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"She's Gotta Have It", "The Bisexual" & "High Fidelity": An Analysis of Representations of Desire for Bisexual BIPOC Female Characters

Introduction:

Throughout queer movements and media history, BIPOC[1] women have consistently led the way in offering complex representations of queerness, biseuxality and pansexuality. In spite of this, mass media, specifically television, has continually harmed bisexual BIPOC female characters in developing problematic, flat archetypes that circumscribe their experiences and identities. In an influential essay entitled "Representation and the Media", media theorist Stuart Hall argues that representation should be understood as constitutive of reality; how social subjects are represented results in how and what makes their meaning. Historically, hegemonic representations have positioned BIPOC bisexual female characters as hyper-sexual, exoticized social "Others," who ultimately cannot be trusted due to their "illusory" bisexual identities. For purposes of this paper, hegemonic will be defined as a state and cultural agenda that works to maintain a "status quo" or enforce a set of cultural norms. As BIPOC bisexual women are represented, their identities are being constructed and given meaning; they are simultaneously used to make and made by hegemonic narratives. When BIPOC bisexual female characters are

[1] BIPOC is an acronym, developed and popularized by young activists and thinkers, that stands for "Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color." Founders of the organization BIPOC Project shared that their organization, like many others, uses the term to "highlight the unique relationship to Whiteness that Indigenous and Black (African Americans) people have, which shapes the experiences of and relationship to white supremacy for all people of color within a U.S. context." According to an article from CBS News entitled "BIPOC: What does it mean and where does it come from?", the term began gaining traction in May of 2020 as a result of a surge in mainstream attention to the Black Lives Matter movement.

reduced to stereotypes, as they have been historically, their identities are endowed stereotypical meaning. This further results in the hyper-sexualization, exocitization and social “Othering” that BIPOC bisexual women experience in the material world. However, in spite of this exploitative history, contemporary BIPOC bisexual female characters now offer space for representations of anti-hegemonic desire, defined as acts that explicitly oppose hegemonic notions of what is “desirable”, such as whiteness, dominant masculinity and heterosexuality. Engaging examples from extant television, this paper will examine how the lead characters in “She’s Gotta Have It” (2017), “The Bisexual” (2018), and “High Fidelity” (2020) engage monologue, dialogue and narrative control in exercising anti-hegemonic desire and challenging the violent envy imposed upon them by an oppressive political order.

An interogattion into representations of bisexual BIPOC women is crucial as mainstream academia and society more generally have historically failed to accept bisexuality as a valid sexual identitiy, consquently dismissing the interpersonal and state violence bisexual BIPOC women are forced to endure as a result of institutionalized racism, sexism and homophobia. According to a study entitled “Violence in LGBTQ Communities of Color” published by the Women of Color Network in 2006, bisexual BIPOC women experience higher rates of rape, physical violence and stalking in comparison to lesbian and straight women, with sixty-one-point-one percent of BIPOC bisexual women enduring these forms of violence in their lifetime. While not stated expliclity, based on additional data, it can be inferred that these rates are even higher for bisexual BIPOC transgender women and gender non-conforming individuals. Interrogating media representations of BIPOC bisexual women is paramount in destigmazing their identities, refuting the historic violence that has and continues to be be imposed upon them, and acknowedlging their positions as autonomous agents. That being said, this critique is not to

dismiss the existing scholarship by and about BIPOC bisexual people but rather to critique mainstream academia, particularly mainstream queer theory's failure to call attention to said work. Potent examples of scholarship that address topics of bisexuality, race and gender include the work of Fuji J. Collins entiled "The Intersection of Race and Bisexuality: A Critical Overview of the Literature and Past, Present, and Future", addressing issues of erasure and the concept of "borderlands" as libreatory spaces for BIPOC bisexual people, and MacDowall Lachlan's text "Historicising Contemporary Bisexuality", which interogates the history of the social anthropological constructions of bisexuality and racial identities.

Television is a particularly powerful medium to interogate these issues as, in the contemporary moment, there has been a continued proliferation of BIPOC bisexual female characters in television, diverging from historic limited representations. Furthermore, television as a medium occupies a contentious position between hegemonic, and anti-hegemonic agendas, magnified through systems of production and the collective imaginations of the public. Collective imaginations of the public refers to the ways in which people across society are mandated by hegemony, as expressed through media, to understand marginalized individuals, such as BIPOC bisexual women. As demonstrated in the statistics above, these imaginations are important because they have material consequences for how marginalized people are treated structurally and interpersonally, reinforcing hegemonic ideals and institutions. It is this precarious, paradoxical positionality that allows television to be an instrument of anti-hegemonic resistance as well as an apparatus of structural state violence. Challenging scholarship that limits television to its relationship to hegemonic structures and capitalist systems, Jill Richards maintains that television's serial form allows for a variety of ideological systems and narratives

to be explored. In her 2008 article "Serializing the Political Spectrum: Post-9/11 Television, From Left to Right" Richards argues that television has radical potentials in the lines,

> "Here the imagination of terrorist antiheroes, anti-capitalist utopias, and other seemingly radical narratives is possible because the temporal reach of serial viewing allows for a vacillation across the political spectrum, one that generally moves from the left to the far right" (Richards 154).

Richards analysis of television, as a medium dependent on seriality and vacillation, offers new insights into how television may be further exploited in supporting a more radical politic. Richards demonstrates that even if an episode or series returns to a hegemonic stasis, there is power in it's "indecisiveness", particularly an episode or series' ability to present a vast variety of radical images that may exist in opposition to a more mainstream narrative. This unique quality offers another tool or strategy to help push television, even the mainstream television Richards explores, towards a more revolutionary social order. Television's unique position as a media outlet, within the context of institutionalized mass media, proves to be an effective tool in recongizing documenting the experiences BIPOC bisexual women, presenting subversive characters, disruptive representations of desire and illustrating the various potentials for a more progressive future.

Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks (Sources):

Maintaining these claims, this paper will engage the theoretical framework of Micheal Bronski's *The Pleasure Principle: Culture, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* published in 1998, which explores American cultural conceptions of sexuality, specifically homosexuality, pleasure, and the influence of queer cultures on American society more broadly.

