



**“THEIR TIME, THEIR MOMENT, THEIR CITY”:  
A CRITIQUE AND BLACK FEMINIST READING OF *HARLEM***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article analyzes the first season of Tracy Oliver’s comedy series *Harlem* (2021) through the lens of Black Feminism. Invoking combined traces of *Living Single* (1993–1998) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), I contend *Harlem* opposes the lack of representation that has erased Black women from mainstream comedies that are reduced to the White experience as it also pursues to transgress the stigmatizing image of Black women in mainstream popular culture. In this manner, Oliver’s *Harlem* addresses several aspects of the Black female experience and shows the gendered racism Black women endure, such as racial stereotypes, medical mistreatment, or White women’s tears, among many others. Prioritizing social accuracy and racial sensibilities through comedy, *Harlem* follows the lives of four Black women in the neighborhood of Harlem in the twenty-first century.

*Keywords:* Black Women; Black Feminism; Popular Culture; New York City; Racial Stereotypes, White Women’s Tears.

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The lack of inclusion and diversity in the most popular (White) American TV series, such as *Friends* (1994) and *Sex and the City* (1998), is nothing new. This might be the reason why the reboot of the latter, *And Just Like That...* (2021), included new characters from diverse backgrounds, with articulated identities and different ethnicities. In a recent article published in *The Guardian*, Andrew Lawrence (2022) notices that “[t]elevision in the 90s assumed its audience was either Black or White” (n.p.), and points out that Marta Kauffman, the producer of *Friends*, recently confessed that she regrets the lack of inclusivity in the production and narrative shaping of the show. Kauffman argued that the exclusion of people of color from her show, following Greg Braxton’s words, “was a symptom of her internalization of the systemic racism that plagues our [US] society” (2022, n.p.). However, Lawrence asserts that Kauffman has produced more “Whitewashing” shows after *Friends* and emphasizes that sitcoms such as *Living Single* (1993)—produced by Yvette Lee Bowser and which follows a group of Black friends living in New York City—

existed before *Friends* (n.p.). Despite the apparent oblivion it has fallen into, *Living Single* was the first show on American television to revolve around the Black female experience. Following four twenty-year-old Black women living in Brooklyn, the series centers around their dating experiences and their careers while it explores Black female friendship.

In an article that celebrates the 25th anniversary of *Living Single*, Hannah Giorgis (2018) remarks that Yvette Lee Bowser was encouraged to produce the sitcom after she realized that most stories on TV only “catered” and “embraced” White people and, principally, White men. Hence, Bowser was encouraged to switch the focus to the Black experience while finding a place of her own in the industry (n.p.). For instance, Black feminist author Roxanne Gay writes her appreciation of *Living Single* in *Bad Feminist* (2014) because, she argues, it allowed Black women “to recognize themselves” in the narrative and setting (60). This not only highlights the aforementioned racial divide on TV and the social racism accepted in American popular culture but also the intersectional discrimination Black women have historically endured and has been accompanied by the silencing of their lives and experiences in popular media. According to Giorgis (2018), *Living Single* has been the blueprint of the worldwide popular sitcom *Friends* (1999–2007) as well as many other productions, including the more recent show distributed by HBO *Insecure* (2016–2021). And yet, despite its significant impact on the industry, *Living Single* is still unknown to many, lacking the credit it deserves.

Representation of marginalized groups in popular culture has not evolved much from how it seemed to work in the 1990s. Most shows are created and produced by primarily White teams and feature predominantly White casts, while actors from minority groups are frequently relegated to supporting and tertiary roles. That is the case of Charlie (Aisha Tyler), the only Black character with more protagonism in *Friends* because of her relationship with Ross (David Lawrence Schwimmer), and in *And Just Like That...*, Lisa (Nicole Ari Parker) substitutes Samantha (Kim Cattrall), one of four original (White) protagonists of *Sex and the City*. Therefore, the workings of the entertainment industry are clear: twenty-first-century shows still favor White supremacy and the representation of Whiteness, while the narratives about “the Other” are secondary, irrelevant, and not central to the (White) American experience. The lack of representation is even more noticeable when it comes to Black women. In her monograph *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay (2014) expands widely on this matter and touches upon this topic in several of the essays in the collection. Foremost, Gay criticizes “[the] general erasure or ignorance of race” in popular culture (5) and expresses her tiredness of the focalization of popular culture of the White experience, demanding a change: “We need more. We need pop culture that demonstrates not only the ways people are different but also the ways we are very much alike” (253). Apart, in the essay “Beyond the Struggle Narrative,” Gay alleges that “slave and struggle narratives . . . are not enough anymore” when talking about the Black

community (231–32), and, in “Feel Me,” Gay dreams about popular culture that shows Black people succeeding in careers that are not stereotypical, for instance, sports or music (6).

