covid-19 pandemic and police brutality. In December 2022, Congress passed bills protecting same-sex and interracial marriages with the “Respect for Marriage Act” providing protection for same-sex and interracial couples privacy during a tumultuous legal season that left many in fear to live their daily lives. Decisions like this along with a high approval rating of interracial marriage (94%) leads one to believe the public's attitudes toward these partnerships are cut and dry (Gallup, 2023). Hall does a fantastic job describing the dynamic lives Black women live especially if they marry outside of their race which leads to nuanced understandings of interracial relationships, especially in the South where misogynoir influences Black women's daily lives (Cheers, 2018; Bailey, 2021).

Uncle Clifford's quote sets the next scene as Keyshawn watches her step-sisters take photos for the Black Mistletoe dance, he gives voice to Keyshawn's inner monologue as she contemplates her beauty in comparison to her biracial step-sisters: “Keyshawn secretly longed to be a baller's trophy like her sisters but nobody ever asked this chocolate girl to the grand ball; it wasn't that she wasn't a bad b*tch. She just ain't know it.”

As she's enviously snapping photos the doorbell rings and O.T. Genasis' “I'm In Love With the Coco” ironically plays in the background as Derrick strolls into her home in a

three-piece suit, holding expensive shoes, a dress and an invite to the all-white formal hosted by his mother.



Derrick surprises Keyshawn and takes her to the “white” winter dance. (“White Knights” 2022)

“Cracker-Toe” is one of the first moments that the audience is embedded in the white community in Chucalissa where the racist social contract still rings true which is evident during the dance as people stare in awe and horror of Keyshawn and Derrick, leading to his own mother confronting him about his choice in date.



Derrick’s mother stares at the couple disapprovingly (P-Valley, Starz 2022)

The scene shows how Keyshawn felt as if she was in the shadow of her step-sisters yearning for true acceptance, love and visibility that she hasn’t experienced at home. Hall explores notions of internalized racism, colorism and controlling images in the way it depicts

Keyshawn and her family (Collins, 2000, Gates 2018). Misogynistic tropes are still projected onto Black women in our society yet through *P-Valley's* casting of a dark-skinned actress and diversity in life experience in the writers room the text offers a nuanced take on Black womanhood. Derrick is depicted as Keyshawn's knight in shining armor who rescues her from harassment and sweeps her off of her feet like a love-bombing Prince Charming.

As he escorts her onto the dancefloor the comparisons to the segregated dances is evident in a split screen– while the white students dance underneath a glittering plantation chandelier, the students of color party under a disco ball in a gymnasium. This scene is interesting because they show the dichotomy of both parties: one is serving lobster and steak while the other has sandwiches; “Cracker Toe” serves champagne and the Black students drink out of red solo cups full of punch; Even the dancing is racialized as the white students engage in formal dancing while the students of color twerk and grind to music. Derrick's mother sees them almost kiss on the dancefloor leading to them leaving the dance and Uncle Clifford reiterates the forbidden nature of their love for one another as they enter Derrick's car, crossing more than the color-line: “They'd both been following rules all of their lives; Keyshawn the rule that a little chocolate girl wasn't deserving, Derrick the rule that a little chocolate girls wasn't deserving... but that night rules was broken, lines crossed, promises made, she reached for him in the blue of the moon and hungry for the softness fresh love can give– or lust? Same thang.”

This scene is so pivotal because Keyshawn conceived their first child thus thwarting Derrick's scholarship and trapping Keyshawn in a cycle of control, manipulation and violence for years. Nonetheless, she goes home happy that she has been seen and validated for the first time. In the next scene she encounters her step-mother while sneaking inside past curfew and

they engage in a rare 1-on-1 conversation that doesn't end in fighting:

Chanisse (Step-mother): Everything fit you like it's custom

Keyshawn: I know

Chanisse: But you ain't get to pick..

Keyshawn: Be careful of becoming a man's barbie doll; he'll always find another one to buy"

