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Amarri J. Smallwood

*Grand Valley State University*, [smallwoa@mail.gvsu.edu](mailto:smallwoa@mail.gvsu.edu)

Ayana Weekley

*Grand Valley State University*, [weekleya@gvsu.edu](mailto:weekleya@gvsu.edu)

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A Black Feminist Content Analysis of Gender and Sexuality in *Living Single*

Amarri J. Smallwood

Dr. Ayana K. Weekley

Grand Valley State University

## Abstract

Between the 1980's and 1990's there were many female-centered sitcom television shows like *The Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, and *Sex in the City* that explored women's sexuality from an autonomous perspective. However, Black women's sexuality and the way that gender roles are challenged in sitcoms has yet to be examined as both oppositional and equally significant. This research focuses on the importance of resistant sexual and gender representations in the 1990's sitcom *Living Single*. This content analysis is drawn from four episodes in seasons one, two, and three. The study uses a Black Feminist theoretical framework to analyze how *Living Single* countered stereotypes of Black women's sexuality. Additionally, this project examines how *Living Single* challenged gender norms for Black women. The questions that will be explored are: How did *Living Single* provide alternative representations for Black women's gender and sexuality? In addition to, why is Black women's sexual freedom an important representation for television?

## ***Introduction***

*Living Single* is possibly one of the most authentic sitcom television shows that explored the lives of young African American women of the 90s'. The show captured the attention of many African Americans on Sunday night, with its all Black cast, relatable plot, and clever sense of humor, the show gave its audience something to laugh to, cry with, and discourse about (Zook, 1999). This research is a Black Feminist content analysis of gender and sexuality in *Living Single*, which explores how the sitcom displayed oppositional or resistant representations of gender and sexuality within their episodes. According to Patricia Hill Collins oppositional is defined as opposing, resisting, or combating unjust politically, social, and intellectual structures (Collins, 2016). In the context of this research, displaying oppositional representations of gender and sexuality for Black women is a way to resist against stereotypical depictions Black women have suffered from over the years. This project focuses on representations where the female characters Regine and Max challenged normative standards of sexuality and gender in the series.

Engaging in a Black Feminist content analysis of *Living Single* is important because positive representations for Black women in television matters. Visual depictions of Black women who are confident with their sexuality and in control of their bodies should not be confused with racist hypersexual stereotypes. Also, if Black Feminist do not challenge the way women of color are portrayed on television then those problematic ideals will remain broadcasted. Studies indicate that when stereotypical depictions of Black people are shown on television it can negatively affect the way they are viewed in the real world this is a better sentence than the previous (Ford, 1997). The main goal of this research is to provide a positive and liberating analysis of Black women in *Living Single* and transform the way sexuality and gender is viewed while watching the television show.

***Background on the show***

*Living Single* followed the lives of six young Black characters; Khadijah the journalist, Kyle the stockbroker, Overton the apartment's handyman, Regine the boutique buyer, Synclaire the aspiring actress/ Khadijah's assistant, and Maxine Shaw the attorney at law. All six characters tried to balance their careers, intimate relationships, and friendships all while living single in Brooklyn, New York. The Brownstone apartments is where all of the characters lived except Maxine who lived across the street, but often made herself at home in Khadijah, Synclaire, and Regine's apartment on the first floor. Above them lived Kyle and Overton, the longtime best friends from Cleveland, Ohio who were quite the opposite, but viewed each other as kin. Khadijah James (Queen Latifah) was a successful business woman who owned *Flavor*, a magazine that centered the lives and voices of the African American community. In the show Khadijah could be viewed as the most level headed out of the four women and often gives advice to the others when she is not battling her own issues. Regine Hunter (Kim Fields) was the materialist boutique buyer who always vocalized her love for attractive men with more attractive wallets. Synclaire James (Kim Coles) was Khadijah's rather simple cousin that worked as Khadijah's assistant at *Flavor* and eventually followed her dream to become an actress. Maxine Shaw (Erika Alexander) was the robust attorney who loved food, sex, and her career more than anything else in the world. Overton Wakefield Jones (John Henton) was the Brownstones handyman who is most famous for his empty wisdom and obsession with Synclaire. Residing with Overton was Kyle Barker (T.C Carson) the metrosexual stockbroker who loved jazz, African art, and Maxine.