This article analyses the first season of Tracy Oliver’s comedy series *Harlem* (2021) through the lens of Black Feminism to examine its Black feminist essence. Aiming to fulfill Gay’s expectations and hopes in the possibility to develop adequate representation, at the same time it pays tribute to *Living Single* with a touch of *Sex and the City*, *Harlem* articulates Black female representation and incites insight into the lack of Black representation in current popular shows, highlighting the workings of American society and its racial idiosyncrasies.

### 1. *HARLEM*: A PLACE OF THEIR OWN IN THE CITY OF DREAMS

*Harlem* is an Amazon Prime Video original production created and directed by Tracy Oliver and released on December 3, 2021. According to Ryan Fleming, (2022) “Tracy Oliver created *Harlem* based on her own life experiences, because she wanted more stories of Black friendship out there” (n.p.), which resonates with Bowser’s motivation. *Harlem* follows four Black best friends, their careers, lovers, and adventures. The show is a fictional portrait of Black women’s lives in New York in the twenty-first century, fighting for their professional and personal goals. As the slogan of the official trailer states: it is their time, their moment, and their city.



Figure 1 Official poster featuring the protagonists, from left to right: Angie, Quinn, Camille, and Tye.

Camille Parks (Meagan Good) is the main protagonist in *Harlem*. She holds a Ph.D. in anthropology and works as an adjunct professor at Columbia, aiming to achieve an associate professor position. Besides her professional preoccupations, to make her life more complicated she is still in love with her ex-fiancé, despite having broken the engagement to pursue her academic career in New York. Angie Wilson (Shoniqua Shandi) plays the role of the extrovert friend who openly expresses her sexuality through her relationships with Black men. She wants to pursue a career as a singer and achieve stardom, but her attempts are thwarted by her struggles to find and maintain a stable job. Their queer and overachieving workaholic friend is Tye Reynolds (Jerrie Johnson), the triumphant CEO of a dating app created for queer people of color. Her storyline begins with a complicated relationship with a White woman and provides an intriguing insight into interracial relationships, as she feels as though she is “betraying” Black women for it. The fourth friend of the group who dreams of living *la vie en rose* is Quinn Joseph (Grace Byers), an entrepreneur who relies on her family’s money to sustain her boutique and who will start a relationship with a professional male stripper. Although *Harlem* pays tribute to *Living Single* playing with its formula and following its main structure, indeed it seems to parallel the famous girlfriend-comedy plot and setting (NYC) of *Sex and the City*, solving the lack of representation of the former while rooting its narrative in the Black neighborhood of Harlem and showing that the Black experience has always been a key part in New York City. Thus—considering a certain parallelism between Star’s and Oliver’s characters—*Harlem* shows Black women could also be the protagonists of *Sex and the City*, moving beyond the traditional and much-exploited struggle narrative that Gay mentions. However, the series still exposes how their lives are shaped by the intersection of their race and gender.

The reminiscence of *Sex and The City* is, however, problematic. Despite the show’s authenticity in following the explorations of these four thirty-something best friends and including characters distinctive of female Black culture, *Harlem* neglects lower-class Black women and circumscribes its own intersectional activism to middle- and upper-class contexts. Angie is the only friend in the group facing economic problems and yet her presence is not enough to complete the intersectional equation developed by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and which is a central pillar of Black Feminism. Angie enjoys a better quality of life by living at Quinn’s apartment for free, which allows her to continue pursuing her dream life even without a stable job. And yet, despite this shortcoming, *Harlem* proves to be effective in making true two of Gay’s wishes: showing Black women detached from traditional slave and struggle narratives—in terms of exploiting compelling tragic personal stories related to slavery and similar contexts—and portraying Black women developing in diverse career fields as entrepreneurs, academics, and chief executive officers, not limited to subordinate labor or stereotyped careers

because of their race. Black women have historically endured hardship, suffering, and struggle because of the socioeconomic status they hold in society, positioned at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy pyramid (hooks [1981] 2015a, 78). Still to this day, Black women experience overwhelming racial and gendered conflicts (Jerkins 2018; McMillan Cottom 2019; Kendall 2020; Hamad 2020; Schuller 2021) which include, among many others, microaggressions, detrimental stereotypes, or so-called “White women’s tears,” as this article discusses in the following section. Then, as an audiovisual narrative, *Harlem* puts these racial sensitivities in the spotlight.

