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# Identity of a Single Black Woman

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Identity of a Single Black Woman

By

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THESIS

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## Abstract

There is not much literature that speaks to the identity of singles, considering this is a growing group in our society today. Singleness may be by choice or by circumstance; nevertheless, this is a group worth investigating. Over the course of the last decade there have been various media programs that depict or explore the idea of singleness and the challenges singles may encounter maneuvering through the world of coupledness. There has been much dialog in prominent mainstream mediums as the *Washington Post* and ABC's *Nightline* concerning the plight of single black women the decreasing number of marriages in the black community. This paper will analyze the network sitcom *Girlfriends* focusing on how mediated images are performed and presented as they relate to single black women. Specifically, examine how popular culture still perpetuates heteronormative ideologies and stereotypical representations of women and black women. In addition, I will analyze how these ideologies influence and oppose the construction of the single black women.

### Introduction

This paper rhetorically explores the media representations of identity as it relates to black women and singleness. More specifically, how stereotypes of singleness and black women are perpetuated through heteronormative value systems, and historical stereotypes of black women. One day my prince will come. Prince Charming will come and sweep me off my feet and we will live happily ever after in a lovely home with a white picket fence. For decades the Walt Disney Empire has eloquently illustrated the age-old tales of Cinderella and Snow White, which have indoctrinated little girls to dream about their Prince Charming or knight in shining armor. Through imagination and images produced by popular culture little girls learn to dream of the magical moments of a beautiful wedding. But what if the prince never appears or what if she is not interested in a prince or does not like that particular prince? Because of heteronormative ideologies, girls have been taught directly and indirectly to seek out marriage. Ideally, if you are raised in what is considered a traditional Western family your direct visual is the mother figure who is usually a woman and the male figure who is usually a man who came together with the intention of procreation continue the family lineage. This image becomes a standard in your mind and anything outside of that is considered odd or unusual (Taylor, 2005).

There has to be some explanation as to why there is only one parent or, in more current times, two parents of the same gender. The heteronormative perspective is the reality for many until you learn and/or accept the family dynamics that are socially different. Early mediated examples of heteronormative ideals would be programs like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* which endorsed patriarchal heteronormative ideals as well as the limited identity of women. As Yep (2003) states “ ‘compulsory heteronormativity’ creates conditions which it will never occur to women to be anything else but heterosexual and channels women into marriage

and motherhood and in the service of men” (p.19). Current programs like *Modern Family* oppose, deviate, and challenge the standard ideals and stereotypical identity of the family structure which early images endorsed.

As referenced above, in past and current popular culture perpetuates heteronormative concepts of women and marriage. Recently, television viewers have been bombarded with programming that portrays women as objects put on display for men to choose from in order to potentially become his spouse or at least become his girlfriend for a moment. *The Bachelor*, *Flavor of Love*, *Rock of Love*, and *Real Chance of Love* are a few of the reality television programs that relegate women to sex objects in hopes of being chosen as “the one”. Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) examined two reality programs, *Flavor of Love* and *The Bachelor*, and illustrate how these programs are raced but the central premise is the same. The leading man, The Bachelor or Flavor Flav is in search for the perfect woman. By the end of the season The Bachelor has found the woman to be his bride and Flavor Flav has found his “special lady” (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008, p. 377).

Generally in this country, social norms are that once you have reached adulthood, say mid-twenties, you should be married, or at least be considering marriage; however, the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau reported that married households are at a record low of 48 percent compared with statistics from 1950 where only 33 percent of the population was single. Currently, 50 percent of the population is single and that number still growing (Bolick, 2011). According to the 2001 U.S. Census Bureau statistics, 41.9 percent of black women have never been married compared to 21.7 percent of white women that have never been married (Burrell, 2010). Even more recently, the 2009 U.S. Census Bureau still shows that the number of black women that have never been married is double that of the white women. There has been a shift in the black

community when it comes to marriage, and it has ignited much dialog about the black woman and her marital status. *Nightline* (2009) devoted a three part broadcast on the subject of single black women, the *Washington Post* (2006) published an article titled *Marriage is for White People*, and most recently a book with the same title was authored by Ralph Richard Banks (2011).

### **Literature Review**

#### **Media Images - Women In Black**

Just as in the past, today's popular media presents marginalized images of women of color. These images have a one-sided, one-dimensional essence. The image, performance, and representation of the black women of old is still prevalent in today's market of programming, especially with the introduction of "reality television" (Gibson-Hudson 1994; Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Squires, 2008; Boylorn, 2008). Reality television is a different genre than sitcoms; however, stereotypical personalities are highlighted during the production process. There are limited amounts of situational comedies or dramas that feature African Americans as primary multidimensional characters; however, is a multitude of comedies and dramas that feature white women in leading roles as doctors, detectives, and main characters for comedic relief. As Merritt (2000) notes, "television viewers have been exposed to characterizations of African American women that seldom reflect their myriad numbers or diverse roles in society" (p. 47). If there is a person of color represented, their role is secondary or reduced to representations of tokenism and stereotypical caricature of black men and women (Merritt, 2000).

Early film presented black life in a distorted fashion, as Gray (1989) states, "Media representations of black life are routinely fractured, selectively assembled, and subsequently

become a part of the storehouse of American racial memory” (p. 377). In early film, black women held roles as the always happy and willing to please maid or housekeeper also referred to as *mammy* or *Aunt Jemima* (Burrell, 2010; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1992). She has a high allegiance to the white family for which she worked. We never really knew anything about her, or anything about her family, or what was really behind the smile. We knew nothing of her struggle, about her family, or if she was really happy. In early film and television she was portrayed as the quick-witted wise woman who loved the family she worked for. She was usually a healthy sized woman, perhaps over weight, and dark skinned. She was usually represented as a woman who had no family and was so devoted to her employers that she resided in their home or there was little representation of a family outside of her white family. She was usually presented as an asexual being (Burrell, 2010; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1992). We still see this character in current representations and performances in black women, such as Halle Berry’s role in the X-Men trilogy. Zingsheim (2011) illustrates how Halle Berry’s character Storm has been reduced from being identified as an African goddess in Kenya (according to the comic book) to being at the service of White males and caretaker of White children (p. 235).