***Literature Review***

Intellectual conversations surrounding *Living Single* appeared in Bretta Smith-Shomade's

*Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television*, Wendy Burns- Ardolino *Female Foursomes and Their Fans*, and Imani M. Cheers' *The Evolution of Black Women in Television; Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses*, where they all discussed how the *Living Single* characters abided by or resisted against stereotypical images of Black women. Black women were usually portrayed as the jezebel, mammy or matriarch. <sup>i</sup>

*Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television* was written to inform readers on how and why Black women were under-examined in popular culture. In chapter two, Smith-Shomade expressed why the show's hip-hop aesthetic was important and informed the readers on how some of the female characters opposed stereotypical storylines for Black women. The author expressed the significance of *Living Single*'s theme song and how it symbolized a beginning to the new Black woman of the nineties. The opening credits started with all of the characters dancing in unity while Queen Latifah rapped about living single and being in solidarity with Black women in the nineties. To Smith-Shomade, the lyrics and visual representations was a form of resistance for Black women to be unapologetic about their Blackness and free to express themselves (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 48). Smith-Shomade then proceeded to discuss the Black Feminist representations in characters Khadijah and Maxine.

Khadijah's character was a young, Black, big, outspoken woman who owned *Flavor* magazine which was dedicated to providing a voice for the African American community (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 52). Her character often challenged societal norms for what it meant to be a successful Black woman. Khadijah frequently expressed her pride and independence throughout the series and was never afraid to stand up for Black women. Smith-Shomade described Maxine as the other Black Feminist of the show because of her intelligence, strong-will and openness about sex. Maxine refused to let a man define her or keep her contained and

always let people know that whatever a man did, she can do better (Smith-Shomade, 2002 p. 53). According to Smith-Shomade, Maxine was the epitome of a Black Feminist who did not conform to the stereotypical representations of Black women, instead she was a positive representation of Black women loving themselves, sex, and their girlfriends (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Equivalent to Smith-Shomade's critical critique about the progressiveness of *Living Single*, Cheers focused more on how *Living Single* was one of many shows that repeated stereotypes for Black women.

In *The Evolution of Black Women in Television*, Cheers explored the complexities of the word mistress in relation to Black women on television (Cheers, 2018 p. 50). She argues that in the 21st century Black women are rarely portrayed as mummies and matriarchs anymore but are "Multidimensional Mistresses" instead. The multidimensional mistress is a powerful woman with authority and is not to be confused with the jezebel stereotype. In regards to *Living Single*, the characters would easily fit the multidimensional mistress description because they were self-sufficient women with professions and dignity (Cheers, 2018 p. 51). Cheers described *Living Single* as the first television show to shed light on young African American women who were professionals and self-sufficient (Cheers, 2018 p. 51). Cheers analysis on the single woman or "mistress" allowed room for other depictions of Black women that were not jezebels or mummies. She made it clear that the mistress representation provided a more positive and uplifting definition for Black women and the characters in *Living Single* were examples of that image. The importance of Smith-Shomade and Cheers' examination of *Living Single* was to highlight the progressive and positive representations *Living Single* provided for Black women. Although their analysis confirms that oppositional representations existed in the show, it does not mention the ways in which sexuality and gender roles specifically, were resistant.

Burns-Ardolino's *Female Foursomes and Their Fans* on the other hand, paid attention to the ways in which fans viewed the 1990's sitcom as a source for repeated stereotypical representations for Black women. In the second chapter "Matriarchs, Naifs, Jezebels, and Virgins, Burns-Ardolino acknowledged the virgin/whore dichotomy of women on television and gave examples on why fans thought that certain characters in *Living Single* were examples of matriarchs, naifs, jezebels and virgins. In the chapter Khadijah was characterized as mammy, Maxine as Sapphire, Regine as jezebel, and Synclaire as the naif or tragic mulatto (Burns-Ardolino, 2017, p. 41). Even though fans thought of the characters as stereotypical tropes, Burns-Ardolino went on to explore the complexities of *Living Single's* female foursome. She argues that thinking of them in the virgin/whore dichotomy leaves no room to explore the solidarity, woman spaces, sisterhood, and woman talk that they gave one another (Burns-Ardolino, 2017, p. 41). Her perspective offers ambiguity to how the female characters express their gender and sexuality, but she does not completely dismiss the stereotypical depictions of them. One thing that all of these scholars have in common is their analysis on the potential of *Living Single* having resistant representations, but falling short due to the harmful depictions of Black women. On the other hand, this project focuses on portraying *Living Single* female characters as liberated women of the nineties who uniquely challenged the ideals of sexuality and gender for Black women.