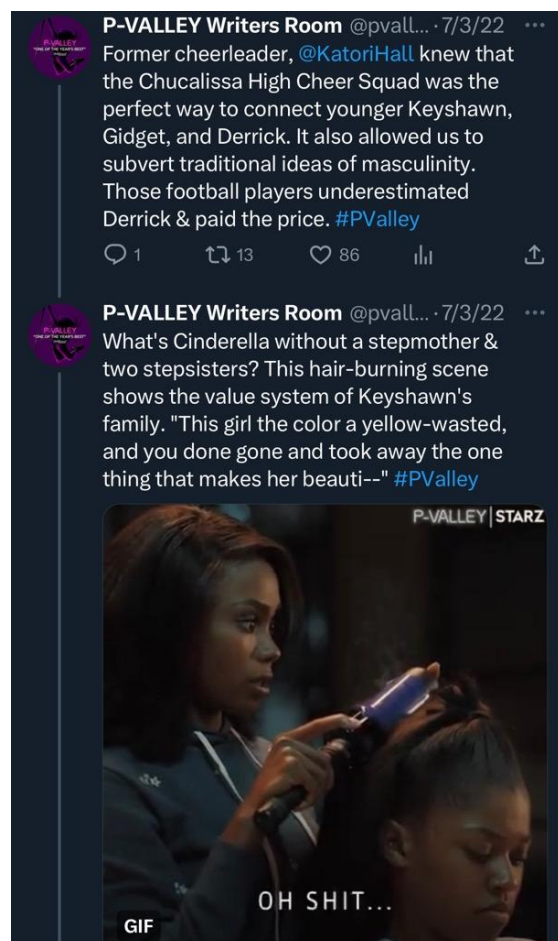
In this scene she calls on existing tropes like the jezebel, rooted in chattel slavery that categorized Black women as promiscuous, temptresses she foreshadows the future of Derrick and Keyshawn's violent relationship as he will continue to put her on a pedestal while attempting to dim her light at the same time (Collins, 2000) The following scene depicts the first time he hits her shown when Derrick yells frustratedly in reference to their low-income housing and his struggle to keep a job: "I knew I shouldn't have dipped my d*ck in the likes of you and now I'm f*cking stuck in this situation, taking care of some backwoods b*tch."

Keyshawn responds arguing she is the only one working, referencing the idea of the Black female as the matriarch of the family (Collins, 2000; Moynihan, 1967). He strikes her while pregnant and is instantly apologetic, this happens countless times with the last instance occurring in a present day scene where she comes home from the tour, escaping almost being sexually assaulted by her manager. She recognizes bruises on her son's back and a pediatric doctor insinuates he may have been abused which infuriates her to the point where her coworker gives her a gun to fight back. Her husband denies the abuse, then admits he had been frustrated with their son which soon turns into a moment where he gaslit her about leaving the children at home. In a moment of rage and violence he does the unthinkable, damaging what she sees as her moneymaker– he burns her face with an iron. This is the last straw and in following episodes she creates a plan in present times with the help of her former Pynk co-worker, Autumn "LaKeisha"

Savage to leave him. She oscillates in her guilt, sadness, anger and love for him which relates to the historical research from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence that 40% of Black women have experienced intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner sexual violence and/or an intimate partner stalking in their lifetimes. This is a systemic issue that is tied to statistics that reflect the nuanced experiences of Black women whose everyday lives are connected to deep rooted racism and sexism policed by the federal government and in US social contracts. Historically Black women are more likely to encounter instances of violence, sexual violence and stalking than any other group due to elements of hypersexuality and racism that intersect their everyday lives (Coburn Place, 2023).

Keyshawn's brush with death has been a buildup including episodes from both seasons where Derrick reveals his anger stems from him getting cut-off financially from his family due to his relationship with Keyshawn. Her blackness is continually framed as an obstacle for her whether in the home, in her relationships and at work— the essence of misogynoir followed her without anyone to help guide her to understanding her worth (Bailey, 2021).

This episode created a domino effect that enabled deep conversations online as viewers began discussing their own experiences with misogynoir, domestic violence, and colorism linking the storyline and commentary to historical displays of respectability politics as ideations of beauty were tied to elements of passing such as the "Paper Bag Test" that describes being able to code switch in Black and white American society. Hall's engagement with socio-political concepts as well as inquiring about colorism expose the educational intentions of this show as a means to steer conversation and clarify storylines, this is also seen on the @PValleyWriters account that goes further to explain the dialogue of the episode:





These tweets expose the writer's intentions to provide context for certain directorial moves like using cheerleading to unpack Keyshawn's young adulthood as well as providing statistics regarding domestic violence that are informative to the audience. The viewer's connection to the narrative highlights Keyshawn's complicated relationship with herself and her husband. She is never able to escape from Derrick as he removes the battery from her car when she attempts to flee, later she finds out her step-mother tells him where she is and when she goes home she is met by Child Protective Services (CPS) curbing her entire escape plan and highlighting the systemic issues within institutions that presume Black women are unfit mothers. Keyshawn's fairytale is consistently impacted due to her race and sex leading to her unraveling in front of CPS— she loses it, hitting Derrick as he smiles knowing exactly what he has set her up

for. She ends up in jail due to the altercation keeping her in a cycle of control and leaving her with no agency over her life– her means of self-definition is again thwarted (Collins, 2000) because of her abusive home life. These tweets not only elucidate on the storyline but also make a distinct move to reiterate resources for those triggered by the storyline or going through something similar– in this way they nurture the hush harbor (Kynard, 2010) and bridge a gap with their audience that I will examine further in the following section.

In the next section I will explore the discourse from the showrunner, the writers room and the Black feminist refracted public that religiously tweets about #PValley in a critical technocultural discourse analysis that further expounds on audience reception of Keyshawn’s domestic violence and colorism storyline.