*Harlem’s* approach to these issues may be misperceived, especially by a White audience. For instance, in *The Guardian’s* “Harlem Review” (2021), Adrian Horton writes that “[*Harlem*] sometimes feels stumped by what to do beyond calling out its representational politics” (n.p.). Horton continued criticizing Oliver’s production with the following words: “But with characters whose bits wear thin, punchlines that frequently boil down to horniness and explanations of racist dynamics that feel pulled from an Instagram slideshow, *Harlem* often tests the limits of representation as justification.” I disagree with Horton’s reading of *Harlem*. It is much more than “just” representation. The shows that revolve around the White experience, such as *Sex and the City*, do not fall under the same kind of scrutiny. White characters are rarely examined in racial terms despite Whiteness. Thus, *Harlem* is about comedy, entertainment, and, foremost, Black female empowerment. This does not mean the show is cinematically perfect, yet its mastery lies in the fact that it carries a socially committed message in its pocket. *Harlem* addresses struggle as one side of the Black experience without making it its core, unveiling real-life racial dynamics.

As I argue in this article, *Harlem* is soaked with Black feminist thought because, despite its short run, the show’s length was long enough to address specific issues, such as racial epithets, gentrification, the politics of Black women’s hair, medical experimentations of Black people, “White women’s tears,” the “strong Black woman” and the mammy stereotypes; the series even plays with intertextual references to Black culture by featuring Jordan Peele’s masterpiece in a fictional new format, *Get Out: The Musical*. Representation is intrinsically political and how the subject is projected onto the screen not only reflects but also influences its audience and the real world. Regarding Black women’s misrepresentation, Moya Bailey and Trudy coined the term “misogynoir” to address the joint forces of misogyny and racism, which not only takes their life experiences as irrelevant but also devalues and silences them (Gassam Asare 2020). As Moya Bayley posits (2018), misogynoir notes “both an historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture” (762). Indeed, *Harlem* works against misogynoir and aims to reverse Black women’s marginalization from mainstream popular culture’s audiovisual narratives by giving them a voice



through fiction and making their experience the core, giving them a narrative of their own, albeit partial.

Apart from engaging with the Black female experience, *Harlem* addresses multiple issues that characterize the Black community. For instance, the show exposes police brutality and implicitly criticizes it in a scene in which Camille passes by a graffiti wall with a clear political message which might go unnoticed in the rush of watching the episodes:

You don't have to answer any questions from police. When they approach, say, "Am I being detained, or am I free to go?" If they detain you, stay silent [and] demand a lawyer. A frisk is only a pat down. If police try to do more than that, say loudly, "I do not consent to this search."  
(fig. 2)

In the article "Can A Mural Save Your Life?" (2016) for *BuzzFeed News*, Emily Raboteau notes this mural can be found in Harlem, in "upper Manhattan, 138th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard." The power of these words goes beyond the fictional realm as they undoubtedly refer to the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality. Apart from showing an actual spot in Harlem, these words have the power of being engraved in one's memory through the screen while waiting for the series to start. Hence, if ever a Black viewer should find himself or herself a victim in a situation of police brutality, these instructional words could save their life.



Figure 2 Full view of the mural used in the show's opening for season 1. Artist: Sophia Dawson (2013).