Another stereotypical representation of black women in media is that of the “*Jezebel*”. By definition a Jezebel is a woman who is evil, scheming, wicked, shameless, one who uses her sexually to get what she desires (Burrell, 2009). In movies about slavery the slave woman would be viewed as the “Jezebel” for tempting the slave master into her bed (Jewell, 1993) or in some early movies the stage show dancers could be viewed as “Jezebels” in there scantily dressed outfits dancing and singing on stage. These women were usually represented as fair or light-skinned black women who were slim in stature (Jewell, 1993). Because of the privilege of their complexion, these women often times had opportunities that their darker counterparts were not

awarded mainly because their skin was closer to the dominant group. In current popular culture we still see representations of the “Jezebel”. She is largely seen in hip-hop music videos and in some “reality television”. In these performances she is usually scantily dressed, embraces her femininity, and is very sexual. She is subjugated and objectified by the men in the video and the male viewer. She has been reduced to a simple sex object with no other purpose other than to fulfill the fantasies of the male voyeur. This representation is idealized in some communities as a means to obtain material gain, to get an ‘up-grade’ in life. Besides Jezebel she is referred to as *Gold-digger, Hoochie Mama, or Slut*, because of the freedom of her lack of sexual inhibitions. During the 1970’s, the era of “blaxploitation”, black women were subjugated as prostitutes, drug addicts, and welfare mothers (Jewell, 1993; Burrell, 2009). These roles helped to project and perpetuate the negative stereotypes in U.S. Western society.

In the last decade we have seen more assertive and somewhat aggressive images in television and film. Collins (2009) refers to these images as the “Black lady”. She is the middle-class black woman with a college degree or two, who works as a doctor or lawyer succeeding in dominant society. She may be the only representation of color of any kind. She is strong and independent, and has learned how to manage her way into the hegemonic culture; however, she is and will be challenged within the dominant culture as well as within her own. She will be challenged within the dominant culture to always have to prove her knowledge and self-worth. She has challenges within her own community by her male counterparts. Collins (2009) suggests there is a competition between Black men and women in the work place because of affirmative action programs. She states, “Many Black men erroneously believe Black ladies are taking jobs reserved for them” (Collins, 2009, p. 89). This image and character is also haunted by the choices she has made. She is so focused on her education and career that she is

considered a modern day mammy (Collins, 2009). Her focus on excelling has eliminated the potential of having a man and children in her life because of lack of time to focus on a relationship.

Another stereotypical representation of the black woman is the '*angry black woman*' (Madison, 2009; Collins, 2009). She is political, boisterous, speaks her mind, and in some performances she is depicted as a man hater because she has been so dehumanized by both black and white men. She holds a strong disdain for men or she is not well liked by men and some women because she is so vocal. The image of the angry black woman is usually portrayed by black women of darker hue. Historically, the color black has negative connotations because "black was the standard of evil, a blight from God, and the mark of Ham, Noah's cursed son" (Burrell, 2011, p. 69). The darker skin denotes fear and anger; however, when the role of the 'angry black woman' is represented by a woman with light skin, it can be read as a reaffirmation of such women belonging to blackness and the community. Again, historically the beauty of African American women has been based on how close or how far their facial features and complexions are to the dominant culture (Burrell, 2011; Collins, 2009; Brown, 2005).

Madison (2011) describes how Michelle Obama was labeled and stereotyped as an 'angry black woman' because she shared her experience as a Black American which resurrected the ugly historical blemishes of racism in America. Her statement of being proud of her country for the first time cast her in the role of angry black woman. As Madison (2011) states, this was "blasphemous" especially now since we live in a supposed post-racial society (p. 310). The angry black woman is the voice and the body of injustices to women and women of color. Madison goes on to quote Lorde's statement regarding anger and the black woman.

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness. (p. 310)

### **Singleness**

The definition of singleness includes those who have never married and are childless, never-married with children, and those who have been divorced or widowed (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004). In review of the statistical information from the U.S. Census never married women between the ages of 28 and 34 is a growing population for both white and black women, also noted by Sharp and Ganong (2007), and the current median age for first marriage in the U.S. is 26 (Bolick, 2011). According to Sharp and Ganong (2007) being married is supposed to be a goal for every woman and this transition in life should occur within a certain window of time. When this transition does not occur within this chronological framework the state of uncertainty is revealed about her future. Sharp and Ganong (2007) address that 'off-time' transition causes stress. "Marriage is a valued status and closely tied to women's identities" (Sharp & Ganong, 2007, p. 832).

The United States is a very heteronormative society when it comes to marriage. The norm has been that; men and women get married at a certain age and have children. Those persons who do not follow this pattern could be considered abnormal or living with a deficit (Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007; Reynolds & Taylor 2004, 2005; Peterson, 1981). Specifically, women who are not married by a certain age are viewed in a harsher light. Unmarried men have the privilege of not suffering the societal pressures of being married by a certain age (Carbado, 2011). On the other hand, a single woman carries with her a sense of failure because she has not been chosen. There is a stigma associated with her status and there

seems to be no good terms to refer to unmarried women. The nomenclatures for unmarried women include terms such as: spinster, old maid, maiden ladies, bachelorette, never-married, or ever single (Peterson, 1981, p. 19). These terms construct women who are single as failures, living at a deficit, and rejection (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004). These terms are derogatory and create negative images of single women. Men on the other hand, are not stigmatized by their single status. They are simply referred to as a bachelor, which has no negative connotation.

As Carbado (2011) discussed in his article on privilege,

Informing the privilege-centered understanding of discrimination is the notion that taking identity privileges for granted helps to legitimize problematic assumptions about identity and entitlement, assumptions that make it difficult for us to challenge the starting points of many of our most controversial conversations about equality. (p. 27)

There is a certain privilege for a woman who is able to identify herself as married; she has a sense of security, acceptance, and pride (Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Married women are not bombarded with questions about their marital status, *“Why are you not married?” “You are a pretty girl or attractive woman, I’m sure that any man would love to have you as his wife.”* It is like adding insult to injury when a single person is compelled to answer such questions. As Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) state “the single woman is expected to have an explanation for her ‘condition’, preferably a story of ‘circumstances’ and ‘missed opportunities’” (p. 490). It almost sounds like being single is an illness that must be cured. This dialog engages ideas of stigmatization that develop in the psyche of women. Women have to negotiate their feelings about perceptions in society and social settings if she is not married. There is potentially a low

sense of value because of their single status. There is a sense of fulfillment for women that can identify themselves as married (Sharp & Ganong, 2007).

Chasteen (1994) discusses how single women negotiate themselves in society as it relates to housing, transportation and leisure activities. She states, “single women face an environment not designed for their needs in mind” (Chasteen, 1994, p. 311). Women are subjected to economic disadvantages because traditionally women do not earn as much as men and single women are working with a single income versus a dual income of married couple when both spouses are working. Also, from a social aspect single woman operate in an environment geared to men and couples (Chasteen, 1994). Participants in Chasteen’s (1994) research stated that they saw their positions of singleness worse than single men because of economics, safety concerns and mobility. A single woman is at a greater disadvantage financially than her married counterpart or the single man. In the United States, according to Fritzpatrick (2010), white women earn 77 cents to every dollar a man makes and black women earn 68 cents for every dollar a man makes. Traditionally married women in a dual income household have better financial stability than single women with one income. Traditionally men are the breadwinners of the household and hold the higher income positions. DePaulo (2006) references how it is cheaper for a couple to than for a single person to travel, join motor clubs, and have two for one meals.