CTDA: PValley Writers Room & Katori Hall on Keyshawn

Using the #PValley and the search term “Keyshawn” or “Mississippi” “#PValley domestic violence or colorism I was able to pinpoint Twitter conversations between the writers room and showrunner Katori Hall who used their accounts to explain their writing tactics and the socio-political context behind the storylines. Through this critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock, 2016) I aim to expose the nuanced conversations that reinforce Black feminist storytelling, Black feminist media concepts exploring instances of signifyin’ and resistance to stereotypical representations of Black women proliferated in the media by exposing the conversational relationship between the Black feminist refracted public (Abidin, 2021), the showrunner and the writers room. This episode explores colorism in the Black community, domestic violence and elements of respectability politics while navigating various controlling images (Collins, 2000) that influence Keyshawn’s self-esteem as a young Black woman.

Hall herself tweeted about the episode emphasizing the fact that she wanted to “show colorism’s long reach” as she hoped to highlight how Keyshawn’s biracial, lighter-skinned step-sisters “struggle with the beauty standards imposed by colorism #PValley.” She goes on in the thread to highlight the proliferation of these microaggressions that occur inside and outside of the community. She tweeted: “From media images to comments made by family, Keyshawn has heard the words “you’re pretty for a dark skin girl” more than she can count” the comments reveals the sometimes hidden oppression Keyshawn uniquely experiences and the power of this Black feminist storytelling is further talked about in an ongoing conversation in the following tweets:



These tweets expose the internalized misogynoir and or the dislike and hatred against Black women rooted at the intersection of racism and sexism. A blatant example of this is when her step-mother, Chanisse imposes historical tropes that plague our white supremacist patriarchal society onto her daughters and Keyshawn using terms like “yellow-wasted” which is an internalized racist idea that Black women who are lighter-skinned are undesirable if they exhibit traits that coincide with Black features. Her comments are deeply tied to respectability politics that were used as a means to conform and survive in a white society especially during the Jim Crow era in the Southern United States (Gates, 2018). The fact that the Black community can perpetuate these tropes onto Black women proves the unconscious nature of this internalized racism. Chanisse is an example of unconsciously projecting white ideations of beauty onto her daughters. The commentary provided from Hall and the writers counter this in their narrative in the same context as what Black feminist writer and activist bell hooks whose concept of “the oppositional gaze” refers to how Black female spectator resisting “stereotypical tropes of Blackness” in the media encouraging them to actively engage in viewing that challenges dominant representations of Black women rooted in white supremacist ideations of womanhood that deem them invisible or objects of pleasure. Hooks emphasizes the spectators' creation of “alternative texts” that are also integral to the political nature of engaging in Black feminist storytelling in the media (hooks, 1992). The idea that the writers and audience members are engaging in an oppositional gaze is not only a site of political education and creative work but also enabled the creation of new texts like *P-Valley* that shines a light on a changing industry which until 2016 was predominantly White owned as very few Black women had power behind the scenes to create, produce or distribute Black female centered content on television thus exemplifying what I consider a “Black Feminist TV Renaissance” (Cheers, 2018).

Hall's shift from playwriting to showrunning and writing *PValley* on STARZ is inspiring in and of itself as she goes on to further engage the audience after the episode she reveals her connection to the show which further integrates the recirculation of Black feminist storytelling and its political implications all while nurturing an online community. For example in the following screenshots Hall completes a 9 tweet thread where she explains her time as a first responder to sexual assault and domestic abuse cases in New York City hospitals:



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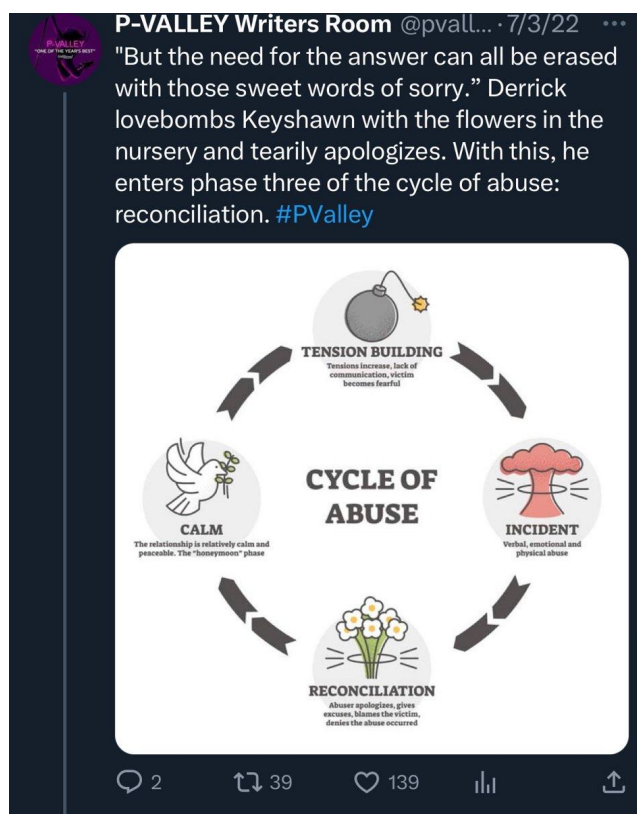
She discusses and preemptively counters any ignorant comments that could be projected by a viewer unfamiliar with the reality of escaping this dangerous situation as a Black woman. Questions she encountered while working as a first responder like: “Why is she so stupid?” “Why don’t you just leave?” “Just call the police!” and “If a man hits my children, I’m going to leave” were tweeted along with facts that note the challenge connected to being a woman trapped in a domestically violent situation. It’s not Black and White or is it both? Hall’s tweets are used to highlight the intricacies and difficulties in attempting to leave a partner when stuck in the cycle of gaslighting, physical abuse. The conversation she starts with viewers on Twitter allows her to dispel any lack of knowledge revolving around domestic violence stories and it’s talked about further in the following section where I conceptualize how the Black feminist refracted public engages in indirect and at some points direct conversation with Hall, the writers and fellow viewers on Twitter recirculating storylines and sharing their experiences.