*Harlem* also addresses the problem of gentrification when Camille uses her social media presence to criticize the new bistro that is going to be inaugurated soon in Harlem. As

Kelly Kreth (2021) notes in *Brick Underground*, gentrification in the show connects with the careers of the protagonists as “[t]he story lines weave NYC and real estate issues,” and who concludes the comedy “offers a very stylistic and modern look at a unique neighborhood” (n.p.). Besides, *Harlem* finds a way to discuss racial epithets when Quinn and Camille meet at a yoga class. There, they complain about their love lives and criticize Black men using the N-word as part of their African American vernacular speech. The White yoga instructor warns them that racial epithets are not allowed in that space and Camille explains to her they can use the N-word because they are Black. Despite Camille’s attempt to educate her on their right to use the N-word, the White yoga instructor asks them to leave the studio. The irony of this scene is shown through its dynamic between a White woman in power and two Black women: it is the former who reprimands the latter for using the word her own racial community started using four hundred years ago. Incredulous at the situation, Quinn and Camille twerk as they sing the N-word in protest. The dynamics of White supremacy are represented in the yoga class distribution of the attendees. In the first row, there are three White women—who gaze at each other perplexed by the Black women’s performance (fig. 3). Meanwhile, three Black women and an Asian woman are in the back row. Ironically, the yoga class arrangement mirrors social structures and demographics in American society: women of color belong to the second row as if they were second-class citizens.



Figure 3 Quinn and Camille twerking in protest, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

## 2. OF BLACK WOMEN, HAIR, AND IDENTITY

*Harlem* celebrates the (partial) diversity of the Black female experience through its four main protagonists. It portrays a variety of skin complexions, featuring both dark-skinned

and light-skinned Black women, without cataloging them according to White-beauty ideals or falling into colorist attitudes. Also, *Harlem* celebrates Black hairstyles and natural hair, featuring Angie's afro, Camille's box braids, Tye's short natural haircut, and even Quinn's balayaged and straightened hair. This visual message is of utmost importance because, due to White hegemonic beauty standards, Black women's natural hair has been undermined in contrast to blond and straightened hair (hooks [1992] 2015b). While Morgan Jerkins (2018) posits that American society "is still grappling with how to control Black women's bodies and identities through their hair" (42), Ibram X. Kendi (2016) contends that Black hairstyles have long been considered "unprofessional" (421). Reversing this narrative and symbolizing the natural hair movement Jerkins assures is taking place at present (55), in *Harlem* both Camille and Dr. Pruitt—the two women working at Columbia, a White-dominated Ivy League institution—wear box braids and dreadlocks with pride.

In the fourth episode of the first season, "Winter Solstice," *Harlem* further explores the politics of hair for Black women and tackles how hair-related issues are a delicate topic for them. Black women's natural hair is at the center of racist criticism and discrimination both outside and within their own community. Condemned for its unique features in terms of texture, thickness, and natural growth, which contrast with prototypical Caucasian hair, Black women's hair is a double-edged sword as it can be both a source of pride or the factor that prompts the denigration and derision of Black women's worth. Because of this, Russell-Cole et al. (2013) acknowledge hair as "political" for Black women (155). In the episode, Tye is excited about her photoshoot for her desired *Forbes* cover, but after a disastrous experience at the hairdresser's, she has to shave her head the day before. The relevance of this situation is clear, as recent events related to Black women and their hair, such as Chris Rock's "joke" about Jada Pinkett Smith's shaved head, who suffers from alopecia, at the 2022 Oscars Gala by indirectly comparing her to Lieutenant Jordan O'Neil (Demi Moore), the protagonist of *G.I. Jane* (1997) because of her shaved head (Barnes and Sperling 2022, n.p.). The denigration of Black women's natural hair as well as the vulnerability that baldness fosters has encouraged the use of wigs and other forms of fake hair which at the same time have resulted in mockery around Black women's "inability to meet femme beauty standards" (McMillan Cottom 2019, 204). Rock, as a Black man and the producer of the documentary *Good Hair* (2009), should have been aware of the impact of his words and the susceptibility hair represents for Black women, making even more inappropriate his comparison of a Black women's hair in real life to a fictional White female character's. In *Harlem*, the use of wigs is both celebrated and addressed naturally. At the sight of Tye's burnt hair, Angie offers her friend "Trina," her "ever-present [wig] in case of emergency"—who confesses to her friends that she carries it with her "all the time" (*Harlem*, ep. 4, 19:20 – 19:31). Nonetheless, "Trina" neither fits Tye's identity nor her personality. Looking at herself in the mirror wearing Angie's wig,



Tye repeats to herself out loud as a mantra, “I am not my hair. My hair doesn’t define me. I am not my hair. My hair doesn’t define me” (fig. 4).