### ***Research Method***

For this project I engaged in a Black Feminist content analysis. A content analysis is a systematic research method used to study text and other cultural products that are not living (Leavy, 2007). Content analysis is a great way for feminist to generate descriptive ideas and theories on any subject they choose. With content analysis I was be able to efficiently investigate



the ways in which women and people of color are portrayed in the sitcom. A Feminist content analysis adopts the same method except that feminist aim to change the perspectives on subjects like race, gender, class, and sexuality. A Black Feminist content analysis is similar except that it aims to center the representations, lives, and voices of people of color. Engaging in a Black feminist content analysis allowed room for interpretation in my data so that I could analyze what was absent or silenced in the sitcom. Over the course of seven weeks I watched seasons one through five of *Living Single* all while taking notes and searching for recurrent themes. To analyze how the show provided oppositional representations of gender and sexuality I looked for moments where gender roles switched for Regine and Maxine while in intimate relationships. Meaning, sometimes they behaved in more masculine ways while dating men. Some questions I asked were “how did the women interact with their male partners?”, “Were the women passive, hyper feminine, or highly emotional?” I also explored their conversations surrounding sex and asked “How did the women talk about sex?”, “Were they shy when having these conversations?” Did they objectify men, if so, how?”

Establishing codes and developing a codebook was the next step for my research. Codes are defined as tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study (DeCuir et al, 2011). In other words, codes were themes produced by the researcher in order to assign meaning to recurrent themes in a text. The codebook is the set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyze data (DeCuir et al, 2011). The codebook was the process of breaking down the themes I examined from the show, providing definitions for them and finally using examples to support it. Initially there were a total of thirteen codes that ranged from topics like; slang usage, blunt honesty/ jokingly insults, spaces of comfort, challenged gender roles, pride, patriarchy/ masculinity,

conflict sexuality, clothing, solidarity, reconciliation, support and beauty standards/hyperfemininity. While revising the initial codebook I learned to combine potential topics that could essentially create a larger category. Moving forward, I also had to be mindful of how I defined and provided examples for to each code. It was in the process of revising the initial codebook where the codes of gender and sexuality became ascending themes to the research and ultimately became the resistance or oppositional representation I was looking for within the show. After the codebook was fully revised, seven codes remained which were; sexuality, challenged gender norms, pride, hyperfemininity / beauty standards, conflict/ reconciliation, support/ solidarity.

After reviewing the literature and establishing my last seven codes I had decided that I wanted to provide a fresh analysis of only the representations of gender and sexuality in *Living Single*. Therefore, the next goal was to re-analyze the episodes in which resistant representations of sexuality and gender were present. The code sexuality was described as all of the women being confident with their sexuality (especially characters Maxine and Regine) and often expressed how much they loved sex. I analyzed four episodes where oppositional representations of gender and sexuality happened more frequently. The code challenged gender roles/ norms was described as paying attention to how gender roles were switched when Regine and Maxine were in intimate relationships and noticing how the two characters objectified men. After declaring gender and sexuality as the main focus the next step was to re-analyze the four episodes and provide examples of oppositional representations.

### ***Regine & Max Reclaiming Sexuality***

The reason why *Living Single* was so different than shows like *Friends* or *Sex in the City* is because of its progressive ideals about representations of Black women's sexuality and their

roles in intimate relationships. In Shayne Lee's book *Erotic Revolutionaries; Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, he began to talk about the complicated history of Black women and sexual repression and how that history forced some Black women to think conservatively about sexuality and carefully supervise their image to avoid being the hypersexual stereotype society wants them to be (Lee, 2010, p. viii).<sup>ii</sup> This ideal of Black women maintaining a conventional lifestyle, one that suppresses their sex life is an act of oppression that should be challenged. With keeping the idea of reclaiming sexuality in mind and focusing on how the women challenged gender roles I noticed that these representations mostly occurred in Regine and Maxine's storylines.

Regine never shied away from informing the other women about her intimate relationships and how she felt about the men in her life. In the first episode of the series Regine swiftly walked into *Flavor Magazine* headquarters to gloat about her sexual encounters with her new boyfriend Brad to Synclaire and Khadijah. In the scene Regine briefly describes the sexual activities her and Brad engaged in while vividly objectifying his buttocks. She described Brad as "fine, educated, and wealthy with a butt that's dented on the sides with a promise of power (Browser & Singletary, 1993). Regine's first appearance was a perfect example of Regine reclaiming her sexuality and expressing sexual freedom. Openly discussing her and Brad's sexual encounters meant that she was not afraid of judgement or being viewed as a promiscuous Black woman. In that scene Regine was fully confident with talking about sex in public and did not see it as taboo.