Engaging a critique of hegemony and desire, this paper will employ Bronski's specific claim that there is a tension between "heterosexual fear of homosexuality and gay culture (and the pleasure they represent) and the equally strong envy of and desire to enjoy that freedom and pleasure" (Bronski 2). Unlike conventional critiques, Bronski centers the pleasure and joy of queerness in understanding violent heteronormativity, reimagining homophobia as the product of a "lack" or emptiness in straight cultures. Employing concepts of envy and desire, while centering queerness, offers potent political insights that I argue relate to the narrative experiences of contemporary BIPOC bisexual female characters. Bronski's analysis of the interwoven relationship between desire and violence, albeit a dangerous relationship to explore, is crucial in understanding how desire can be reclaimed for marginalized individuals. Unmasking the desire imbued in the harmful encounters these character experience aids in reinstilling pleasure as part of the life-long politic these characters adhere to as well as exposing the complexities of racism, sexism and homophobia, specifically biphobia. Bronski's understanding of desire and violence, in relation to queerness, enriches the complexities of the instances of violence these characters endure and highlights the efficacy of desire as an act of anti-hegemonic resistance.

While Bronski's theory of desire is useful in interrogating contemporary representations, it is crucial to note that, in looking at the text holistically, Bronski's "Queer Other" is understood as a white, gay cis-gender man. In presenting a critique of this analysis, it is important to acknowledge that Bronski's argument is limited in it's failure to offer an intersectional approach to queer identities, consquently earsing the unique, multi-layered experiences of queer people of color, various types of queerness such as bisexuality and queer people that are not cis-gender men. While remaining critical of these failures, this paper will work to expand Bronski's claims

to include additional intersections of queerness, specifically bisexuality, as well as race and gender.

Alongside *The Pleasure Principle*, additional more contemporary theoretical texts that focus on the experiences of BIPOC bisexual people will be engaged throughout this paper. These works include Micheala Meyer's essay "Representing Bisexuality on Television: The Case for Intersectional Hybrids", Monica Ghabrial's text "We Can Shapeshift and Build Bridges: Bisexual Women and Gender Diverse People of Color on Invisibility and Embracing the Borderlands", "Missing Colors of the Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance" by Elena Kiesling, Sydney Fonteyn Lewis's doctoral dissertation "Looking Forward to the Past: Black Women's Sexual Agency in 'Neo' Cultural Productions", Brady A. Weller's text "How the West's Indirect Fetishization of Middle-Eastern Women Creates a Barrier to Authentic Expressions of Gender Identity and Access to Social Equality", and "Ethnic Minority Bisexual Women: Understanding the Invisible Population" by M.L. Brooks. These texts offer additional arguments concerning the unique experience of marginalization bisexual BIPOC women endure that will strengthen and inform the central claims of this paper. Alongside these supplementary theoretical frameworks, this essay will engage a brief discussion of audience reception and issues of narrative form for each show, in offering a brief analysis of the impact of each show's production on the ways in which characters are represented within the narrative world.

Language and Terminology:

For the purposes of this paper, I will be defining bisexuality as attraction to one's own gender assignment as well as those of other gender identities. "Bisexuality" was selected as there is a tremendous amount of ambiguity around this term making it welcome to alternative

definitions, personal understandings, and other forms of queerness. Furthermore, bisexuality's prevalence in my research and its popularity as a term amongst pop culture and society more broadly makes it a more readily available term. In it's earlier conception, bisexuality was first used in an effort to categorize the sexual behaviors and physical attributes of non-white populations, as part of colonial projects. Explored in the critical work of Merl Storr entitled "The sexual reproduction of "race": Bisexuality, history and racialization", groups that demonstrated bisexuality, either presenting "male" and "female" physical attributes or engaging in sexual activities with people of multiple gender identities, were categorized as inferior to Western society. Working to reinforce Western supremacy, Western social scientists concluded that societies where people practiced monogamy and exhibited "stable gender", referring to a certain set of "feminine" or "maculine" physical features, were more developed and therefore superior to those that did not. The colonial process, which began the Western world's effort to construct concepts of race and gender, identified bisexuality in demonizing the non-Western world. Conceptions of bisexuality, in adherence with Storr's claims, have always been intractable from colonial processes of racialization and gender, an important history to include in employing the term. Eventually, the term was no longer used to describe someone's physical attributes, shifting into its modern definition, attraction to people of multiple gender identities.

More recently, there has been debate within the queer community around the definition of bisexuality, as the pre-fix "bi" could exclusively refer to "men" and "women." This assumption or definition could potentially reinforce the gender binary and invalidate those occupying gender identities outside of "male" and "female." However, influential texts such as the "Bi Manifesto" published in 1990 by a bisexual collective residing in the Bay Area, maintain that bisexuality is not "binary or duogamous in nature", further asserting that there are not "only two genders."

Engaging this definition, while still debated both historically and now, reinenforces the idea that bisexuality did not and does not uphold the gender binary and includes gender non-conforming individuals.

That being said, in achieving an appropriate scope for my argument, pansexuality will be included in the term bisexuality. Pansexuality, according to Meriam-Webster, is defined as attraction "to all kinds of people, regardless of their gender, sex or presentation." While these definitions are deeply personal, generally, pansexual people understand their attraction to sexual and romantic partners as outside of gender and gender identity. This is crucial to address as one of the main characters in my case studies, Nola from "She's Gotta Have It" (2017), occasionally identifies as pansexual, despite habitually refuting sexual labels. This inclusion is not to negate the nuances or particularities of pansexuality but rather, address the discrimination that people who experience attraction to multiple gender identities face, specifically within television. Bisexuality often proves to be a more popular, and consequently more accessible term, for individuals navigating being attracted to people of multiple gender identities, whereas pansexuality proves to be less available. In saying so, pansexuality also is often placed under the umbrella of bisexuality, within the queer community. An article published by the LGBT Foundation, entitled "5 things you should know on Pansexual Visibility Day", discusses the function of bisexuality as an umbrella term in the lines,

> "Pansexuality is different from bisexuality but the two aren't mutually exclusive. Being bisexual means being attracted to more than one gender, while being pansexual means being attracted to people regardless of gender. Pansexuality and bisexuality are not in conflict. In fact, some bisexual people also identify as pansexual, and vice versa.

> Pansexuality is included under the bisexual umbrella, which covers anyone who experiences sexual or romantic attraction to more than one gender."