*Figure 4* Tye wearing “Trina” and repeating her mantra, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

While she is trying to convince herself with the mantra, Anna, Tye’s White interviewer and love interest, arrives and both women address Tye’s new looks. Showing her vulnerability, Tye takes off the wig and exposes her shaved scalp to Anna, waiting for her reaction and disapproval (fig. 5).



*Figure 5* Tye waiting for Anna’s reaction, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

That the series shows Tye in this situation, the one friend of the group with seemingly higher self-esteem and better self-image is crucial as it extols the idea that hair for Black women transcends mere appearance: even the most self-assured Black woman could be defeated by an unwanted haircut or hairstyle. However, Anna celebrates Tye's hair and claims: "Fucking flawless. Now I really want that date" (*Harlem*, ep. 4, 30:13 – 30:15). Anna's positive reaction helps Tye to feel confident about her looks, unlike Rock's insensitive comment directed towards Jada Pinkett Smith. *Harlem* provides a reassuring message to those Black women who are struggling because of hegemonic White beauty standards related to hair and their assimilation in the Black community. The misbelief that natural hair is not beautiful affects the Black woman community by harming their self-esteem and self-image and which may drive them to chemically straighten their hair, wear wigs, or feel ashamed of their natural hair texture and shaved scalps in an attempt to fulfill White hair ideals and beauty standards. Hence, with this scene, the goal of *Harlem* is to suggest Black women should free themselves from the overwhelming pressure of respectability and beauty politics around their hair.

### 3. KILLING THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN TROPE AND IMPERSONATING THE MAMMY

The seventh episode of *Harlem*, "Strong Black Woman," which was written by Britt Matt and directed by Stacey Muhammad, can be argued to be one of the series' best episodes in the first season in terms of its Black Feminist essence. The episode revolves around one of the many stereotypes about Black women in the United States: that of the strong Black woman, who is "inferior to the pinnacle of womanhood, the weak White woman" (Kendi 2016, 6). As discussed by several Black Feminists (hooks [1989] 2015a; Hill Collins 2000; Jerkins 2018; Cooper 2018; McMillan Cottom 2019; Kendall 2020), like any other stereotype, the "strong Black woman" image is highly detrimental for its dehumanization of Black women. While Camille writes the passage (quoted below) on her computer which she narrates via voiceover, her explanation is accompanied by several images and videos about Black women, including Michelle Obama, Octavia Butler, and Rihanna, among many others:

No one knows exactly who coined the term "strong Black woman." Or even exactly when the term originated. What we do know is that the trope is uniquely American and has been germane from slavery to the present day. In comparison to White femininity, which is valued for beauty, vulnerability, and maternal softness, Black women have been valued for their labor. Both literally and figuratively. A "strong Black woman" suppresses her emotions, never letting anyone see her sweat. She is ambitious, but still makes time to be supportive, even carrying her mate, her friends, and her family when necessary. Being labeled a "strong Black woman" is a rite of passage. She is resilient, independent, and capable. But what if she isn't? (season 1 ep. 7)

Then, the focus switches to Tye’s hospitalization, who passed out in the previous episode because of incapacitating pelvic pain. Tye is misdiagnosed by a White male doctor who diminishes her ovulation and menstrual pain by saying “that is just Aunt Flo being a tough houseguest” (season 1, ep. 7, 02:53 – 02:55)—and who later insinuates Tye went to hospital looking for opioids. What this scene addresses is not just the frequently biased treatment female patients receive in terms of their health issues, but the dehumanizing treatment Black women receive in particular, which exemplifies “gender racism” (Kendi 2016, 6), and connects both with the misbelief that Black people feel less physical pain—known as “racial empathy gap”—and the strong Black woman stereotype (Cooper 2018, 93). The manipulation of Black female bodies in the name of science has historical roots. Following Jerkins’s (2018) words, “J. Marion Sims, the father of modern gynecology, experimented on enslaved Black women without their consent and, in his autobiography, praised three slaves’ endurance to withstand experiments without any anesthesia because their contributions would help all women” (122). Aware of the history of Western medicine experiments on Black bodies, the fact that Tye postponed seeking medical aid shows that for many Black women, despite the physical pain they might be suffering, dealing with it in silence is less hassle than dealing with the lack of empathy many White doctors treat the Black female body. The next day, when she wakes up in the hospital bed, she confesses the following to Quinn, who is sitting by her the following, referring to the medical experiments performed on African Americans between 1932 and 1972 in Tuskegee: “[t]hey [White doctors] do not treat us anyway. The most they do is experiment like Tuskegee” (ep. 7, 02:37 – 02:40). Then the two friends enumerate other instances of White experimentation, reproductive injustice, and medical exploitation of Black women’s bodies.