CTDA - Black Feminist Refracted Public: Domestic Violence

The public known on twitter as The #PynkPossee is what I conceptualize in Chapter 2 as a Black feminist refracted public that I define as a segment of Black Twitter that engages in recirculation, meme sharing and spreading of a Black feminist consciousness that is triggered by the storylines depicted on *P-Valley* (Abidin, 2021; Clark, 2018). Interestingly this public emulates the audience reception of domestic violence storylines seen in TV studies examining shows like *Cagney and Lacey (1981-1988)* (Ford, 2017) and recently shows like *Big Little Lies (2017-2019, HBO)* evoked audience responses that were feminist in nature inspired by the context provided in the programs and the realistic representations of women depicted in the storylines.

Throughout the course of the show I conceive of the Black feminist refracted public as a community that engages in knowledge sharing that is specific to the Black feminist consciousness evoked from Keyshawn's storyline exploring her experience with colorism and domestic violence. Viewers share their thoughts on the episodes narrative as well as their own personal experiences on their Twitter feeds, sometimes replying in conversation with the writers room and Hall herself as they use the hashtag #ThePynk #PValley exemplifies what Kynard describes as a “digital hush harbor” or an online safe space for expression where Black women can counter racism and sexism (2010).

The following tweets show how the #PynkPossee community is built through questioning, agreeing and bravely discussing their own stories of domestic violence seen in replies to a thread put out by the writers explaining the cycles of abuse:



Replies to the thread along with searching” #PValley domestic violence” allowed me to see the response the #PynkPossee had regarding the storyline:



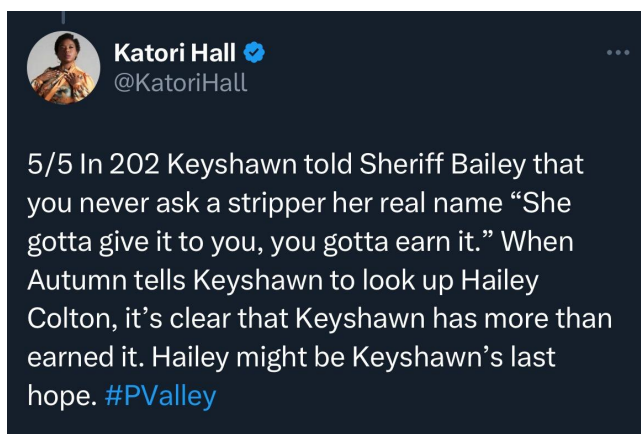


These tweets reiterate statistics from non-profit organization, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence that reflect the nuanced ways Black women experience this abuse (Coburn Place, 2023). Users agree with the depiction of the violence in the show as they signify (Steele, 2021) back to Hall, the writers room and other viewers– they place themselves in the same narrative of Keyshawn. One user wrote about her experience with intimate partner violence claiming relating to Keyshawn's plans to leave Derrick when she wrote: "it took me 2 [years] for me I got to strategizing on dat ass."

This user notes the context of the final episode of season 2 I briefly discuss as Autumn, who is constantly on the run from her abuser, recognizes Keyshawn's situation is becoming

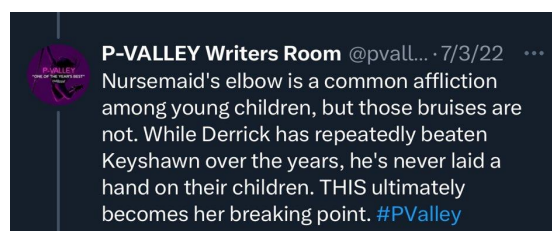
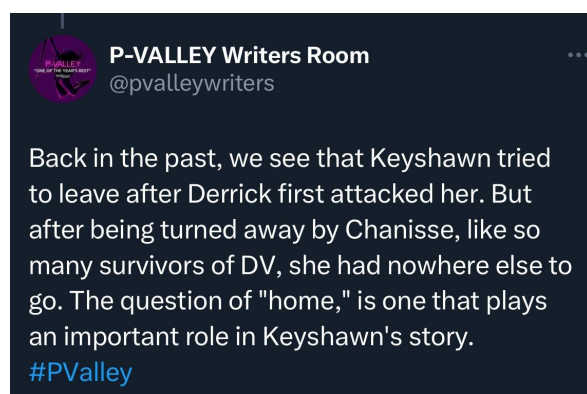
increasingly more violent. They confide in one another and Autumn personally creates a plan for Keyshawn to leave the country, change her name and take her kids away from Derrick, who was found to be abusing the children— Keyshawn’s breaking point. Hall connects this to the political nature of this storyline when she tweets: “DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FACT: It takes a victim on average 7 times to leave an abusive partner And when they do it increases the likelihood that they will be killed by their partner.” The writers room reiterates this point when they posted an article from *Time Magazine* titled “Domestic Violence and Covid-19: The Pandemic Within the Pandemic” emphasizing the “skyrocketing” DV numbers during the pandemic that affected women all over the world who were now seemingly locked down with their abusers. The following tweets reveal the two women in the same diner that Keyshawn and Derrick have their first date in adding to the creative irony of the writers and producer:





This photo highlights the power of coming together as women and sharing one's story as Hall breaks down stylistic elements of the scene when she notes the women's clothing choices, specifically the women wearing the color purple. She argues the color choice was chosen specifically as a means of showing their shared trauma.

The following tweets exemplify how the writers room connected the dots between the internalized racism Keyshawn experienced from her step-mother as well as her domestic violence storyline essentially framing the ongoing narratives of the episode (Tewksbury, Schuefele, 2009):





This discourse outlines how domestic violence cases increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and the writers reiterate Keyshawn’s turning point– when Derrick begins abusing their children. They also take time to address the Black feminist refracted public as they highlight when someone is going through DV there are informal resources available: friends, those who have been through it too that can help them– we can see this in the tweets above that reflect Keyshawn and Autumn’s relationship. There is an obvious relational element to this that the writers and Hall aim to emphasize to their viewers, in the following section I’ll look at how the audience shares their own personal experiences, question and further relate to the narratives discussed on *P-Valley* on Twitter.

CTDA: Black Feminist Refracted Public: Colorism

Another storyline debated online by this Black feminist refracted public were the instances of colorism, respectability politics and internalized misogyny that Keyshawn experienced throughout her life:





These tweets point directly to how Black women engage with *P-Valley* and mirror ways that this public follows in the footsteps of other Black Twitter communities that have emerged from Black women centered programming including: *Scandal* (ABC), *How to Get Away With Murder* (ABC) and *Insecure* (HBO). The centering of Black women's experiences in their Twitter discourse along with a relational element is evident in Black audience studies and imagined further in *P-Valley* (Cheers, 2018). The Black feminist refracted public uses their personal experience to relate and educate one another and although this was an episode that was uncomfortable for those who have experienced colorism or domestic violence users were able to come from a position of "self-definition" where they were able to share thus recognizing the intersectional oppression Keyshawn encounters recounting their own situations (Collins, 2000).

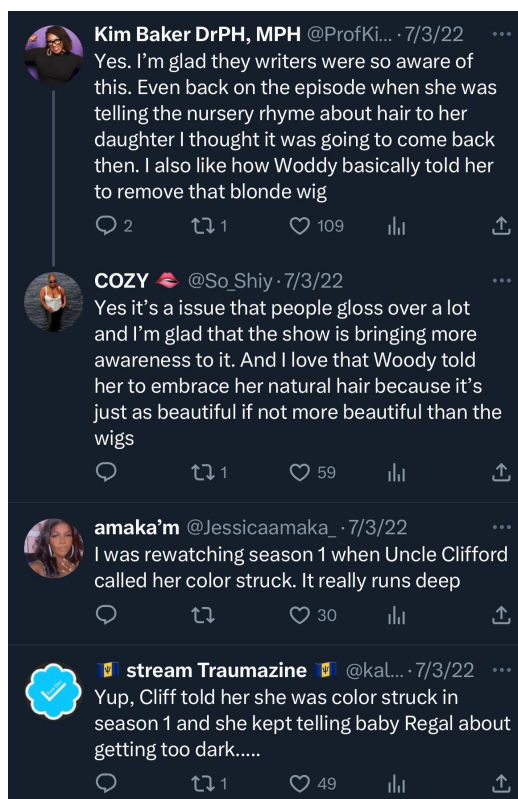
Users “talk back” to those behind the scenes at the show, invoking an ongoing conversation that is rooted in informal Black feminist activism and recirculation of theory (hooks, 1989). This is seen in the following tweets as they share personal contacts with colorism:



Comments like “... I felt it to my core” and “That you’re pretty for a dark skinned girl hits home” points to the relatability of the shows content as Hall and other women of color in positions of power in the industry prove why the freedom to tell one’s story is integral to a Black TV Renaissance (Giorgis, 2021). These users hint at Black feminist theorized concepts that come from Black media scholars like Steele, Bailey and Gates who focus on understanding the relationship between Black digital enclaves and technology– as it can be used as a survival tactic in a white supremacist patriarchal society. Black cyberfeminism and Black digital alchemy are

foundational sites of resistance and transformation that allow for underrepresented users to “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to authority through their use of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and signification (Steele, 2021) on social media platforms. Again, Black Twitter is a prime example of the conversion of Black feminist thought and Black media studies as the comments about this episode exemplify Clark’s claim that Black and Feminist Twitter overlap leading to nuanced conversations that dispel myths that render the Black community monolithic (2018).