Alongside this relationship between bisexual and pansexual identities, within the LGBTQ community, bisexual and pansexual people often exist in community together, united over their shared experience of attraction to people of multiple gender identities. According to an article published by the Human Rights Campgain, entitled "Five Pieces of Advice for Coming Out as Bi, Pan, Queer or Fluid", describes this shared community in the lines,

> "The bisexual, pansexual, queer and fluid community includes people who are emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree" (Human Rights Campgain 1).

The joint community that exists between bisexual and pansexual people reinenforces the descion to include pansexuality, specifically a pansexual character, in this discusion of bisexuality and bisexual characters.

While this decision is informed by a variety of perspectives and definitions within the LGBTQ community, it would still be irresponsible not to acknowledge that there is a potent danger in grouping or even collapsing bisexuality and pansexuality together. This potential collpase could erase the unique experience of attraction and understanding of gender that many pansexual people experience, particularly those that do not share this relationship to bisexuality.

History of Bisexuality, Gender, Race & Television (Early Case Studies).

Prior to analyzing contemporary bisexual BIPOC female characters, it is crucial to deconstruct specific examples of older television figures that upheld principles of whiteness, sexism, and heternormativity. In doing so, this section will engage a brief discussion of academic

Leonie Taylor and Michaela D. E. Meyer's essays' exploring the characterization and narrative arc of two bisexual BIPOC female characters from television series that ran in the early 2000s. Taylor utlizes the example of Kalinda Sharma, a central character from the television show "The Good Wife" (2009) in arguing that Kalinda, as a bisexual South Asian woman, is subjected to excotization and hypersexualization, in supporting the narratives of white characters. Meyer's, asserts that Anna, a bisexual Latinx female character from the teen television drama "One Tree Hill" (2003), is exploited in validating the identities of the show's white protagonists, further positioning her as a disposable "Other" that is only briefly included in the series. Exploring this history through these two examples will not only acknowledge the importance of BIPOC characters in leading representations of bisexuality but also help illustrate the ways in which bisexual BIPOC women have been exploited by television, positioned as hegemonic agents that further reinforce concepts of whiteness, gender, and heternormativity. Deconstructing these hegemonic images will also call further attention to the ways in which "She's Gotta Have It" (2017), "The Bisexual" (2018), and "High Fidelity" (2020) offer more politically empowering, radical representations of BIPOC bisexual women and their desires.

Kalinda Sharma, a secondary character in the hit television show "The Good Wife" (2009) is an example of a BIPOC bisexual female character who's represented through stereotypes, fulfilling a hegemonic agenda. Kalinda is consistently characterized as untrustworthy, hyper-sexual and manipulative. These "bad" characteristics are positioned, by the show, as a byproduct of Kalinda's sexual, racial and gender identities. In addition to this problematic characterization, Kalinda is only defined by or allowed to exist in relation to white characters, particularly her white sexual partners. Leonie Taylor's article argues this in the lines,

> "In Eating the Other, bell hooks (1992, p. 22) argues that white fantasies for contact with the 'primitive Other' help to reinscribe and maintain a white supremacist status quo. All of Kalinda's sexual partners are white, and I argue that perhaps a white audience doesn't see itself in Kalinda, but it sees something 'Other' that it desires—an alluring mixture of danger and sexual energy" (Taylor 10).

Taylor argues that Kalinda's sexual relationships with white characters, on a predominantly white television show, allows white audiences to "access" her. Kalinda is "Othered" in her identity as a bisexual South Asian woman as she is positioned as an "exotic" object with which white audiences can voyerusistically consume. Reflecting on her position within the series and her overall characterization, Kalinda's identity as a bisexual BIPOC woman further subjects her to racist, homophobic hyper-sexualization that marginalizes her and her desires within the narrative world of "The Good Wife."

As illustrated in Taylor's article, Kalinda Sharma proves to be an example of a highly problematic representation of a bisexual BIPOC woman, as her desires, both interpersonal and professional, are imagined in relation to and in reaffirming whiteness, sexism and heternormativity. While still maintaining this claim, it is also worth noting that, despite Taylor's use of the terms "colonialism" and "neocolonialism", she fails to interrogate the ways in which Kalinda's identity as a South Asian woman relates to her problematic characterization. The result of this is a lack of a complex analysis into the specific colonial histories, narratives and stigmas around South Asian identity that Kalinda endures. Furthermore, part and parcel to this, positioning Kalinda as "non-white" merely reinenforces Western racial binaries and diminishes nuances amongst various ethno-racial groups, centering whiteness within a complex web of racial identity.

Alongside Kalinda Sharma and shows like "The Good Wife" (2009), an earlier example of a BIPOC bisexual female character whose characterization affirms a hegemonic agenda is Anna, from season two of the teen-drama "One Tree Hill" (2003). Anna's brief story arc on "One Tree Hill" follows a conventional "coming-out" narrative that ultimately centers the identities and experiences of the straight, white lead characters on the show. Characters like Peyton, Anna's friend and a main cast member, employ their statuses as white, straight individuals in exploiting Anna's identity, further positioning her as a queered, racialized "Other." Anna's character is used in order to reaffirm Peyton's identity as a "good" and "liberal" character within the world of "One Tree Hill" (2003). Michaela D. E. Meyer illustrates Peyton's exploitation of Anna in the lines,

> "In many ways, Peyton's co-optation of queer activism can be read as a hostile erasure of Anna's ethnic and sexual identity… Coding Anna as the only teen struggling with sexual identity on the series complicates the discursive tensions between sexuality and ethnicity, illustrating that 'hybridity is more desirable to dominant sensibilities and thus more widely available in contemporary mainstream media, more often than not rendered strategically in various ways that ultimately serve to restabilize whiteness' (Shugart 2007, p. 133)" (Meyers 247).

Meyers argues that Anna's narrative is marginalized in service of reaffirming the existences of the shows reoccurring white characters, like Peyton, who center themselves in the experiences of those they position as "Other." Meyer highlights the potent erasure that Anna experiences within the narrative world of "One Tree Hill" (2003), acknowledging the historic relationship between racialization and bisexuality. Furthermore, the show taps into stereotypes that Latinx people are

inherently conservative and homophobic, stereotyping Anna and her family in service of supporting the “white savior complex” embedded in “One Tree Hill”, calling attention to the ways in which Anna endures racialization as a Latinx woman rather than a generically “non-white” subject.