According to Dorothy Roberts (1997), the exploitation and domination of Black women’s bodies during slavery influenced the latter involuntary sterilization of Black people in the name of eugenics: “Whites’ domination of slave women’s wombs to sustain the system of slavery provided an early model of reproductive control” (61). Reversing the exploitation of Black women’s wombs after the abolition of the slave market, considering Black people both unfit and sexually deviant, especially Black women, involuntary sterilization of Black women was enacted to stop their reproduction, which is accurately described by Davis ([1981] 2019) as “a racist form of birth control” (183). The occurrences that Quinn and Tye allude to include the forced sterilization of the Relf Sisters, which is one of the many cases of “compulsory sterilization as a means of eliminating the ‘unfit’ sector of the population” (194). The friends also mention the so-called “Mississippi Appendectomy,” in which hysterectomies were performed on poor Black women without their prior consent (Early 2021, n.p.), and Henrietta Lacks’ case, who was diagnosed and died of cervical cancer and whose cells have been used until the present day without her consent for scientific research and experimentation (“The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks”

n.d.; Lang 2022). In this sense, *Harlem* not only denounces these cases but raises awareness about them. If the viewer is not familiarized with them, the show will have succeeded in triggering at least a Google search, prompting further research into these historical occurrences.

Apart from the “strong Black woman trope,” *Harlem* also tackles the historical stereotype of the mammy. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) defines the mammy as “the faithful, obedient domestic servant” that takes care of White children (72–73). In *Ain’t I a Woman*, bell hooks ([1989] 2015a) explained that “[t]he mammy image was portrayed with affection by Whites because it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal Black womanhood—complete submission to the will of Whites,” and pointed out that the mammy trope is still present in contemporary shows, presented as the “[prototype] of acceptable Black womanhood” (119). In the fourth episode, Angie takes advantage of this, as Hill Collins calls it, “controlling image” (72). She visits Quinn at her boutique and asks her friend for the money she needs to join the Actors Union, but Quinn declines as she is struggling to pay the boutique’s rent. Then, Jill, a White mother, comes out of one of the changing rooms and complains about her daughter because she could not try on the clothes she wanted: “She is the worst. I am so over it. I am totally, totally lost since my Jamaican nanny quit” (season 1, ep. 4, 14:52 – 14:57). She then confesses to Quinn her neediness for support with her mothering: “I am desperate for help, but she has to be Jamaican. I had a Jamaican nanny when I grew up, and I miss her so much” (15:00 – 15:05). Jill’s words imply she has a deep-seated wish to perpetuate the cycle of subordination she learned as a child. She reveals her racial obsession with Black women from a particular ethnonational group as domestic helpers under the delusion that Jamaican women are superior to other Black women because of her alleged bond with a Jamaican nanny when she was a child.

Then, out of a racist preference, those are the only Black women she accepts in her circle. Critical race feminist Taunya Lovell Banks (2003) notes that in the United States “[t]he term ‘domestic worker’ invokes the historical image of a native-born Black woman, the mammy” (332) and contends that the job titles of “babysitter” and “nanny” justify the low wages childcarers are paid (329). After overhearing the conversation, Angie starts her performance as a Jamaican immigrant looking for a nanny job (fig. 6). Enchanted by her new finding, Jill is willing to hire Angie, who leads the negotiation, asking for the six hundred dollars she needs straightaway. Her performance and cultural appropriation are not correct—as Quinn reprimands her—but, in doing so, she is indeed reversing the narrative. This time, Angie is the one mocking a White woman who is obsessed with having a Black Jamaican “nanny” and yet she cannot differentiate a real Jamaican from an impostor. Once at Jill’s house during the interview, Jill tells Angie she reminds her of actress Viola Davis. Once she leaves, Angie changes her accent and apprises Jill’s child, Teddy, angered by her mother’s microaggression and racist behavior: “Okey. The doll shit is



okay, but your mum’s racist bullshit is not. All dark-skinned women do not look the same, and we are not here just to take care of White kids” (28:59 – 29:07). Although she is completely aware of the part she is playing, Angie decides that, for the first time in her life, subordination will be a Black woman’s choice rather than an imposition.