Affordable and safe housing can also be an issue as a single person. Chasteen (1994) makes reference to the continued assemblage of single-family detached structures for which most single women cannot financially afford. As the census numbers show a variance in income between men and women, affording a house may not be an easy task for single women for two reasons: first, the cost and maintenance of a home on a single income and second, the safety of

living alone in a house alone versus with a spouse or partner. Single women are negotiating within a world that has been designed by men for men and for couples. Single women are viewed as being out of place or as Chasteen (1994) puts it, “she violates the assumptions of where a woman without a man should be” (p. 325).

Peterson (1981) studied women of various ages, ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and geographic locations. There were many common themes that seemed consistent with each age group among these women: social stigma, stress about being single, out of sync, and uncertainty about future (Peterson, 1981; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Even though there has been much discussion on the negative aspects of singleness, there has been little discourse on the positive aspects, or rather what could be considered positive aspects of singleness, such as: independence, freedom, living fulfilling lives, and positive self-image (Sharp & Ganong, 2007).

The status of singleness can be quite complex to describe and contradictory to define. One being single can be based on choice and chance. Merriam-Webster offers the following definitions for choice and chance. *Choice* is defined by an act of selecting or making a decision, whereas, *chance* is defined as the possibility of something happening. Based on these definitions there is a chance every woman could get married; however, she may choose to remain single. Also, based on the traditions of marriage in the U.S. the man chooses to ask a woman to marry him. Ultimately, a woman will choose to decline or accept his offer of marriage. For some women the idea of marriage is the natural progression of adulthood or a generalization based on cultural and traditional identities that women are to become wives and mothers (Taylor, 2005).

The idea of marriage has been there since childhood from visuals of their family life, and media representations perpetuate the idea that adults are suppose to get married. In reality women in their early twenties are not as concerned with marriage; their focus is education,

starting a career, travel, relocation after college to start a career, dating with hopes of finding “Mr. Right” but “Mr. Right Now” is good until the right guy comes along (Reynolds, Wetherwell, & Taylor, 2007; Sharp & Ganong 2007; Bolick, 2011). When women reach their late twenties and early thirties marriage becomes more of an immediate issue (Peterson, 1981; Bolick, 2011). Single women in their thirties begin to feel a sense of urgency because the proverbial biological clock is ticking. As Bolick (2011) puts it, “the marriage o’clock” (p. 10) is sounding off like a gong in one’s mind because you are not getting any younger and you have yet to marry or have a baby. Sharp and Ganong (2007) discuss expectations of timing as it relates to childbearing years. “In the United States, and the timing of marriage has pronounced importance for women because of limited childbearing years and the value of marriage for their identities” (Sharp & Ganong, 2007, p. 831). Women who desire children have options of choosing single parenthood conceiving through conventional means, IVF, or adoption--she does not have to wait for marriage (DePaulo, 2006).

The narrative of the single woman becomes a conflict because of expectations of her role as a woman in this society. She is constantly having interpersonal and intrapersonal conversations to explain her reason for being single. Taylor (2005) suggests “that the more contingent narratives in ordinary talk are used by a speaker to explain deviations of expectations from the canonical or normal narratives of culture” (p. 252). How we talk to and about ourselves helps construct our identity; in the case of a single woman, the attempt to construct, reflect and identify with an identity that reflects a lack or deficit is challenging on the psyche of the woman (Taylor & Weherell, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). In the patriarchal heteronormative society we live in, a woman is chosen by a man to become his mate, partner for life. If a woman is not partnered there must be something wrong with her from the perspective of the married couples

within her world, and she may internalize and begin to feel deficient because she has not been chosen. The sense of lack brings about reminiscing of past relationships and agonizing about loves that have been lost because of poor choice or timing. Sharp and Ganong (2007) share narratives of how their participants reflect on their single lives based on society's expectations:

Sometimes you question yourself because you are thinking "why is that I am 32 and I can't seem to find someone?" So that is the hard part because your start thinking, "Well maybe something is wrong with me because I can't find someone." (p. 837)

DePaulo (2006) offers insightful views of singleness. For example, she renders a narrative from a choice standpoint but society still frowns upon your status or tries to come up with reasons for your decision. DePaulo (2006) recalls that when she shared that she was happy and single with a taxi driver he insisted that something bad must have happened, a bad relationship or something and that she would change her mind and want to be married. The constant need to explain single identity to the couples of the world places the single in the category of 'other'. As single women negotiate their lives in the workplace, with family and friends they are constructing, reflecting and identifying with singleness in a universe of couples.

I believe with life experiences and maturity, single people gain a different perspective on their lives. As unmarried women enter into middle age their expectations shift and they become less obsessed with their status and enjoy and respect themselves as single women and shift their focus to career, family, and community (Sharp & Ganong, 2007). As Sharp and Ganong (2007) suggest, at this age some women "had not consciously decided to avoid marriage; they let nature take its course" (p. 833). This group has a high level of self-esteem and are very comfortable with their lives albeit chance or by choice (Peterson, 1981; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Peterson

(1981) offers insight on women who are 50 - 60 years old and their point of view on single life. Generally speaking, from this vantage point there are no regrets to being single. “What course in life did I make that brought me to this particular moment in time?” is the main theme in Peterson’s (1981) book and the work of Reynolds, Wetherall, and Taylor (2007). In reflection of their participants’ lives, they were able to see where various opportunities and choice contributed to their singleness. Choice is the agency and they were happy with their choices.

### **The Artifact**

In this study I will explore and examine the mediated construction of the identity of single black women. In order to accomplish this task, I will review and analyze the first season of *Girlfriends*, a television series created by Mara Brock-Akil and produced by Kelsey Grammer. This series aired from 2000 - 2008 and was initially part of the newly formed UPN network and later picked up by the CW when UPN and WB networks merged. The core characters of *Girlfriends* vary in terms of their backgrounds, education, career path and socioeconomic class. The first season was chosen because this laid the foundation for the success of the series.

*Girlfriends* is a sitcom largely based on the relationship and lives of four African-American friends. The main female characters are Joan Clayton (Tracee Ellis Ross), Toni Chiles (Jill Marie Jones), Lynn Searcy (Persia White), and Maya Wilkes (Golden Brooks). In the sitcom we are offered observations of friendship bonds between women, women in high-pressure work environments, and romantic relationships with potential suitors. This sitcom was chosen because it was created by a black female and I believe this program offers sensible representations of single black women in current popular media and offers an illustrative point of view of women characters who are relatable to black, professional, single women between the ages of 25-35. Also, it was a popular sitcom among African-American viewers ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)). I will pay

close attention to the rendering of images, representations, and performances of the main characters exploring how traditional hegemonic stereotypes are perpetuated and/or resisted in this program.