Case Studies:

An iconic figure across film and television that exercises anti-hegemonic desire is Nola Darling, from the hit television show “She’s Gotta Have It” (2017) a remake of the Spike Lee film “She’s Gotta Have It” (1986). “She’s Gotta Have It” (2017) follows Nola Darling, a self-identified “sex positive poly-amorous Black pansexual” woman and visual artist, as she navigates romantic relationships, friendships, her career and her community in Brooklyn, New York. Throughout the series, Nola continually combats sexism and biphobia from her male partners and biphobia, sexism and anti-Blackness from hegemonic institutions. As a pansexual Black woman who practices polyamory, Nola is often hyper-sexualized, labeled “freaky” and accused of being “addicted to sex.” Consequently, she experiences additional dimensions of violence as she is perceived as more readily available for hegemonic consumption, exploitation and re-imagining. Michaela Meyer addresses the nuances of hypersexualization for BIPOC female characters in her essay “Representing Bisexuality on Television: The Case for Intersectional Hybrids.” Meyer discussions hyper-sexualzation within the context of television in the lines,

> “Ultimately, these women [of color in television] are represented as in crisis—and framing bisexuality as part of that identity crisis situates identity struggle as hypersexualization. Given the stereotypical associations with bisexuality as an

> oversexualized, morally depraved identity, images that situate ethnic women within this context contribute to a discourse of female 'others' acting in socially deviant ways" (Meyer 5).

Meyer argues that BIPOC bisexual female characters have historically been represented as hypersexual, with hypersexualizality framed as immoral and irresponsible, further contributing to the "Othering" they experience. As Black subjects and female subjects, Black women endure additional degrees of sexulization as their sexualities, gender identities, and racial identities are made inextricable from each other as part of the violence they endure from the state. Academic Sydney Fonteyn Lewis also explores hyper-sexualization although, unlike Meyer, focuses specifically on hyper-sexualization for Black women. In her essay "Looking Forward to the Past: Black Women's Sexual Agency in 'Neo' Cultural Productions", Lewis argues,

> "I argue that black female sexuality has been defined primarily as a lack of agency, that is black women have been scripted as hypersexual or asexual, animalistic and masculinized… None of these positions are self-defined or self-created; rather they are products of various white heteropatriarchal regimes…" (Lewis 5).

Lewis contends that Black women experience an imposition of sexualization, unique to the Black body, that intentionally strips Black women of their agency as social subjects. Lewis further maintains that Black women endure a "constant pull between hyper-sexuality and invisible sexuality", illustrating the ways in which Black women undergo a process of violent socialization by the state as they are made into sexualized "types". Nola's experience of racialization and sexualization is part and parcel to the historic anti-Blackness embedded within the American social order, offering additional implications to the ways in which she is able to move within the narrative world of the show. Nola experiences hyper-sexualization as a Black

bisexual woman, whose body has and continues to be subjected to sexualization and de-sexualization as part of on-going colonization of Black people.

Engaging the historical context Meyer and Lewis provide, in also applying the work of Bronski, Nola is able to unmask the envy at play in hegemonic desire and violence. Demonstrated primarily through dialogue, Nola centers her desires and celebrates her identity rather than centering the violence habitually imposed upon her. A key scene demonstrating this is episode four of season one, entitled "#LuvisLuv (Sexuality is Fluid)." Prior to this moment, Nola has shared with the audience that she is taking a break from her male partners and spending exclusive time with her beloved on-again-off-again female partner, Opal. The scene begins in Nola's therapist's office, as Nola and her therapist are discussing Nola's relationship with Opal. After describing a few of Opal's attractive qualities, Nola comments, "And the key is, unlike the men I've been dealing with, she's not trying to own me", addressing a major problem in her relationships with her three male partners. The two briefly discuss other ways in which Nola has been caring for herself in light of her recent sexual assault by an unnamed stranger, the destruction of her art commenting on her assault, and the on-going process of gentrification that threatens her ability to live in her neighborhood. Following this discussion, commenting on the various therapeutic tools she's been employing, Nola shares, "I've needed them all because I've just been attacked from all sides, but with Opal, I don't have to fight back all the time." Much like Bronski's understanding of the theoretical "Gay Other", Nola's relationship with Opal in response to the violence she is experiencing is a radical act of anti-hegemonic resistance because it rejects the supremacy of heterosexuality, whiteness, and patriarchy. Nola's choice to seek refuge with Opal, a Black queer woman, centers her desires and identity, as she works to heal from the trauma unfolding around her. Nola finds physical and emotional pleasure with Opal,

exemplified in her claim that she “doesn’t have to fight back all the time”, consequently disputing the violent forces of whiteness, sexism, and homophobia that impose themselves on her and her community. Throughout the scene, Nola calls attention to the ways in which her male partners attempt to “own her", particularly after her assault. In spite of this, Nola does not frame this as failure in her desires for a relationship, as a polyamorous pansexual Black woman, but rather a failure in her partners to understand the beautiful complexities of her sexual identity. Nola continually understands the biphobia she experiences in her interpersonal relationships as the product of envy, illustrated in this scene in her analysis of men attempting to control or “own” her sexuality. Nola’s deconstruction of her partners' attempts to restrict or define her, paired with her re-construction of her relationship with Opal, proves to be an act of anti-hegemonic desire, defying the institutional forces of whiteness, patriarchy and heterosexuality.

Expanding on issues of representations in relation to narrative, it is also important to briefly examine the show’s production process, audience reception and general issues of form. “She’s Gotta Have”, a remake of the 1986 film “She’s Gotta Have It”, was released in 2017 as a Netflix series, written and directed by well-known filmmaker Spike Lee. While Lee has continually enjoyed praise for his complex portrayals of Black sexualities and relationships, his work has not gone without formidable, enduring critique. Spike Lee received vehement criticism over a crucial scene in the original 1986 film in which Nola is raped by one of her partners, Jamie. This scene is followed by Nola’s compliance to engage in a monogamous relationship with Jamie, despite her extremely evident fear and hesitation. Lee later expressed regret over the scene, which proved to be a central point for critique, as well as a variety of other key

problematic plot points such as the film's portrayal of Black female sexuality. bell hooks challenged the film's portrayal of sexuality in her book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* published in 1989. hooks argues that,

> "Men do not have to objectify Nola's sexuality because she objectifies it. In doing so, her character becomes the projection of a stereotypical sexist notion of a sexually assertive woman - she is in fact not liberated" (hooks 136).

hooks also adds that Opal, the sole lesbian character in the film and Nola's only friend, was characterized as "predatory" in her continued attempts to intiate a sexual relationship with Nola. Engaging these potent critiques, significantly prior to the release of the Netflix series, Lee articulated his regret and later demonstrated the ways in which he would alter his new series in order to "right the wrongs" of the film, while still adhering to its central goals.