Comments about Keyshawn’s circumstances were ripe for debate as viewers discussed her dynamic storyline throughout the second season. Hall along with the writers room Twitter account invoke responses from viewers, revealing how they connect the behind the scenes writing choices to their own lives recirculating and further theorizing how Black women navigate white supremacist patriarchal ideations of femininity:

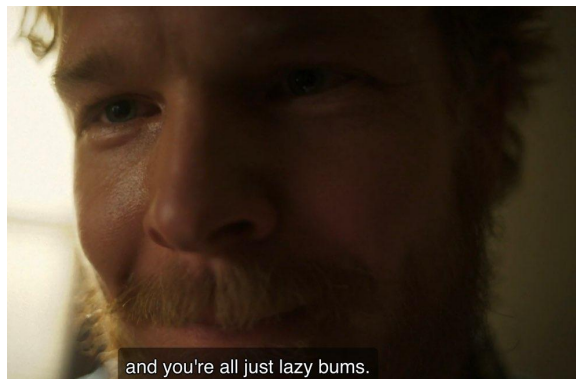
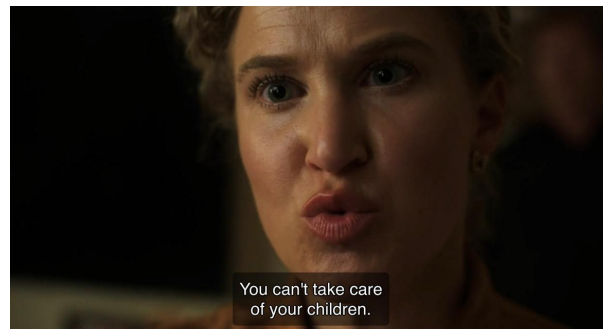


These tweets show how important this show and its authentic storylines are in direct conversation with audience reception and the recirculation of the Black feminist thought on social media framed by Hall and the writers. Engaging with this discourse is a way for production to utilize their viewers as marketing tools while also encouraging the creation of a Black feminist refracted public (Maragh, 2016; Abidin, 2021). The creation of accounts like this one along with Hall's Twitter engagement shows the invested interest in second-screening and Black Social TV (Hall, Coleman; Williams et al) where writers, producers and advertisers can engage with and possibly incorporate direct feedback from viewers in revolutionary ways (2018).

The viewers reiterate the powerful writing emphasizing how it speaks to instances of colorism in their own lives while also referencing previous episodes that reveal the internalized racism Keyshawn and many Black women experience as they feel the need to conform to the ideals of a white supremacist, patriarchal society through adopting respectability politics. As the refracted public discussed their own experiences as mothers with Black daughters, some tweets read: "This is a real issue. I never knew my daughter experienced this in middle school and high school... It also affected who she dates," along with tweets noting that this is a generational trope that is passed down and normalized, this is exemplified in an example where a user notes "I had to get on my mother about constantly telling my chocolate baby ow she needed to stay out of the sun because she was already dark and getting blacker." These tweets reveal the everyday nature of this systemic issue that is intentionally built into the fabric of the United States, originating during chattel slavery— as those Black women with fairer skin were able to work inside the house, darker-skinned women and girls were forced to work in the field. Both sects of

Black women were exploited, surveilled and sexually violated on a daily basis (Hartman, 2016). Hall and the writers engage with this subject in a nuanced way that acknowledges the fact that Keyshawn wished to be validated in a community that devalued her because of her appearance. She's seen by Derrick but then is unable to bask in this validation from her "White Knight" as her pregnancy leads to him imparting misogynoiristic and violent behavior, diminishing her self-esteem.

Although she is able to regain her confidence working at The Pynk and on tour, the fact that her escape failed and she was jailed by CPS in the final episode of season 2 reflects a system that too often characterizes Black women as inadequate "welfare queens" (Moynihan Report, 1965). Seen in her final scenes in the season 2 finale:



This scene is the climax where misogynoir and her intersectional existence leads to her becoming the villain in her fairytale as she attacks Derrick she is violently arrested and sent to jail where she calls her real knight in shining armor, Diamond for help:



Keyshawn's inner dialogue as the CPS officer explains the next steps reflects her damaged psyche and the fact that she's fed up from years of abuse— all she hears when the officer is speaking are the tropes that have been projected on Black women for decades that they are “lazy” and “cannot take of themselves or their children” Black feminists like Angela Davis and recently Tiffany Lethabo King have argued against this notion claiming The Moynihan Report (1967) and Reagan era politics were based in capitalist, white supremacist patriarchal social contracts that refused to afford agency to Black women leading to disparities in legislation and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. (Collins, 2000; Letharbo King, 2018).

In the next season, which is set to premiere in 2024 it will be interesting to see what the Black feminist refracted public as well as Hall and the writers have to say about Keyshawn's ongoing storyline— doesn't Cinderella deserve a happy ending?