Figure 6 Angie pretends to be a Jamaican immigrant, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

At the end of the seventh episode, the four friends reunite and cry around Tye’s hospital bed complaining about the rough experiences they each had in the last few days. Camille laments over the fact that Dr. Pruitt does not think she reaches the levels of excellence a Black professor should have at an Ivy league, Quinn complains about her troubled relationship with her mother and her friends see her as the strong friend of the group because she comes from a wealthy family, Tye about her surgery and pain, and Angie about the fact that she has been humiliated, twice, by White women. Repeating how it started and closing the circle, the episode ends with Camille’s voice in voiceover addressing the negative impact of the Strong Black woman trope:

While the “strong Black woman” insignia charades as a compliment, it really pardons the rest of the world of their responsibility to view the Black woman as vulnerable, able to experience pain, capable of weakness, worthy of support, and unconditionally lovable. Until the Black woman is allowed to reject this demand for strength, she will never truly experience her own humanity. (ep. 7, 29:20 – 29:48)

Thus, *Harlem* shows the vulnerability of Black women and their humanity as it aims to surpass this trope and the detriment it represents for Black women’s mental and physical well-being. By portraying its four characters suffering and realistically handling their

trauma, the episode invites the viewers to reconsider that despite appearances, the strong Black woman tag should be left in the past.

#### 4. WHITE WOMEN'S TEARS, BLACK WOMEN'S BLAME

In its seventh episode, *Harlem* exposes a phenomenon that despite its innocent appearance it is, in fact, an ultimate mechanism of racist manipulation and White domination that asserts the subordination of people of color, particularly, the subordination of women of color: the so-called White women's tears. Several Black feminists have addressed this tactic of domination and manipulation and Black women's impossibility to "get out" of its claws. On the one hand, British author Reni Eddo-Lodge describes White tears as a phenomenon that is "a really destructive byproduct of anti-racist conversation, in which White ears hear Black voices talk about racism and interpret it as information designed to make them feel like they are a bad person" (in "7: White Women Crying is Racist!" 2018). According to Luvvie Ajayi Jones (2018) when White women cry in a situation that involves a Black woman, or women of color in general, they perform the role of the helpless "damsel in distress" (n.p.). That is because White women's tears behold "transformative power[s]" (Schuller 2021, 68) and they are used to "shift blame and claim victimhood" (Cooper 2018, 173). The explanation behind this phenomenon is that White women's tears represent both the cult of (White) womanhood (Ajayi Jones 2018) and that of "true civilization" (Schuller 2021, 50); thus, leaving Black women unprotected. Following Ajayi Jones, Ruby Hamad (2018) describes the weaponizing of White women's tears as "the trauma caused by the tactic many White women employ to muster sympathy and avoid accountability, by turning the tables and accusing their accuser [Black women/women of color]." Later, in the book *White Tears, Brown Scars* (2020), Hamad further contextualizes this White practice and posits that "the woman of color is left out in the cold, often with no realistic option—particularly if it is a workplace interaction—but to accept blame and apologize" (7). In *Harlem*, Angie once again experiences the workings of White-Black dynamics at her workplace. Apart from her sour impersonation of a traditional mammy, like many other Black women, she also confronts the phenomenon of White tears.

Kate, the actress who plays the not-so-innocent Rose in *Get Out: The Musical*—a fictional musical after Jordan Peele's *Get Out*—uses the words "ghetto" to criticize the marking tape, the set design, and the overall production after tripping down in one of the scene rehearsals. Astonished by the situation and the director's silence, Angie confronts her White colleague in front of the entire cast and asks her what she means by calling everything "ghetto." Kate replies to Angie's inquiry with another question, "Are you calling me a racist?" to which Angie's comeback is, "Depends on how you answer the question" (ep. 7, 09:30 – 10:04). Suddenly, Kate leaves the stage crying in despair, apparently hurt by her Black colleague's indirect accusation. Then, Angie adds triumphantly, "White