In a 2017 article with the New York Times entitled "A New 'She's Gotta Have It': Spike Lee's Feminist Breakthrough", Lee shared the ways in which the series would incorporate Black female voices, challenge the original script and incorporate additional socio-political issues such as sexual violence. Author of the article, Salamishah Tillet, writes that Lee ensured the writer's room was "filled with African-American female artists and writers, including his wife, Tonya Lewis Lee, whom Mr. Lee credited for conceiving the film as a series." Four of the eight credited writers of the series are women; Radha Blank, Eisa Davis, Joie Lee, Lee's sister, and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage. Alongside incorporating Black women into the writing process, throughout the article, Lee expresses his efforts to extrapolate on "Nola's sexual universe", specifically "the ways in which her and other black female characters' bodies are constantly under surveillance (by white shopkeepers), exploited (at a local burlesque club or on reality TV), threatened (by police officers) and even assaulted (by everyday men on the street)."

These issues are tackled by Nola as well as her Black female friends, two new characters that are integrated into the series in working to expand Nola's character outside of her romantic relationships as well as highlight the importance of platonic friendships for and between Black women. Lee's shift in content, specifically updating major plotpoints, and shift in narrative form, now a Netflix series, are essential to consider in providing context for the ways in which Nola is characterized as BIPOC bisexual woman and the ways in which her narrative universe is constructed. Many publications later praised Lee's efforts and deemed the 2017 series of "She's Gotta Have It " successful in it's address of identity politics and presenting a more complex, nuanced narrative, illustrating the impact of his process on his final product. That being said, while the television series has been widely celebrated, many Black queer women have critiqued the show, primarily through smaller publications, claiming that Lee fails to capture the complexities of queerness and polyamory, accusing him of using queerness in order to gain millennial viewership. These responses, while not the vast majority, are crucial to consider, particularly in contrast to mainstream publications that fail to thoughtfully or meaningfully interrogate the show's portrayal of queerness and polyamory.

Buidling off the legacy of Nola Darling, another key bisexual figure in television that employs radical forms of anti-hegemonic desire is Leila, the main character from the Hulu original series "The Bisexual" (2018). "The Bisexual" (2018) follows the life of Leila, a young Iranian woman living in London, as she begins to explore her newly realized bisexual identity. Originally identitifying as lesbian, Leila attempts to find herself while navigating biphobia, sexism and racism within white lesbian communities and white heteronormative social structures. Centering her own desires and journey towards self-discovery, Leila contests hegemonic forces of racism, sexism and biphobia as they manifest in her interpersonal

relationships. Throughout the series, Leila encounters feelings of loneliness and isolation as she experiences erasure and rejection from her various communities, resulting in her feeling "invisible" within her own, once joyous, social world. Scholar Monica Ghabrial investigates this experience of rejection and intersectional identity, specifically the form of "invisibility" BIPOC bisexual people endure, in her essay "We Can Shapeshift and Build Bridges: Bisexual Women and Gender Diverse People of Color on Invisibility and Embracing the Borderlands." Ghabrial deconstructs social invisibility in the lines,

> "Racialized people who are attracted to more than one gender are seen and unseen, moving between their heterosexual world, their ethnoracial world, and their queer world, perhaps not fully belonging to any" (Ghabrial 1).

Ghabrial argues that BIPOC bisexual women experience a feeling of "invisibility" as they attempt to navigate acceptance from various social communities, a nuance of BIPOC bisexual identity that is reflects Leila's experiences. Leila is continually positioned by her peers as ``singular" or outside of social norms, resulting in her feelings of rejection and invisibility. As indirectly demonstrated by Gharial, throughout the show and particularly in the following scene under discussion, Leila experiences being "seen" and "unseen" as she is rejected from her white lesbian community, shares a precarious connection with her enthnoracial community, represented in her relationship to her family and her close friend, and the wider, much more violent sexist, white heterosexual world. In spite of this on-going violence, Leila actively deconstructs these hegemonic concepts and political forces, instead emphasizing the joyfulness of her identity as an Iranian bisexual woman.

A key scene demonstrating Leila's repudiation of hegemonic ideals is season one episode four of the series, when Leila meets her roommate Gabe's sister. Framed by a wide shot of the two exiting the building, Leila remarks how lucky Gabe is to have a "sister like that", referring to Gabe's sister's maternal nature. Gabe apatheticly responds that Leila is in fact "the lucky one." Leila then jokingly comments that "no one on the continent loves her", referencing her recent break-up with her long-term girlfriend and alienation from her white lesbian friends, framed by a series of shot-reverse-shot cuts. Proceeding this, Gabe begins to argue that Leila's biseuxal identity endows her with a degree of privilege because her sexual partners and her family don't expect her to settle down with a single partner. Gabe continually asserts that Leila's bisexual identity makes her inherently non-mongamous and allows those around her to "lower" their expectations for a committed, serious relationship with her. Leila passionately responds, "Why are you talking to me like I am another species from you", repudiating Gabe's sexist, racist and biphobic attack. Tapping into socially informed assumptions that Leila is inherently hyper-sexual, asserting she's "shagging half of London", Gabe critiques Leila's identity, and becomes increasingly offended with her angry response. The scene ends as Leila storms off, shouting that she refuses to wait with him for an Uber, threatening their friendship and condemning his toxic, violent behavior. The conventional shot-reverse-shot, medium framed images of this scene highlight the potent dialogue transpiring between the two, emphasizing the multi-layered ways in which Gabe dehumanizes Leila as a bisexual Iranian woman.