### **Method**

Rhetorical theory offers us a method to engage with the world by analyzing the construction of symbols used to communicate with one another. Through these constructed symbols we are able to communicate and offer our perspective on a given subject and invite others to understand us better (Foss, 2008). It provides a teaching moment for learning different perspectives. Rhetorical theory allows for the audience to have a point of view of the symbols and images in which they are engaging (Brummett, 1984). When we engage with artifacts, be it visual, oral, or written, each person processes that information in many different ways. Two people could witness the same program and interpret what is seen in two totally different ways and have opposing views on the message. As Brummett (1984) argues, “rhetorical theory is creative in that it gives people the conceptual means by which to experience the future” (p. 104). I will also use the ideological and feminist critical approach (Foss, 2008; Griffin, 1995) to analyze the chosen artifact. Griffin (1995) defines ideological criticism as a method of discovering the politics hidden in the artifact (p. 172). Foss (2008) states that “ideological criticism is rooted in basic conceptualizations about ideologies and how they function” (p. 210). In other words, views from an ideological stand-point are based on explicit beliefs and value systems. The specific systems for this analysis are grounded in a feminist approach which explores how gender is constructed and “does it or does it not improve the women’s life” (Griffin, 1995, p. 169; Foss, 2008).

I viewed the entire first season of *Girlfriends* which consisted of 20 episodes. During my viewing, I identified various themes that presented themselves in each show. The initial viewing provided an opportunity to enjoy the show and familiarize myself with the characters and story lines. During the second viewing I focused on finding relevant themes found in literature such as compulsory heteronormativity, patriarchal heteronormative values, privilege, stereotypical mediated imagery of women and singleness and the choice and chance of singleness. Subsequent viewings were used to spot check and verify nuances that revealed themselves through the program that supported my argument.

### **Discussion & Results**

In this section I will discuss how this ensemble of women provides an assortment of personalities and situations surrounding the lives of black professional single and married women living in Los Angeles, California. Each episode presents a perspective on topics such as singleness, women in the corporate world, interracial dating, sex and sexuality, marriage, infidelity and trust in relationships, and women's health issues. Through these plot lines, this series works to construct a multifaceted view of single black women which differs from images of the past; however, there is still a continual tie to the heteronormative ideals about women, marriage, and family versus the independence of singleness, as well as; stereotypical representations of singleness as a deficit despite the many positive aspects of a single person's life.

Joan Clayton is an attorney working hard to become partner in her firm; Toni Chiles, who is Joan's best friend since fifth grade, is striving to become a successful real estate agent or to marry a wealthy man--whichever comes first; Lynn Searcy, the college friend of Joan and Toni,

has made attending college a career; and Maya Wilkes, legal assistant to Joan, is a mother who married at an early age due to a teen pregnancy.

### **Joan vs. Self and Society: Neurotic Single Woman**

The character of Joan Clayton, attorney at law, is constructed and performed as an over the top neurotic woman with grand ideas about how her life is supposed to turn out within the time frame that she has prescribed for herself. Her character is performed with many of the heteronormative ideologies of marriage and family. Joan, more than any of the other characters, is representative of many of the stereotypical qualities assigned to single black women. She exhibits the qualities of Collins' (2009) "Black lady" or modern day mammy; she gives off an aura of being desperate and perhaps too assertive. She has prescribed qualities that her ideal suitor should possess, much like what Izreal (2010) describes as The Denzel Principle. The Denzel Principle is what Izreal (2010) alludes to black women are looking for the screen version of Denzel as a mate.

Joan's home and office show her compulsion with control and accomplishments as a professional woman. Her home is spacious like a vessel waiting to be filled, which is a reflection and a symbolic manifestation of Joan's need to be married and have a family. She meticulously surrounds herself with things that she loves: photos of her family and friends, artwork from her travels and artwork of her heritage, books of hobbies and special interest. You can tell by Joan's home and office that she may suffer slightly from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Everything has a place and she can tell if something has been slightly moved.

In the initial episode we are introduced to Joan Clayton in her office planning her birthday party. She has just received a huge bouquet of flowers from a gentleman that she has been dating, and the attached card not only wishes her happy birthday but it also announces he

will not be attending her party because he has reunited with his prior girlfriend. Throughout the series we follow Joan's relentless battle of bad relationships. She has created a timeline of how her love life is supposed to fall into place, but unfortunately, she has not been very successful in reaching those goals. Joan laments internally as she celebrates another birthday as a single woman and losing yet another boyfriend: "According to my life's day planner, I should have it all by now: the career, the husband, the kids. So if I say I'm 26, I've bought myself some time." Joan has not met Mr. Right, or at least she has not properly given a guy the opportunity to be Mr. Right because of how she expects life to occur. Joan subscribes to the "happily ever after" realm of thought. Her neurotic actions chase men away before they themselves can make a decision. She jumps the gun in the cat and mouse game of courtship or she dismisses the man because he does not meet a certain quality, characteristic, or physical standard. Joan's neurotic behavior, as it relates to relationships, is exhibited in several episodes in conversations with men in her life. Charles, an ex-boyfriend of Joan whom Joan was very fond of, attends her birthday party with Toni. Toni is Joan's best friend. Joan and Charles have a heated conversation that relates to marriage and the demise of their relationship:

JOAN: Are you saying you want to get married?

CHARLES: Sure, why not?

JOAN: One very short year ago that was completely out of the question.

CHARLES: What can I say, it has been a very good year.

JOAN: Why, because you broke up with me?

CHARLES: You broke up with me!

JOAN: Because you did not want to get married!

CHARLES: Well, no! Not when it's being crammed down your throat.

Joan takes Charles' current desire to settle down and make a commitment very personally; she feels rejected and dejected. Joan has this intensely overwhelming personality, and in this episode with Charles, she comes across as desperate. Later we learn that Charles was not ready to settle down reluctant because he was just getting started in his career path and did not feel he was financially ready for the commitment of marriage. Izrael (2010) alludes to this idea of men waiting to marry until after they have established a career and are financially stable. Charles really enjoyed his relationship with Joan; however, he was not ready to make that commitment at that time. The demise of Joan's relationship with Charles was that she "jumped the gun", she did not make her desires known in the proper manner and she overreacted when she did not receive the answer she wanted to hear. Joan assertiveness challenges the patriarchal heteronormative idea of men being the pursuer in the relationship. Joan stating how she would like to see their relationship evolve into marriage is outside the boundaries of the male/female courtship ritual. Ideally, women should allow the man to suggest marriage. Black women have been stigmatized for their assertiveness which could be viewed as unfeminine (Collins, 2009). Collins (2009) states, "Aggressive, assertive women are penalized--they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine" (p. 85).