Even though throughout the series Regine's character development focused on overcoming her shallow and conceited ways there was never a moment where her sexuality was jeopardized. In episode sixteen of season three Regine found herself in a unique situation dating

both a father and son. After visiting her new acquaintance Cole (Mario Van Peebles) at his job at a weather station in Brooklyn she ran into another man named Warner (Melvin Van Peebles). Warner flirted with Regine and asked if she could accompany him to an event in his honor later that evening. Regine flirted back with Warner and accepted the offer even though her potential new boyfriend Cole was in the other room. It is soon after Regine and Warner's interaction that the audience discovers that Warner and Cole are related. Throughout the episode Regine balanced both dates with Warner and Cole quite nicely and when Synclaire asked if both men knew about each other Regine laughed and expressed that she liked them both, but there was no EOM also known as expectations of monogamy (Browser & Gittelsohn, 1996). Meaning, she was content with dating both men at the same time and did not feel pressured to follow normal expectations of dating. In this episode, Regine continues to disrupt normal patterns of sexuality and even gender roles. Normally, in television women are mainly concerned with the need of love, relationships, and commitment (Milestone, 2012, p. 88), but Regine is different because of the non-monogamous behavior and her ability to control how her intimate relationships function.

By the middle of the episode Regine found out that Warner and Cole were related, but she still continued to date them both. After having a minor panic attack Regine came to the conclusion that she was not doing anything wrong. In the episode she says "This is so... nineties. I mean come on Khadijah just because they are related, why should I penalize them? (Browser & Gittelsohn, 1996)". Regine was more than open to the idea of having relationships with both men and that was a representation of sexuality in the nineties that people did not recognize. Typically men in television are the ones who are managing dates with multiple women and are often praised for it. Regine's double dates refuted the conventional lifestyle that Black women were supposed to uphold because of the jezebel stereotype. Similar to Regine, Maxine was another

character in *Living Single* that challenged normal gender roles for women in intimate heterosexual relationships.

Maxine whose nickname was the Maverick because of her free and autonomous lifestyle always dominated episode scenes as well as her intimate relationships. The first episode of season two is the audiences' first glimpse of Maxine and Kyle's intimate relationship. After having sex while intoxicated they both avoided each other in the first ten minutes of the episodes because of embarrassment, but eventually Kyle asked Maxine out on a date. During their dinner date, Kyle asked Maxine to clarify their relationship status and Maxine expressed that she much rather not get into a relationship and remain friends.

Eventually through the series, Maxine and Kyle began dating, but it soon ended because of Maxine's lack of affection for Kyle. In episode seventeen of season three, Kyle grew angry with Maxine because she encouraged him to go out with another woman while they were dating. When responding to his confusion Maxine said that she was not his warden and did not care if he accepted the date. After Kyle returned home, he and Maxine began to argue about the absence of tenderness she has for him. He explained, "I want a woman who is affectionate, a woman that has a picture of me in her apartment, I want a woman that does not send me on dates with other women (Browser & Gittelsohn, 1996)". Maxine challenged his desires by stating that he did not want a girlfriend, but a psychiatrist that is good in bed and asked if she does not make him happy then why they are together, which resulted in Kyle ending their relationship. This episode is a clear example of an oppositional representation of gender roles within the female characters intimate relationships. Maxine's lack of affection and non-possessiveness are traits that are rarely depicted with women and dating on television. Ordinarily we see female characters chasing after men for intimate relationships and love, but this representation was different and that is why

*Living Single* is important. This series gave viewers Black women who were bold with their sexual decisions and did not burden themselves with what others thought of them. Regine and Maxine should be viewed as an inspiration to all Black women who are not confident with challenging norms of gender and sexuality.

### ***Conclusion***

This research is relevant because it analyzes oppositional ideals for Black women's representations of gender and sexuality in television. An important outcome of this research is to always be critical about the ways in which Black women are portrayed in television especially in the context of gender and sexuality. Black women being cognizant of how damaging stereotypical images are would give them the influence to reclaim their image and develop revolutionary representations of themselves which is why this project is important. This research aims to showcase why positive representations of Black women being comfortable with different sexual and gender experiences matter and should be recognized by everyone. Black women refuting stereotypes and conventional norms of sexuality and gender is a step forward into radical change of how we view those topics.

Initially, this project focused on how *Living Single* provided Black Feminist representations of friendship and community for Black women, but while re-analyzing and conducting the literature review, topics like gender and sexuality kept reappearing. Although I wanted to avoid contributing to the conversations surrounding sex and the women in *Living Single* there was an opportunity to think differently about how sex and gender was represented through characters Regine and Maxine. So, instead of focusing on Black women's friendship and solidarity I decided to shift how sex and gender is viewed within the show.