\As a white man, Gabe's assessment of Leila's sexuality is inetricable from her identity as an Iranian woman, as bisexual BIPOC women endure additional degrees of exociziation and hyper-sexualization as racialized subjects. Gabe's socially powerful position as a white man encodes additional violence as he attempts to "read" Leila as a sexualized, racialized and

gendered social subject. The racialization Leila endures is specific to her identity as a Middle Eastern woman as Middle Eastern women are frequently subjected to hyper-sexualization by the Western gaze. It is important to note that Leila, despite being Persian, is likely being read as Arab by her white peers, including Gabe. Academic Brady A. Weller addresses the specific form of sexualization and fetishization Middle Eastern women experience, in relation to colonial histories, in his essay "How the West's Indirect Fetishization of Middle-Eastern Women Creates a Barrier to Authentic Expressions of Gender Identity and Access to Social Equality." Weller explores hyper-sexualization in the lines,

> "The indirect fetishization and hypersexualization of women's bodies in the west and the abundance of emphasis that we place on women owning and expressing their sexual power and autonomy, is not only a slippery slope for the way that our western culture perceives healthy expressions of femininity, but also for how we begin to lead other cultures down paths of 'social equality' and empowerment" (Weller 9).

Weller argues that the West has historically fetishized and hyper-sexualized Middle Eastern women's bodies, further contextualizing this sexualization across transnational politics. This hyper-sexualization is part of the West's continuous attempts to control and construct Arab, "Eastern" or Middle Eastern women's sexualities in reinforcing white supremacy. This is part and parcel to the West's historic efforts to create a binary of a "non-white body" and position bisexuality as inferior to Western concepts of heterosexuality, further addressing the indivisible relationship between colonialism, race, gender and sexuality. Gabe's efforts to position Leila as hyper-sexual tap into racist, Orientalist narratives about Middle Eastern women and a long history of Western attempts at constructing a demonized "non-Western" social Others.

In spite of this attack, epitomized in her line "Why are you talking to me like I'm another species from you", Leila calls attention to Gabe's dehumanization of her and centers her experiences as valuable outside of his opinion. Much like Bronski's assertions around desire and envy, Leila defends her sexual and romantic experiences, refusing to participate in Gabe's selfish emotional spiral. Leila recognizes and rejects the ways in which Gabe's feelings are the product of hegemonic envy, specifically his own failures with monogamy, and how his critique of her "freedom" is actually a reflection of his desire. While Leila is not the "Gay Other" Bronski's text imagines, she still employs similar principles of desire and envy, in deflecting the projections and heterosexual white male anxieties that Gabe attempts to impose upon her. Demonstrated in her vocalized anger, Leila's refusal to participate in Gabe's violent temper tantrum centers her desires, her identity and her intimate relationships in challenging the hegemonic forces of racism, sexism and homophobia, specifically biphobia, that Gabe epitomizes.

Unlike "She's Gotta Have It" and "High Fidelity", "The Bisexual" is an original script made and set in London. The show is co-written by, directed by, and stars filmmaker, Desiree Akhavan, who is more famously known for her independent films like "Appropriate Behaviour" released in 2014 and "The Miseducation of Cameron Post" which won a Sundance Grand Jury Prize in 2018. In an interview with Vanity Fair, Akhavan shares that "The Bisexual" was inspired by her relationship to her own bisexuality and the shame she felt around being identified as a "bisexual filmmaker." Despite being a filmmaker, Akhavan shares that, when conceiving the story, she "craved the flexibility of TV, where she could follow multiple characters and digressive subplots, conjuring a loose world that was funny, sexy, and tonally ambiguous." When asked about the show's exploration of race, as like Akhavan the main character Leila is an

Iranian-American woman, Akhavan maintains that “she had intended to include scenes about Leila’s family, but they fell by the wayside in favor of a deeper dive into sexuality and friendship”, further adding that “if the series gets picked up for a second season, she hopes to take on questions of race and heritage.” While race is largely discussed implicitly, there are key moments in the series in which Akhavan argues offer radical representations of Middle Eastern women, creating a collection of potent images that are often not afforded in the mainstream. For example, in the interview, she shares that she was “moved by the sight of Leila and her scene-stealingly deadpan best friend, Deniz (Saskia Chana), driving a van at the start of ‘The Bisexual.’” Reflecting on the personal and political significance of this visual moment, Akhavan comments,

> “Two non-classically beautiful Middle Eastern women owning a scene, you know? Not talking about men, not talking about how they were going to get with men . . . just hanging out, driving the van. I didn’t realize it would be so strange until I watched it” (Press 2).

While perhaps not explicit, Akhavan’s understanding of the progression of the show offers space for discussions of Middle Eastern identity, particularly in relation to friendship, womanhood and queerness. Engaging Akhavan’s reflection on her work, “The Bisexual” also differeniates itself from the other case studies as it is a “non-remake” and as a semi-autobiographical series. While Lee incorporated Black female artists into the writing process, it is important to note that “The Bisexual” is the only show, of the three, that was written by a bisexual BIPOC woman and reflects her first-hand experiences. While Akhavan’s series has been condemned as “superficial” by some mainstream publications, overall the cultural reception has been positive and further stimulated discussion about bisexuality, particularly BIPOC bisexual people, as a mutli-layered,

marginalized identity within the queer community. Exploring the impact of form on the content of the series offers crucial insights into “The Bisexual”, specifically it’s portrayl of BIPOC bisexual female desire and the narrative world it constructs.

Another recently released television show, that is also a film remake, is the Hulu original series “High Fidelity” (2020), an updated version of the iconic Stephen Frears movie “High Fidelity” released in 2000. The television show stars Robyn “Rob” Brooks, a Black bisexual woman, music buff and owner of the record store “Championship Vinyl” located in Brooklyn, New York. The show follows Rob’s attempts to discover why she is unable to be satisfied in a romantic relationship, as well as her failure to show up emotionally for her family and friends. Rob opposes hegemonic forces of racism, sexism and biphobia, in centering her own desires through her narrative reimagining of her past relationships with problematic partners. Rob’s refutation of hegemonic forces, specifically in deconstructing the violence she experienced in her previous romantic relationships, aligns with Bronski’s understanding of structural homophobic violence as the product of envy and desire.