girls gonna White” (ep. 7, 10:09) without knowing that her words are going to bring her more pain than liberation. As signaled by Ajayi Jones, Hamad, and Eddo-Lodge, Kate’s White tears are victorious, demonstrating how White women’s tears trap Black women within a social pattern that uses victimhood to achieve domination. Later in the episode, the director—a Black man—commands Angie to apologize to Kate because, according to his perception of the events, she is the one who made the insensitive comment, and, in consequence, Kate claims to be too upset to rehearse (fig. 7). Ironically, the execution of White tears takes place during one rehearsal of *Get Out: The Musical*, a fictional musical adaptation of Peele’s film about the White latent desire for slavery in the United States and the dynamics of White domination and Black subordination. What is more, with his request the director as a Black man fails at defending his community, his working team, and, more particularly, a Black woman who tried to fight against microaggressions.



Figure 7 Kate uses her White tears against Angie, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 7).

When Angie discusses the situation with her friends, Camille hits the spot: they all know well that she must apologize if she wants to keep her job. As Hamad (2020) highlighted, because the incident occurred in the workplace, Angie has no other option but to apologize to the White woman who used her White tears against her. After that, in a scene that looks like a kindergarten setup, Angie is bound to apologize to a now-smiling Kate. Yet a major plot twist occurs when Angie rebels and bursts the following words with anger:

Fuck you, Kate. Fuck your microaggressions. Fuck your White tears that you use as a weapon to distract from your racism. Fuck the history of White women like you who got people who look like me harmed or killed because you were too weak to admit your own fucking shortcomings. [Faces Mark, the director] Fuck you for being another Black man complicit in some racist bullshit against a Black woman. [Faces Eric, a co-worker] Fuck you for engaging in

respectability politics, which we all know has never and will never get us to equality. [Turns to another co-worker with her fist up in the air] You cool, sis! [Faces another co-worker] Fuck you for asking me to forgive this shit. [Asks all] Does anybody ask Jewish people to forgive the Nazis? No! Because the Nazis were fucking wrong-ass, vile-ass pieces of shit. [Middle fingers out] So fuck all y'all! Fuck this bullshit production! I'm out! (ep. 7, 24:35 – 25:38)

But a sudden return to reality confirms that this monologue just took place in Angie's imagination. In the end, Angie apologizes to Kate, who forgives her and hugs her despite Angie's avoidant body language (fig. 7). Proud of the conflict resolution, Mark claims, "this is what *Get Out* was all about" (26:04 – 26:09) as if Peele's film were about the Black community forgiving White people for their atrocities. As Angie wonders, did he even watch it? Indeed *Harlem* does not offer its viewers a solution to end White women's tears—if there is one—but at least it points to it as a real-life everyday experience raising awareness about it and its manipulative nature: White women's tears are an execution of White power that reinforces Black subordination. Nonetheless, *Harlem* offers a memorable speech that should not be forgotten. With Angie's monologue, the series gives voice from fiction to what many would like to scream and cannot in the real world.



Figure 8 Kate hugs a humiliated Angie after she apologizes to her, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 7).

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Harlem* aims to transgress the stigmatizing image of Black women in White-dominated pop culture or their erasure from it. It offers new narratives, voices, and realities, and fills in a representational void without forgetting that it is, foremost, comedy. Despite the series' shortcomings in terms of class representation, failing to be fully intersectional itself, *Harlem* brings its audience closer to Black Feminism through its examination of Black women's daily experiences. A viewer acquainted with Black Feminist history and theory will recognize the topics the series touches upon with ease. And, if not, it promotes both



the observation and understanding of the Black female reality. Thus, *Harlem* would become a vehicle of knowledge, reflection, and social change. Apart, its high-class focalization shows that Black women could also be the protagonists of a *Sex and the City* kind of narrative—yet forever haunted by gender racism—therefore, showing what Roxanne Gay manifested in *Bad Feminist* in the essay “When Less is More”: how White and people of color are different and yet very much alike. On a concluding note, if a White viewer or reviewer assumes *Harlem* holds no value as a popular culture product, their stance is likely connected to White fragility having felt attacked by the social accuracy and racial sensitivities revealed in the series. The discomfort and defensiveness the subject might experience watching the episodes prevent them from appreciating *Harlem*’s essence: effective popular culture entertainment centered on the Black female reality in twenty-first-century America. And for those who enjoyed the first season, *Harlem* has returned in 2023 with a second season composed of eight new episodes that promise to continue being as bold and daring as the ones examined in this paper.

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