Conclusion

This chapter explores the everyday lives of Black women while focusing on Keyshawn “Mississippi” Harris’ storyline which Hall and the writers room use as a means to expose viewers to concepts like domestic violence and colorism in the Black community rife with elements of Black feminist storytelling, theory and recirculation seen in the episode as well as in the discourse surrounding it on Twitter. Starz has made a direct intervention within the industry

to center the stories of underrepresented groups and this is further exemplified in the storylines and post-show conversation about *P-Valley*. These challenging and violent storylines can be difficult to watch as they highlight a dark side of Black womanhood yet the socio-political context provided by Hall, the writers and the tweets from the Black feminist refracted public reveal how they mirror previous Black women centered programming that incorporate an embedded feminist consciousness that evoked feelings of community seen in the audiences feedback and recirculation of the shows narrative on Twitter (Ford, 2017).

Exploring the episode's context as well as incorporating the paratext from the audience, producers and viewers exposed the changing nature of television and the freedom given to Black women showrunners, producers and writers on streaming services during what I consider a Black Feminist TV Renaissance. This renewal began to bloom with the greenlighting of Issa Rae's hit *Insecure*. The freedom allowed those behind the scenes to focus on elements of Black womanhood that are rarely covered in mainstream media as they elaborated on the intricacies of Keyshawn's everyday experiences that are rooted in historical ideations of Black womanhood and motherhood. They were able to connect it to Black feminist theory while engaging in an ongoing conversation that informed the post-show subject matter discussed on Twitter through Black rhetorical tactics like signification as they utilized: tweets, memes and gifs to relate to the show.

The information provided from the episode from Hall, writers and the Black feminist refracted public emphasizes the influence of Black feminist storytelling and how it is relatable to everyday Black women and girls. Keyshawn's narrative served as a vehicle to discuss the internalization of microaggressions against her as a dark-skinned Black girl and woman while exposing the cognitive dissonance she endured from Derrick that resulted in a warped sense of

self that trapped her in cycles of abuse. Audience reactions to this are varied in that they relate to the storyline by sharing memes/gifs while debating the reality of the show and directly questioning the motives of production reveals the reciprocal nature of their conversations. In this chapter I examine how this episode of *P-Valley* was able to introduce a storyline that highlights Keyshawn's lived experience as a dark-skinned Black woman evoking an open ended conversation between Hall, the writers and the audience as the latter expressed their own encounters with misogynoir and respectability politics on Twitter. This chapter reiterates the fact that the Black population in the United States is not monolithic, noting how this show is niche while highlighting the life experiences of Black women. These specific the issues discussed are focused on Black women in the Mississippi Delta yet they are relevant to women all over the country and world; this relatability is conveyed in major American publications like *GQ*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and the *New York Times* that review the show and highlight its increased viewership, subscriptions to STARZ as well as the dynamic cultural storytelling driven by Hall and the writers room in season 2 (2022). The metaphor of fairytale storytelling methods uncover tropes that too often normalizes the notion that women cannot choose their own realities (Collins, 2000). *P-Valley* counters this by centering the "oppositional gaze" (hooks, 1992) of those behind the scenes and Black women spectators.

Conclusion

Hall and the writers rooms efforts to represent Black women on *P-Valley* allowed them the ability to expose an historically stereotyped, devalued sect of the American public— Black women. They were able to express Black feminist storytelling through rhetorical tactics while centering the narratives of Black women in the rural south working outside of the formal economy in their discourse while sprinkling political and theoretical concepts into the show that

are rooted in Black women's everyday intersectional lives. The intentionality of Hall in fostering diversity in ethnicity and age while fostering a shared experience of womanhood behind the scenes is what I feel is at the core of reframing the "controlling images" that would historically devalue them (Collins, 2000) ushering in a Black Feminist TV Renaissance. This was also enhanced by the intentions of Hoffman, STARZ president who discussed the way streaming service deliberately focused on greenlighting projects from underrepresented groups of women who wish to tell stories about women as a way to make progress in an industry where diversity is oftentimes an afterthought.

The dynamic dialogue projected audience was powerful in that they were able to renegotiate, relate, contemplate concepts like domestic violence, colorism, respectability politics, interracial marriage and the socio-political nature of being a Black woman in modern day America. With their use of Black rhetorical tactics like signifyin' (Steele, 2021) incorporating memes, gifs and AAVE they were able to talk back (hooks, 1989) to production regarding their thoughts on the storyline (Christian, 1987).

Hall's and the writer's engagement with viewers has evolved and follows in the footsteps of shows like *Scandal* (2012-2018), *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014-2020) and *Insecure* (2016-2022) whose Black showrunners, directors and writers were able to further engage with storylines through the use of hashtags and audience feedback on Twitter. Hall and the writers room are unique in that the lines between the public and private between viewers and those behind the scenes were blurred, leading to what I view as a unique relationship that allows for informal Black feminist theorizing, community building and marketing for the show (Maragh, 2016).