A crucial scene in which Rob challenges biphobia, sexism and whiteness is episode four of season one entitled “Goodluck and Goodbye”, when she visits Kat Monroe, her last female partner and number two on her “top five worst heartbreaks" list. Rob has already established in the first episode of the series that she never felt completely comfortable in her relationship with Kat and that Kat brutally dumped her because she preferred dating white women. Rob decides to visit Kat at a luxury apartment, accidentally walking in on a party Kat is hosting. Beginning in a wide shot of the table, with Rob in center frame and a series of close-up shots of the other guests, Rob realizes that Kat was never a good partner much less a good person. Turning to the camera,

Rob remarks, "Yeah, I hate these people. They're all awful." Shifting to an internal monologue, Kat is brought into focus behind Rob, as Rob comments, "And the most awful of the awful, fucking Kat Monroe." Overlaying a shot of Kat chatting up other party guests at the head of the table, Rob continues to explain how Kat was never actually as profound as she remembered her to be but merely said "terrible, stupid things that meant abosolutely nothing." Rob further maintains that Kat is able to get away with her behavior because no one around her cares about her, aside from her digital popularity. In a predominantly white space, Rob refutes the commercial, reductionist community around her and challenges her previous perceptions of Kat that were largely influenced by Kat's position as a white woman who is deemed desirable by a white supremacist social order.

Later in the episode, Kat accuses Rob of being "too difficult" of a partner in comparison to the white woman she left her for, who she describes as "less hardwork" and "a bit sunnier." These comments further reinforce Kat's anti-Blackness as a white queer woman and further correlates to the clear emotional trauma Rob suffered in the relationship, addressing a long history of anti-Blackness within the mainstream white queer community. Engaging issues of racism within mainstream white queer communities, author M. L. Brooks and other contributing scholars articulate the trauma BIPOC bisexual women endure from existing in predominantly white lesbian and gay socio-political collectives in their essay "Ethnic Minority Bisexual Women: Understanding the Invisible Population." Brooks outlines these experiences in the lines,

> "Bisexual women of color face a unique type of oppression due to varying levels of power and privilege based on both race and sexual identity (Harper et al., 2004), and their experiences of oppression may cause stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental and physical problems (Dworkin, 2002). Bisexual women of color may experience

discrimination or be eroticized within the predominantly White LGB community (Harper et al., 2004; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004)" (Brooks 3).

Brooks's analysis of the unique form of psychological and physical stress BIPOC bisexual women experience, as part of the disrimination they face from the socially dominant white lesbian and gay community, offers additional insights into Rob's relationship with Kat. Rob, who throughout the series experiences various forms of mental and emotional distress, is triggered in her interaction with Kat, who epitomizes mainstream white queer insitutions and the racism they prepeuate in capitalzing on their positionalities as white people.

It is important to note that Rob is experiencing anti-Blackness in her encounters with white queer people. Anti-Blackess is important to call attention to as it has a unique place within queer history, particularly within the U.S. despite Black queer and trans people leading revolutionary queer socio-political movements. Academic Elena Kiesling articulates white queer communities historic anti-Blackness in her analytical text "The Missing Colors of the Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance." Investigating anti-Black legislation endorsed by white queer organizations, Kiesling addresses this history of violence and erasure in the lines,

> "The bill, which is most widely know as the Matthew Shepard Act (once again centering the white gay male, while dropping the name of the black male that was lynched) was passed as an attachment to a Department of Defense bill. This results in further funding for state institutions like the police and the military that ultimately target those that the act attempts to protect, or, in the case of the military, enable violent acts upon populations of color outside of the U.S. (Spade 2008). The third key element is the silence of leading LGBT organizations on the mass-incarceration of black bodies" (Kiesling 25).

Keisling offers a potent historical critique of dominant white queer organizations and their continued political alignment with anti-Black American institutions. Highlighting specific pieces of legislation that mainstream LGBTQ+ socio-political collectives admently or implicitly supported, Keisling articulates the ways in white queer communities perpeuate anti-Blackness in aligning with the state. This form of racism, specifically anti-Blackness and allegiance with the white supremacist state, has crucial implications for Rob's ablility to navigate her queer identity within the world of the show, particularly with Kat. The anti-Blackness Rob experiences in her previous and subsquent interaction with Kat is part and parcel to the historic anti-Blackness embedded within conformist, socially powerful white queer communities. Furthermore, as Kat accuses Rob of "always being in search of" herself, it's worth noting the implicit biphobia present in Kat's "reading" of Rob as a partner. Kat positions Rob as "lost", playing into stereotypes that bisexual women are merely "confused" or "lost" people searching for validation. While there is arguably a valuable critique around Rob's shortcomings as a romantic partner, it would be irresponsible and incorrect to not recognize the stigmas around the language Kat employs. Therefore, it is crucial to understand Rob's deconstruction of her problematic relationship with Kat as a reassertion of the validity and desirability of her Blackness, womanhood, and bisexuality. Rob's refutation of Kat's anti-Black, sexist stereotypes is inextricable from the ways in which Kat attempts to frame Rob's bisexuality as invalid, further engaging the deeply entwined colonial history of race, gender and bisexuality.

Contesting hegemonic forces of biphobia, anti-Blackness and sexism, Rob calls attention to the ways in which Kat uses her position as a "desirable" white woman to align herself with hegemonic social structures and maintain cultural norms. Centering her desires for her own life and defining herself as desirable, Rob repudiates hegemonic forces of whiteness in

de-glamorizing Kat's life, exposing it as essentially empty, via her frank, passionate dialogue with the audience and the narrative control she exercises throughout the scene. Rob's demythizing of whiteness as inherently valuable, in response to the violence imposed on her, challenges hegemony and centers her desires rather than the experiences or personhood of her white counterparts. Addressing the violent complexities of this interaction, Rob continues to prioritizes her desires in recognizing the ways in which Kat's desire for her is the product of violent envy. In doing so, Rob refutes hegemonic forces of sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia, specifically biphobia, in positioning her desires, body and experiences as valuable.