In another episode when the ladies are discussing what they desire in their ideal mate. Maya, the only married member of the cast, shares that she wrote a list of characteristics that she desired in a man and put them under her pillow. The next day in class she meets her husband Darnell. Joan, Toni, and Lynn decide to do the same, but they decide to try online dating. From this Joan meets a really nice guy and later finds out that he fits many of the characteristics that she put on her list; however, in true Joan fashion she decides to break up with him because of a

few of his flaws. William, Joan's colleague, calls her out on how particular she is towards a man that she has just met:

“You finally meet the man that meets your absurd list of criteria...hell you meet a man and now you have second thoughts because he is a little clingy? You just don't like a man who treats you well. You would rather have a man that gives you a hard time than flowers.”

Joan wants it all, but it has to be according to what she has designed in her mind about love and marriage. Joan has a chart in her laundry room outlining the events of her life: when she would make partner in her law firm, the length of time she would date Mr. Right before he proposes, the wedding event, the point when children would be born and the number of children. Joan is suffering from what Izreal (2010) calls The Denzel Principle or “Drizzle” (p.15). She is looking for a Denzel Washington type man, the screen version of course. The screen version of Denzel personifies “just enough of the kind of softness that makes women think he might suddenly call in off patrol, lock up his gun, tie on an apron, wash the dishes, and cook up a casserole. Denzel comes off as not too hard, not too soft on cue” (p.15). Izreal (2010) continues to suggest that black women have grand expectations of what a man is suppose to bring to the table, yet they have failed to look at what they are not bringing to the table to manifest a true partnership; thus they set themselves up for disappointment. In viewing Joan's character, she on many occasions fails to realize how she is a key conspirator in the demise of her relationships. Upon reflection on her missteps Joan could better understand what causes the demise of her relationships and create better situations in the future.

The introductory episode establishes representations of the stereotypical ideas of a single black woman or a single woman in general as being desperate, living with a deficit, or abnormal

(Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor; Reynolds & Taylor 2004, 2005; Peterson, 1981). In this instance, media is perpetuating the ideals and mindsets of a heteronormative society. Joan's stereotypical character embodies the heteronormative ideas of marriage and the role of a woman. Yep (2003) refers to "'compulsory heterosexuality' "as a condition in which it will never occur to women to be anything else but heterosexual and channel women into marriage" (p.19). The ideal status for Joan is to identify as married. Joan's character, as well as her friends, is within that age range of 28 to 34 which is the growing population of single, never married women according to the U.S. Census. Joan and her girlfriends are within the age range where it is expected for them to be married (Sharp & Ganong, 2007) and Joan illustrates the defective behavior believed to be associated with single women of this age group. She perpetuates the idea that something has to be wrong with her because she has not been chosen or the right man has not entered her life for her to choose him. As I referenced in the introduction, there has been much discourse concerning the *Single Black Woman* and why there are so many black single women in this decade compared to those in the past. As Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) state, "A single women is expected to have an explanation for her condition" (p. 490). Singleness is treated and framed as chronic disease that requires an immediate cure.

Joan demonstrates and represents what many late twenty-something women in general feel seeking out relationships. Reynolds and Taylor (2004), Peterson (1981), Sharp and Ganong (2007) all discuss the enormity feeling of lack by single women of a certain age. Joan constantly expresses that lack in her interpersonal and intrapersonal conversations. Her outward behavior among friends and her internal conversations show her desperation to become a couple versus embracing her singleness.

These early episodes are framed with many instances of choice and chance; however, the agency of choice often outweighs those chances when it comes to relationships evolving into marriage. Despite Joan being very much driven by compulsory heterosexuality to solidify her identity (Sharp & Ganong, 2007), the viewer sees and recognizes her successes as a single black woman. She has achieved the status of junior partner at her job, she has purchased her own home because of her upper middle class status, and she is surrounded by people who care about her. This shows a very fulfilling life, yet this fulfilling life is overshadowed by her inability to be happy without a man. Throughout the first season we only see Joan dating black, college educated, white collar, professional men. This shows the limitations Joan has placed on her dating pool. According to Banks (2011), “Black women are also less likely to intermarry than any other minority group” (p. 116). Throughout the season there are inferences of how hard it is to find a “good” black man due to black men dating outside of the race and high rates of incarceration. Banks (2011) shares the statistics on the number black men who are incarcerated in the United States, “More than two million people in the United States are in jail or prison, and 40 percent of them, more than 840,000, are African Americans” (p. 31). Even though societal issues may restrict her dating pool, viewers see Joan’s single status as her own fault based on the choices she has made.

### **Joan vs. Gold Digger: She Ain’t Messin’ with a Broke A\$\$**

The “Black lady” aspect of Joan’s character is shown by her hard work to earn accolades such as graduating at the top of her law class and in the first episode Joan earns the position of Junior Partner. She takes her education and accomplishments very seriously, but her drive for success caused Joan to bypass or even recognize the man she is looking to settle down with. Joan’s asexual behavior and strict moral standards invoke the image of the “mammy” from

literature and film. A 'lady' is supposed to be pursued by the man and the woman is not to give any indication of how interested she may be. Nor should she give any indication that she is a vibrant sexual woman, at least not early on in the relationship. Joan has not engaged in any sexual encounters in a year and reminds her friends, "You know I have a three month rule." Within her group she is juxtaposed to Toni and Lynn who are free and open with their sexuality. Toni uses sex for material gain and Lynn is a free spirit.

TONI: "That was cute back in high school when we were doing 'it' in the back of cars. Now we do 'it' to get cars."

LYNN: "Sex is freedom, it is the ultimate manifestation of our humanity it is a beautiful connection between two people..."