This show epitomizes the power of what I conceptualize as A “Black Feminist TV Renaissance” as Hall contends with socio-political issues relevant to many Black women, the way politics influences their daily lives and engages in a progressive conversation that is reflected in the socially mediated discourse surrounding *P-Valley*.

he episodes dedicated to reproductive health, interracial marriage and intimate partner violence are taboo topics that allowed me to analyze Black womanhood through Brock’s “critical technocultural discourse analysis” (2018), legal theory and Black viewers commentary as a framework to interrogate how Black women experience this in a disproportionate manner compared to other demographics of American women. Again, this is proven not only in the text of the episodes (“Jackson”, 2022; “White Knights” 2022) but also in the surrounding Twitter discourse from Hall, the writers room and viewers shows the affective nature of the show as it garners emotion, nostalgia and community.

Those behind the scenes are paving the way for future showrunners, producers, writers of color as they (*PValley* - writers room) are able to subtly introduce informal Black feminist theory from prominent authors like Collins, hooks who have discussed the notion of Black female representation in the media (2000, 1992). The enclave formed in this niche community derives from Black Twitter in that it is primarily Black women engaging with one another (Clark, 2018). Introducing theory to this show and the mediated discourse that encompasses it allows for future media professionals who wish to create content that “breaks the rules” as Hall stated in a Writers Guild interview (2020). She clarifies that this storytelling is unique as she has a history in playwriting, the show also centers the Black female gaze, for future feminist media professionals or scholars *P-Valley* is an integral text to study as the storylines reflect Black women’s everyday lives while subtly connecting it to Black feminist theory and politics. In the future professionals

and Black media scholars can look to this text as an example of how it follows in the footsteps of Black feminist television shows in the late 2010's, how Hall curated a safe/open space for Black women's stories to be told and how they foster a relationship with their audience on social media.

Directions for Further Research:

If I were able to spend more time on this analysis of Black feminist storytelling I would have delved into the storylines of Uncle Clifford, Lil Murda and Autumn's storylines. Uncle Clifford is the owner of The Pynk and has an integral role in creating a safe space for the dancers as well as Black people in Chucalissa. His existence is revolutionary in that he is a nonbinary individual who has social and political capital in Chucalissa as a means of the strip club he runs, when he meets Lil Murda it makes things all the more complicated as homosexual relationships in the Black community are historically fraught with ignorant assumptions (Lewis, 2003). Their relationship is a beautiful example of unconditional although secretive love that propelled both of their lives— Murda's into trap rap stardom and allowed Clifford to examine a sect of his life he felt could never be fulfilled.

Lil Murda's narrative expounds on the essence of what Kaluza discusses as the "African-American Dream" (2018) and his debut at The Pynk was the pinnacle of the first season as well as a highlight of the second season when he performed with Megan Thee Stallion. Murda's storyline would be interesting to examine as he navigates queerness, mental health in the Black community and music industry.

Another narrative I'd like to further examine is highlighted in the rootworker episode with Diamond, where Mercedes' exposes the reality of an aging stripper. Although she is only in her late 20's she is seemingly unable to perform after an injury sustained during the traumatic

shooting in the finale of the first season. She goes on to obtain sex work outside of The Pynk where she develops a relationship with the wife of a man she has had a lucrative and sexual relationship with during her time at the club. This is all happening while she is counseling her estranged daughter about her options regarding her teen pregnancy. Her relationship with a woman led her to embrace economic independence and empowerment sparked when the woman displayed photographs of her dancing in an art gallery. Discussing how she affords Terricka the option of “choice” that she was not given when she was pregnant as shown in this analysis, it’s clear she is hyper-aware of the intersectional aspects of her life that influenced her choices: her mother who is a politician and deeply devoted Christian, the influence of the Black church in the Bible belt; All of these socio-political forces led Mercedes to self definition (Collins, 2000) and to embrace a notion of Black female empowerment rooted in Dirth South Feminism (Johnson, 2021). It would be interesting to examine her storyline further as she regains her confidence and “graduates” from the club.

Final Thoughts

What I conceptualize as a “Black Feminist TV Renaissance” is in full swing as programs like *P-Valley* encourage Black women’s acculturation, contemplation, inspiration and audience engagement through signification from the Black feminist refracted public (Steele, 2021; Abidin 2021). Hall opens up the conversation to the Black feminist refracted public that is responsive and emotionally connected to the show. *P-Valley* is powerful in that it enables those behind the scenes to set the tone online and in their storytelling rooted in Black women’s rhetorics which could be a model for future media interpretations of Black women in the media. They do all this while affording the audience an informal education exposing the nuances of Black womanhood

in America and highlighting prominent political topics that are unavoidable for African-American women.

Hall and the writers room have created a distinct dynamic dialogue and relationship between the audience and themselves resulting in a recirculation and further theorizing of informal Black feminist storylines. Whether focusing on production practices or the socially mediated discourse surrounding *P-Valley* it's clear there is much more than meets the eye “Down in the Valley where the girls get naked” (Froot, 2020).

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