Much like "She's Gotta Have It" (2017), Hulu's original series "High Fidelity" is a television remake of the 2000 Stephen Frears film remake of the Nick Hornby novel *High Fidelity*. This "re-remake", with which Hornby is credited as an executive producer, earned substantial popularity prior to it's release largely because of the casting of Zoe Kravitz as Rob, which proved to be "fan bait" as Kravitz's mother, Lisa Bonet, played a beloved character in Frear's film. However, this digital "hype" quickly dissipated upon the release of the series. While multiple mainstream publications have bashed the show for being largely superficial, with a series of aesthetically compelling shots that lack meaningful or sincere content and rely heavily on Kravitz's inherent "coolness" as a pop culture figure, there has been less mainstream discussion of issues of race, particularly colorism and Black female stereotypes. An exception to this is an article in The New Yorker entitled "'High Fidelity' and 'Party of Five' Reboot Nineties Landmarks", written by Doreen St. Félix. St. Félix writes,

> "Curiously, 'High Fidelity' is unfashionably race-blind. It tends to launch signifiers of racial awareness but backs away from giving Rob a racial consciousness. Recalling her

> tumultuous relationship with Kat, she complains that Kat preferred white girls. The fact that all but one of Rob's exes are white—and that Mac, too, ends up engaged to a white woman, who posts photos of frosé on social media—is never explored. Something simmers between Cherise (Da'Vine Joy Randolph, who deserves better than her treacly arc) and Rob, the show's only two black women. At one point, after Rob warns Cherise against 'talking smack' to her, Cherise retorts with an intriguingly cutting barb. 'Talking smack, Robin?' she asks. 'I bet you feel extra black today.' The tension clearly springs from history, personal and otherwise, but, once again, the static instantly smooths" (St. Félix 3).

St. Félix articulates the ways in which the show avoids discussing race, specifically Blackness, despite initially receiving praise from the cultural mainstream for re-imagining these iconic characters as Black women. The show has been able to label itself as "revolutionary" because the writers chose to change Rob from a heterosexual straight white cis-gender man to a Black queer cis-gender woman but without doing the necessary work within the narrative to flesh out the nuances of Black queer female identity. Additionally, expressed in St. Félix's address of the character of Cherise, "High Fidelity" participates in a history of colorism, a conversation in which Kravitz has continually been cited, and stereotypes concerning Black women. An article published on the site Black Girl Nerds entitled "'High Fidelity': Alt-Black Girl Magic or Stereotypically Tragic?", written by Danielle Broadway, further explores the show's prevalent colorism and poor treatment of Cherise in the lines,

> "While petite light-skinned Rob gets to be an unconventional alt-Black girl badass, her thicker darker-skinned best friend Cherise (Da'Vine Joy Randolph) is perpetuated as the same stereotypical Black girl archetype that we're all just sick and tired of seeing.

> Cherise is loud, rude, distrustful and falls far behind Rob's other best friend’s, Simon (David H. Holmes), plot development. Unlike other characters, she gets no romantic interest or history to be explored. Cherise is presented as a confrontational, asexual, big Black girl” (Broadway 2).

Broadway critique’s the show’s casting of Kravitz, whom she describes as the more “palatable Black girl”, and the ways in which Cherise is reduced to a highly problematic stereotype that lacks any sort of substantial character development. Broadway’s critique proves significant as it highlights the various ways in which “High Fidelity” works to position itself as “radical” without actually offering a meaningful take on these iconic characters. It is paramount to note how these issues of characterization and identity are left out of the mainstream critique, offering additional implications to the ways in which television shows are imagined as “popular” by those in the so-called “cultural elite.” These critiques, particularly Broadway’s argument around fatphobia and colorism, are crucial to include in understanding the ways in which Rob is still privelged as a BIPOC bisexual woman in comparison to other characters within the series. This nuance offers a more complex analysis of the ways in which identity and desire function under the American white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Furthermore, these shortcomings call attention to how the white, straight screenwriters, Veronica West and Sarah Kucserka, impacted, limited and ultimately harmed the show’s characters, consequently resulting in how it was received by those outside of the cultural elite or mainstream.

Conclusion:

It is essential to consider how television as a medium has allowed for these influential narratives to be told, as well as how cultural reception or perceived cultural norms have

influenced the motivations of a series' writers and directors. These motivations ultimately impact the representation of key characters, particularly bisexual BIPOC women, in nuanced and complicated ways. Deconstructing Western notions of pleasure, "She's Gotta Have It" (2017), "The Bisexual" (2018) and "High Fidelity" (2019) offer radical representations of anti-hegemomic desire by and for BIPOC bisexual women. These characters employ desire, centering their experiences and identities, in contesting racism, sexism and homophobia, specifically biphobia. Despite historic damaging representations that defined BIPOC bisexual female character as demonic, dimensionless and hyper-sexual, Nola, Leila and Rob take control of their own narratives in working against the violent social structures that seek to diminish them, finding joy in places where they are told to feel shame. Further explored through the work of Micheal Bronski in *The Pleasure Principle: Culture, Backlash and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* and expanded on through contemporary queer scholarship, such as Monica Ghabrial's "'We Can Shapeshift and Build Bridges': Bisexual Women and Gender Diverse People of Color on Invisibility and Embracing the Borderlands" and Michaela Meyer's "Representing Bisexuality on Television: The Case for Intersectional Hybrids", these characters challenge hegemonic concepts of desire, presenting new possibilities for more radical television.

Engaging issues of representation, content, reception and form, academic and cultural conceptions of bisexuality must always be understood in relation to colonial histories, specifically colonial constructions of race and gender. This history is paramount in developing a more intersectional, radical address of the institutionalized biphobia, racism, and sexism that continues to plague the Western world. This argument is reflected in academic Merl Storr's text, "The sexual reproduction of 'race': Bisexuality, history and racialization" from *The Bisexual Imaginary* in the lines,

> "... the slippage [referring to bisexuality and racialization] are not merely incidental to the power-effects of racial and sexual discourses but are integral to those very effects, a crucial part of the production and regulation of sexual-racial subjects" (Storr 84).

As demonstrated in Storr's analysis, concepts of race, gender and bisexuality, as they are rooted in colonial histories, continue to inform one another, particularly how they are made, remade, and reinforced through interpersonal and structural interactions. This history is paramount as it continues to impact dominant Western notions of identity, further informing the complex, violent social structures that seek to police marginalized bodies. Bisexual, pansexual, and queer BIPOC women and gender non-conforming indivuals continue to lead the way in creating a more liberatory framework that reimagines the positions of those continually excluded from socio-political conversations. In developing a more nuanced and revolutionary future, within and beyond media apparatuses such as television, it is crucial to center those that have been pushed to the margins of society in creating a politic that addresses the intricacies of the global social structures marginalized individuals must face.

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