Outside of Joan's home and workplace Cafe 847 is the local meeting spot for dinner and after work socializing. As in many sitcoms there is a location that represents the melting pot for singles to interact and potentially Mr. or Ms. Right. Because of Joan's latent sexual activity, her friends goad her on to engage in a one night stand. Despite Joan's rigid moral standards, she caves under pressure and decides to pursue Davis, restaurant owner and friend. She feigns the role of damsel in distress to get his attention, but she is quite unconvincing. Her performance is so out of character and so over the top that Davis does not understand what she is attempting to do. Being a damsel is completely out of the stereotypical "Black lady" identity because she is supposed to be strong and self-sufficient. This makes her representation complex and contradictory because Joan buys into the patriarchal heteronormative ideology, but she does not see falling into the fragile female role as constructive even when it comes to work or romantic relationships. Nothing happens between Davis and Joan, but Lynn walks in when it looks like the deed has been done. Davis and Joan imply verbally that they had a secret rendezvous; it only

appears that she has relaxed her three month rule and allowed herself to have a sexual encounter that she desires. As the upstanding “Black lady” she is not suppose to exhibit any of the sexual tendencies of the stereotypical Jezebel. The Black Jezebel has been portrayed as an oversexed woman with no morals or limits (Burrell, 2010; Collins, 2009; Boylorn, 2008). Joan is applauded by her friends, though it is men who usually have the privilege of sharing their sexual encounters with their friends and placing themselves in a heroic position. This scene turned the tables; even though it was implied, Joan was placed in heroic stature and hailed by her friends for going after what she wanted. This is not a position that women generally find themselves in because a “lady” does not rant and rave about her sexual escapades, whether frequent or infrequent. Even though Joan’s sexual escapade was fictional, this scene exposes her sexual side in a subtle manner. She is able to maintain her sense of morals and assuage her friends’ concern for happiness.

In contrast to Joan’s character, real estate agent Toni Chiles’ main goal in life is to marry a rich man. She is constructed as the ‘Jezebel’ of the group. She wears expensive revealing clothing, and drives an expensive vehicle that she cannot afford in order to project a certain image that attract the right caliber of man. Toni is not ashamed of her beliefs and she is not shy about vocalizing them to her friends. She sees her sexuality as a means to gain what she wants. Love is secondary to money and material gain. Toni’s construction is reminiscent of Sondra of 227, a popular 1980’s sitcom. Sondra represents the single black woman that used her appearance to attract wealthy men (Merritt, 2000). The fact that Toni and Joan are best friends is a quandary since their values are so completely opposite of one another. Toni wears very revealing clothing or those that accentuates her curvy figure. Her condo building is the El Royale which connotes lavishness. Many of the scenes filmed in Toni’s home occur in her

bedroom which is elegantly decorated in expensive white linen with French provincial furniture, connoting the finer things in life. Her bedroom symbolizes the place where she conquers her men. Toni is very much into image as she proclaims to her friends: "I eat salads, work out five times per week, and the Koreans sell me my hair!" When she meets a new man she is only interested in his status and what gifts he can offer her. This is evident in the following dialogue with Lynn:

LYNN: "Who's the new guy Charles and what is his last name?"

TONI: "Don't know but he has a Porsche."

Charles purchases Toni a diamond tennis bracelet that she cares for more than Charles. Toni believes that money can buy her love and the lifestyle she never had. Toni and Joan are from Fresno, California which Toni has deemed as country and classless. She never wants to go back there, and in her mind, the only way to prevent that from happening is by marrying a rich man.

Toni does not portray the Jezebel image solely. Her character seems to be more complex by showing moments of caring about others and also acknowledging her true love for her college sweetheart, Greg. Greg was everything she desired emotionally in a man, but unfortunately for Toni he chose the career of a starving artist. "We can't live on passion alone!"

When Greg and Toni's paths cross again she struggles with her feelings as to what she wants in life and what she truly feels for Greg. Toni tracks Greg down and hires him as a private bartender for her alone. She just wants a fling, but Greg is offended by her offer. As he walks out on her she proclaims

TONI: I want you!

GREG: You want me rich.

Toni has to make a choice about what she wants in life; true love or money. She struggles with being in love and the outer image she wishes to sustain. Her desire for the finer things in life are in opposition of Greg, who does not desire the exuberance like Toni----he sees life and love as simple.

Toni is not only a Jezebel; she is constructed with some of the traits of a “Black lady” (Collins, 2009). She works hard to maintain her extravagant lifestyle until she meets a rich man who can assist her in obtaining all the coveted status symbols she desires, since Greg is not the man who can assist her, she begins to emasculate him because she is supporting both of them while trying to uphold an image in front of her peers. She begins to seek out a relationship with a wealthy man that can provide her with the lifestyle she desires.

Toni meets Dr. Clay, a successful surgeon; he is a man of distinction, a man that embraces all of the finer things, and Toni picks up on this right away. Toni knows how to flirt to gain the attention of the right man. After a few dates he is so intrigued by Toni that he proposes, and to no surprise, she accepts. When she shares the news with her girlfriends, Joan, who subscribes to true love and soul-mates, disparages Toni’s decision. Toni is blinded by the 5.2-karat engagement ring, the financial stability, and the social status this union would bring her. Joan is very upset with her and verbalizes her discontent. Toni challenges Joan’s sentiments:

“Joan you act like you are the only one that wants to get married. Just because I don’t walk around whining about it every five seconds doesn’t mean I do not want to, I’m not getting any younger and there are not a lot of men who want me for my personality.”

Just like Joan, Toni desires to be married and buys into the patriarchal heteronormative ideals that a man is supposed to take care of the woman. As the ‘Jezebel’ Toni has designs on material

wealth and love is secondary. Her need for socioeconomic status seems to be more appealing than love. She feels she will learn to love him if it comes to that. Toni does love Greg but her desire to be wealthy is greater. Greg cannot provide the wealth, so she chooses Clay who offers the dream life she desires. Toni uses the agency of choice; she has control and chooses what she wants out of life. By exercising her agency of choice, Toni may still find herself at a deficit and ultimately being unhappy by marrying a man that she does not love. Toni and Joan both exercise choice but they still find themselves in a passive role because they have not met the right man.

### **Joan vs. Free Spirit: I'm Living the Single Life**

Joan does not physically fit the mammy stereotype and her character is more multifaceted and complex than the mammy of old who was depicted as an asexual servant to the white upper class and more specific the white male (Collins, 2009; Burrell, 2010). Joan's character construction is a combination of Collins' (2009) description of the "Black lady" or modern day mammy and matriarch (p. 82). Collins (2009) describes the "Black lady" or modern day mammy as one who is focused on her education and career instead of the well being of her employers and the matriarch is the head of the household, leader and voice of reason for the family. I would like to refer to Joan as a 'neo-matriarch'. Expanding on Collins (2009) matriarch persona, a neo-matriarch is a woman who takes the lead role in her circle of friends versus lead family member, the one who holds the moral compass and is the dominant force that holds the circle of friends together. In most cases the circle of friends are single with or without children. Married women are not excluded from this circle; however, married women do not find themselves reliant on this circle to function socially. The 'neo-matriarch' encompasses the drive of the "Black lady" or modern day mammy to pursue education and career while

establishing the guiding maternal role with her circle of friends. In the case of *Girlfriends* this circle is comprised of professional women and up and coming professional women.