In the future, the two topics could possibly align together, exploring how Black women's friendships shape their openness about challenging the norms of gender and sexuality is an issue that should be analyzed. Also even comparing *Living Single* to other Black female centered televisions shows to investigate the differences in how they represent gender and sexuality is another option. As someone who is interested in completing more Black Feminist content analyses I am interested in the lack of representations of Black queer women and the way their sexuality is portrayed because of their queerness. When Black Feminist engage in content analysis they aim to expose problematic representations then focus on changing those perspectives. That is why examining how Black women are portrayed in the media is an ongoing interest that does not end with *Living Single*.

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<sup>i</sup> Jezebels are Black women who are inevitably promiscuous and sexually aggressive (Collins, 1990, p. 81). The Jezebel uses her body to her advantage, more often than not to exploit men. The idea of the Jezebel appeared before the Civil War when African enslaved women were used and perceived as reproductive machines and only recognized for their libido (Gray-White, 1999, p. 29). The reason why hypersexuality was linked to the Black female image is because of the forced reproductive labor they participated in. People who were accustomed to speaking and writing about the bondwoman's reproductive abilities could hardly help associating her with licentious behavior (Gray-White, 1999, p. 31). Forced exposure was another reason why promiscuity was assigned to Black women and their bodies. In the antebellum south during the times of slavery, to be a "respectable" woman was to be fully clothed showing no body parts and maintain a certain type of femininity, one that White men could deem acceptable. Since Black women were forced on auction blocks fully naked at times and left to be harassed it led to an unconscious equating of Black women with promiscuity (Gray-White, 1999, p. 32). After the Civil War the Jezebel stereotype and label still remained for Black women and the mammy figure appeared as well.

The mammy was a sweet Black fat woman who was very obedient and deeply cared for her master and his family. Mammy's were responsible for taking on the "mother" or nanny role for White children and often cared about others well-being more than her own (Gray-White, 1999, p. 47). This fictional role of the Black women influenced a belief that Black women were put on this earth to obey and be at the service for others even if it means not taking care of themselves. She was also seen as asexual and a "respectable" woman who did not tolerate vulgar behavior unlike the Jezebel. In all, the mammy character dedicated her life to White families and was mostly known for domestic work (Gray- White, 1999 p. 49). Along with the jezebel and mammy figure was the matriarch.

In Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, she gave a description of how matriarchs were portrayed, as independent women who choose to not serve or remain submissive unlike the mammy (Collins, 1990, p. 75). The matriarch serves as a different kind of threat because her character aims to dismantle patriarchy and she doesn't need sex or a White family to achieve that (Collins, 1990 p. 75). All of these images are stemmed from racist ideologies from slavery. The mammy would be the Black women who cared for White children, Jezebels are Black women who dangerously captured White men with their bodies, and the matriarch is the angry Black women non-Black

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people are afraid of. According to Collins, these depictions of Black women are meant to control them and their images. These representations are meant to make racism, sexism, poverty, and misogyny seem normal, natural and inevitable for Black women (Collins, 1990, p.). When stereotypical images are repeated, having resistant depictions that refute those images almost seems impossible, but what this research does is challenge those ideals by expressing the importance of the oppositional representations *Living Single* provided for Black women. With that being said reviewing the literature other scholars produced on *Living Single* and seeing how they examined the characters in relation to the stereotypical characters is an important aspect of this research.

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<sup>ii</sup> It is no secret that Black women have always been treated differently than White women when beauty, sexuality or femininity is the topic of discussion. In Deborah Gray-White's book *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Gray-White discussed the intersecting issues of race, gender, and class that essentially made Black women face a special kind of oppression, one that cannot be experienced by Black men nor White women (Gray-White, 1999). In other words, because they are Black and female, Black women simultaneously struggle against racism and sexism and cannot separate their identity. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* is an important book because Gray-White focuses on how those intersecting issues contributed to the sexual oppression of Black women. Depicting Black women's bodies as abnormal and exotic started in the 1660's where Englishmen constructed Black women's bodies as monstrous and grotesque, savage enough to deem all Africans inferior in contrast to English people (Gray-White, 1999). During the times of slavery Black women were never in full control of their bodies and were subjected to rape and other sexual abuse. Black women were forced to have children and forced participants in gynecology experiments (Gray-White, 1999). The abuse and negative connotations assigned to Black women would haunt them for centuries and force them to engage in battles between them and the world about their bodies and sexual image. The battles would include loving their bodies despite normal standards of beauty and embracing their sexuality even when they are hypersexualized.