Joan is the mother figure and/or caretaker to Lynn Sercy, a child-like adult who has yet to make an adult decision for her life and career. Her two closest friends are aware of Joan's obsession with being the 'mother figure' in one scene where Toni puts Lynn out of her condo: "Go back to Joan's yurt (reference to home). She enjoys playing the mama."

Lynn is the over educated, free spirit, free loader college friend of Joan and Toni. Lynn's child-like behavior has allowed her to view life from a more open-minded point of view. She has not completely bought into the capitalistic views of her friends, yet this capitalism is what enables her to continue leaching off of them for the bare necessities of food, clothing and shelter while she obtains yet another degree. Joan treats her like a child by taking on the responsibility of providing housing, food, and even laundry duties like a mother would. Joan laments: "When I took her in, it was just until she completed sophomore year. It's been eight years." When Joan and Toni plan an intervention to confront her about her plan to obtain yet another degree as a means to avoid the real world, Lynn's response is "Duh!!"

Lynn has bounced back and forth between the home of Joan and Toni. Toni is tired of the situation and gives Lynn an ultimatum of finding a job or she has to move out of her place. In usual Joan fashion, Joan provides Lynn with a job of doing the gardening around her home. Toni finds out that Joan has enabled Lynn to not really take the job search seriously and packs up Lynn stuff and Joan inherits the pleasure of mothering Lynn, again.

The Joan and Lynn dynamic is likened to that of a parent/child relationship where the parent does not like to see the child suffer and comes to their aid and assistance at all costs. Joan is caring and a loving individual to her friends; however, her actions sometimes enable

dysfunctional behavior of her friends, especially Lynn is a freeloader. During an intervention session Toni points out how Joan is the root of the problem.

TONI: Joan you are an enabler. You enable the dysfunctional behavior of your friends, protecting them from consequences of their actions.

JOAN: I am not an enabler.

TONI: Yes, You are the root of the problem.

Joan's caring nature is not helping resolve the problem of Lynn taking on the responsibilities of an adult. Joan is not the sole problem, but her actions contribute to the delinquency of Lynn behaving as an adult.

Even though Lynn's role is not as dynamic and in depth in this first season as her counterparts, she offers comic relief and a poignant sociopolitical voice. Lynn speaks out about AIDS and women, and safe sex; she participates in rallies for those who do not have a voice because she believes in fighting for the underdog. Her longevity in school gives her affinity to the human cause and the opportunity to tap into the events and rallies. On the other hand, her friends have become consumed with their lives and careers are not as attuned to the human condition as she.

Even though Lynn is a minor character she does present some complexity. She uses the child-like behavior to get away with irresponsibility, she is a woman and very aware of her femininity and sexuality. She is a mix of 'the angry black woman' (Madison, 2009) who sees and fights for the injustices in the world and, she is a "Jezebel" in her free-spirit when it comes to life and sexuality. Lynn is the gypsy, non-conformist bohemian of the group. She dresses in wild, unconventional clothing that she finds or borrows then remakes into her own style. Lynn is

usually scantily dressed in an unconventional and liberal manner; promoting sex appeal by showing her mid-drift, never wearing a bra, and demonstrating her free love attitude.

In the Valentine's Day episode she wore a t-shirt that said "I Love Me" as she volunteers at a suicide hotline. While her girlfriends are being neurotic about their boyfriends not being available or making plans to be with their significant other, her shirt makes a bold statement about loving one's self before seeking love from others. She conveys a powerful message of love and encourages self-esteem. She provides a voice of reality and balance. Lynn is opposite of Joan in her desire to seek out the patriarchal institution of marriage. In a conversation with Toni, Lynn explains, "We subscribe to free love..."

Lynn is the only biracial character in the show. Lynn's father is black, and her mother is white, and she was adopted by a white family who lived in an all white community; she is a mix from a cultural and socioeconomic standpoint. She has the opportunity to view society in both black and white. Lynn is a woman who is choosing her destiny, regardless of how her friends view her, haphazardly or with some logical sense to her.

There has been an increase of single women in both races, however, there has been a faster decline in marriage with black women than with white women (Banks, 2011; Bolick, 2011; US Census Bureau). Lynn has a dual perspective of singleness as a black woman seeing the world from the vantage point of white suburban America. Lynn's adoptive parents provided a normative patriarchal foundation, yet they taught her to be a free thinker and not to buy into all of the normative values. Within the context of this show Lynn is presented as set apart from the other women who grew up in black communities; she has had the opportunity to participate in and monitor white suburbia.

The combination of Lynn's upbringing and academic background has allowed her to view the world through a different set of lens. She understands the heteronormative view, yet she also understands the scientific aspects of anthropology through evolution and challenges the value systems of her friends. Because of Lynn's proximity to whiteness, being raised by a white family, she is constructed as being open minded and her educational background allow her to experience the world in a carefree manner. According to Carbado (2011) as he describes the privileges of heterosexuals this explains the foundation of Lynn's value system and how we can read her as being carefree:

“(White) heterosexuals do not have to worry over the impact their sexuality will have personally on their children's lives, particularly as it relates to their social lives (though black families of all identity configurations do have to worry about how race and racism will affect their children's well-being)” (p. 38)

### **Joan vs. Antithesis: I Gotta' Man**

Maya hails from the city of Compton, California and provides the stereotypical sassy 'ghetto girl' attitude. Maya seems to be more religious oriented than the other girlfriends and tends to provide the moral compass about right and wrong. Maya and Toni are always at odds with one another because Toni looks down upon her because of Maya's 'working class' status. Maya, on the other hand, does not agree with Toni's egotistical, narcissistic, gold-digger values in life. In one exchange, Toni's condescending tone with Maya leads to a grammar lesson in which Toni learns that Maya is a smart girl and a force to be reckoned with. At Joan's birthday celebration Maya is eating Moroccan food for the first time, she shows her lack of exposure and culture which Toni loves to point out. Toni and Charles sit and stare in amazement how she is eating the food.

MAYA: This Moroccan food is off the hook! I'm gonna take some to my husband. (Pause) What...why you lookin' at me?

TONI: It's, why are you looking at me. You dropped a verb.

MAYA: Toni I go to college, I don't need you correcting me.

TONI: They apparently did not teach you that a sentence must have a verb.

MAYA: I did learn that 'KISS' is both a verb and a noun. So how about you give my ass a kiss or kiss my ass!

During another encounter Toni points out how Maya takes advantage of her friendship with Joan. She asks Joan, "Why do you let your friendship with Maya interfere with your role as her boss?" Joan has brought Maya into her fold of friends, despite the fact she is her legal assistant, Joan has taken her under her wing to mentor, but there are no lines of authority in the workplace. Seemingly Joan loses control as the boss, and her desire to be well liked works against her in the end.

Maya is the youngest and the only married woman in the group of friends, and she does not mind reminding them of her marital status. Maya is the antithesis of Joan, she has what Joan desires. Maya represents the heteronormative ideals to which Joan subscribes, and also to those single viewers who have the desire to meet that special man, marry and begin a family. Even though the circumstances that led up to Maya's marriage were not conventional, she became pregnant as a teenager; she still has the ultimate prize of marriage. Maya's marriage provides a glimpse into the events that can occur in the lives of married couples such as lack of communication between spouses, supporting one another's dreams and desires, and sex and the suspension of marital fidelity. Maya and her husband demonstrate that marriage is more than a fantasy; it requires work and compromise.

We can also explore the socioeconomic factors that are implied with the reasons Maya got married in the first place. Being a teen unwed mother is frowned upon in most societies, and as a girl from a poor, working-class family, raising a child alone would be even more challenging. Collins (2009) makes reference that “female-headed households would be seen as an important cause to racial oppression and poverty” (p. 82). Being a single mother would place Maya in socioeconomic stagnation. Maya’s marriage represents the heteronormative ideology of financial stability. Even though Maya and Darnell are not part of the upper-class, Maya is in a better financial position than if she were alone raising a child. However, in today’s society having a family does not depend upon a woman being married. Because of Joan’s financial means, she would have the ability to support her family without a husband. Throughout the program there was never a mention of Maya’s father, so we assume her mother was a single parent. When Maya and Darnell renew their wedding vows there is no mention of her father nor does anyone give her away; her marriage represents the end of the perpetuation of single motherhood. Maya loves her husband very much, which is demonstrated in the episode in which they work on saving their marriage, but her life would have taken a very different path if she had not gotten pregnant at an early age. They were doing what is considered the “*right thing*” by not having a baby out of wedlock.

Another theme that presented itself in the same episode was that of classism. Joan presents herself in a classist manner; she is not as blatant as Toni, but it opens up another point of view. When Maya and Darnell complete marriage counseling they decide to renew their vows and have the wedding ceremony they never had. Joan becomes the neurotic wedding coordinator and zealously imposes her wedding dreams and plans onto Maya. For every suggestion Maya offers, Joan counters it with something that she feels is better. In an exchange between Joan and

Maya, Joan alludes that she just wants to make her wedding classier. Their exchange raises issues of classism. Joan does not think she is belittling Maya and her family; however, she is completely oblivious to her words and actions and how they impact Maya. Maya's struggle has been one that she has had to explain her culture to white people, but she is also tired of having to prove herself to "uppity" black folks who look down on her.

Consequently, Maya's early marriage and pregnancy prevented the privilege of completing college and enjoying the single life that most twenty-something would enjoy because she has to work to help support her family. Although she does not come from the same middle class environment like Joan, Toni, and Lynn, she still has or similar aspirations. She is strong, smart, and determined; had it not been for the mishap of getting pregnant she would be on a different path at this time. Nevertheless, she is still pursuing her dream of obtaining a degree while helping to support her family.

Maya represents how the options of chance and choice came together based on a series of events. Maya and Darnell took the chance of having sex without proper protection and a pregnancy ensued. They could have remained single co-parents, but they chose to get married and be a family. In this first season we see Maya working through her marital issues, and it reminds viewers a glimpse that happily ever after is not always so.

### **Conclusion**

"Identity is viewed as fragmented, mutable and multiple instead of whole, unchanging, and singular" (Zingsheim & Goltz, 2011, p. 3). Over the years black women in media have been represented as the traditional mammy, the woman who cared and catered to the white family and their children; the sexy and vivacious jezebel who uses her sex appeal to gain what she wants; and the modern day mammy who is focused on education and work her way up the corporate

ladder. In many early television programs the lives of black families and black women were very one-dimensional and limited by stereotypes according to the dominant culture (Merritt, 2000; Burrell, 2010).

As in the past, today we seek out representations of ourselves and our lives that incorporate complex and multidimensional images. Unfortunately, very limited representation of black leading men and women or they are represented in overtly stereotypical images of black culture. With the onset of reality television we have been bombarded with the same negative stereotypes of women, women of color, and the desperate single woman waiting to be chosen by the *Bachelor*. Even though reality television is within different genre than sitcoms it is worth noting how women of color are represented. Squires (2008) suggests that reality television, which is supposed to be unscripted, still highlights many of the negative stereotypes associated with black women. Opportunities have arisen for black female writers and producers to offer a voice and a narrative representing multifaceted images that are more appealing to women and black women in particular. For example, in the early 90's, writer-producer Yvette Lee Bowser brought us *Living Single*, a sitcom which featured young twenty-something single professional women. This program provided a whimsical view of young women a few years out of college establishing themselves in the world and the workforce. These ladies were dating, enjoying what life has to offer, and "finding themselves". These women represented images of strength and independence not one of lack and defeat.

In the early 2000's Mara Brock-Akil, writer and developer of *Girlfriends*, was able to showcase a relatable ensemble of middle class black women in their mid to late 20's voicing their dreams and ideas on life and what is supposed to happen after you have completed college and established yourself in a career. Yet, their narrative was intertwined with the hegemonic

ideals of the dominant society. Such ideals are rooted in normative patriarchal ideologies and heteronormativity ideologies, where there is no room for singleness and drives home the image of women being a wife and mother (Yep, 2003). For married women there is the threat of becoming single again should the marriage come to an end. Singleness is not the desired state. Most recently Stacy Littlejohn, creator and producer, of *Single Ladies*, provides a representation of independent business women who seek out love and romance, but that is not the main focus of their lives.

These programs provide a voice to be heard and an opportunity for the relatable voices, to all women. The highly popular *Sex and the City* provided a voice about women who are defining themselves by their beliefs and expectations. Carrie's voice, just as Joan's voice, could be the voice of any woman. A voice posing the questions that any women would ask about the roles, values, and identities that women; specifically single women, are to follow based on the society we live in.

There is not much in popular culture that represents single women as vital, viable people functioning independently in this society. There is an opportunity to portray and represent single women as whole, independent, self-sufficient and thinkers. Relationships should be options to what is already good and not a relationship born out of desperation and dependency.

Even though society still follows patriarchal and heteronormative ideals, there have been changes in our modern households. In some cases women make as much or more than men, making them the bread winners of the home. We see same-sex households raising families, which still reflect some normative values, but still it is no *Father Knows Best* situation. Finally, we see households that are headed by single women who have chosen not to marry or remarry after divorce. This is an opportunity for television writers and academia to recognize the

growing group of single women, black and white, in a positive light. Today's woman has a voice that should be heard to overcome the stereotypes of singleness.

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