


“Whole Self to the World”: Creating Affective Worlds and Black Digital Intimacy in the Fandom of *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure*

Brienne A. Adams <ba644_at_georgetown_dot_edu >, Georgetown University  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0883-6262>

Abstract

This article examines how Black fans utilize social media platforms to engage fandoms of contemporary Black popular cultural productions. Specifically, how Black digital intimacies are created through examining the interiority expressed in the cultural productions and their fandoms. Utilizing YouTube and Twitter fan comments from *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* [YouTube, 2011-2012] and *Insecure* [HBO, 2016-2021], this article proposes affirmative transformative fandom to examine the affective relationships fans have with their fan objects and fellow fans to explore their own intimate lives

Introduction

In an interview with *Harper's Bazaar*, Issa Rae, the creator of the web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and the television show *Insecure* said: “So much of Issa's [the character on the show] journey has been about denying who she is, not being honest about her feelings, and just really being obviously insecure about so much of her life. So, a happy ending to me would just be Issa feeling happy and satisfied to give her *whole self to the world*.” [Betancourt 2020]. Rae's retrospective and foreshadowing pontification about the upcoming fifth and final season of her hit series, *Insecure*, exemplifies the journey fans found themselves on alongside Rae and in community with each other on social media platforms. *Insecure*, created by Issa Rae for HBO in 2016, is a comedy/comedy-drama that chronicles a thirty-year-old, Black heterosexual woman who, at beginning of the series, is dissatisfied with her career and love life. The show explores dating, family, friendship, sex, career issues, and race through “Issa Dee” as a character, which borrowed Rae's first name as the protagonists' name, and her best friend Molly's relationship. *Insecure* is loosely based on one of Rae's earliest YouTube produced web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, that premiered in 2011. *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* — also referenced in this article as *Awkward Black Girl* or *ABG* — features Issa acting as the character “J” with a similar premise. The protagonist “J” chronicles her career, friendships, and romantic life under the comedic guise of being awkward. Her awkwardness propels the comedy's conflict and character development much like Issa's insecurities does for *Insecure*'s plot.

This article examines the online fandom of *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* to explore the affective relationships Black people have to their fandom objects, their own intimate lives, the creator's intention, and the digital fandom expressed on social media. Following in the footsteps of television shows from the 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Living Single* and *Girlfriends*, *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* continued the comedic expression of Black intimacy and interiority by focusing on friendships, romantic partnerships, and family relationships. Rae's foray into producing the web series on her own on YouTube and her usage of fan engagement to continue producing and prop up its popularity that eventually turned into the iteration of *Insecure* on HBO is a fascinating case study on digital creation, social media, and fandom that supports and propels shows into mainstream media.

I focus on the intimate relationships characters have with each other and those developed by fans in social media spaces. Black familial and relationship studies emphasize the ways Black Americans forefront their intimate

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relationships as a foundational tenet and an affective motivating factor to continue to fight oppressive systems. Scholars of a journal special issue on Black Love state "...what sustained black Americans was love — communal, familial, and carnal..." [Jelks and Hardison 2019]. Amidst all the turmoil and triumphs, relationships have sustained Black communities. Combined with Black feminisms, my research develops the affective mode to interrogate how Black communities have sustained themselves. Specifically, Black feminism grounds my affective theoretical approach through womanism's assertion of love as a central tenet. Womanism's definition of love is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" [Walker 1983]. The emphasis on community, love, and sexuality within womanism's description attends to how I am examining Black affect through intimacy and how Black communities have deep roots in love for self, others, and the community that continues in online spaces. It is the pursuit of wholeness as praxis — as sustaining and eventually thriving in Black communities' personal lives. I assert that one way to trace this pursuit is in the active discussions about fandom. Fans have a specific understanding and relationship to their objects that center romantic, communal, and familial storylines. Rather than speculate and theorize about these processes through only examining the cultural productions themselves, we can turn to the words of fans as well as their reflections on the characters and their own lives as evidence of the affective struggles and triumphs in Black interpersonal relationships.

Fandom studies is the lens by which Black feminisms and digital studies combine in my research. Fandom scholars have traditionally centered the affective and intimate through demonstrating fandom as inherently participatory. The two definitions of fandom, affirmative and transformative, are central to how I am conceptualizing digital participation and fandom engagement as well as how the cultural productions are informing how their fans are analyzing their interpersonal lives. Affirmative fandom describes fans that like, or affirm, the productions they center their fandom on. Transformative is defined as taking the interest and creating a new work inspired by the fandom. Fandom scholars, especially fandom scholars of color have evolved and taken up this question... " should be "Fandom scholars, especially fandom scholars of color, have evolved and taken up the definitions and arguments of the field in various ways. I intervene through combining both definitions into an amalgamation that states that Black fans demonstrate affirmative transformative fandom in digital spaces. Further, fans shared their insights about the characters and storylines and the overlap with their own lives through witnessing the pain, joy, growth, setbacks, stagnation, and transitions explored in both shows through character arcs and narrative choices. Rae's usage of the YouTube as a new media platform fueled by fan engagement spurred the popularity of the television series where the characters showcased their whole selves, and fans responded enthusiastically on social media to Rae's creation of complicated characters that struggle with their inner worlds and how it affects their relationships. Centering the community that Black digital fandom spaces create, I engage Black studies, digital humanities, and fan studies to examine connections fans make to Rae's media output and their own interiority and intimate lives amongst each other using the comments on YouTube and hashtags on Twitter.

This article is driven by several interlocking questions: What does the digital fandom of the *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* reveal, complicate, and demonstrate about romance, friendship, and community? Further, how does the representation of these stories effect their fans interior lives? How does the expression of their interior lives on social media build community and challenge notions of hegemonic intimacy that is both expressed in the interpersonal sense and in online spaces? I posit that by examining interpersonal intimacy and interiority in cultural productions and digital fandoms, we see the demonstration of the pursuit of love, wholeness, and intimacy as labor that sustaining acts for and by Black communities. Within the quotidian acts of social media usage and the small moments of reflection they provoke, Black fans pursue much needed forms of rest and respite in these public communities and find ways to self-make to imagine a different world within their own relationships and interrogating processes taken to heal from generational trauma, patterns, and actions. Black fans contend with their familial and romantic lives through the expression and labor for themselves of simultaneous affective and transformative fandom in collective digital spaces. I examine how these interactions serve two capacities. First, they do the meaningful and important work of recovery and healing for Black fandom communities to examine how hegemonic narratives about the intimacies of friendship, family, and romantic relationships are reinscribed through popular media and are challenged in the storylines and expressive digital fandom. Secondly, pleasure and play in fandom communities continues to foster personhood, worldmaking, and reimagining for Black people in the face of the dehumanizing power structures that they navigate daily.

Black DH: Fandom and Intimacy

Intimate partnerships are an extension of where we encounter and negotiate our interior selves and how they are expressed outwardly. Thus, our digital selves are an extension of these intimate negotiations and are a site to examine how our hegemonic ideals about our interpersonal relationships are reinscribed, challenged, and co-created with others in a public domain. Affect and queer theorist Lauren Berlant's theoretical framing of intimacy as an intersection of interpersonal relationships that reverberate publicly situates my framework on Black relationships, the digital, and fandom. Berlant's definition of intimacy is "an aspiration for a narrative about something shared" and that "the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness" [Berlant 1998]. Berlant's assertion is that institutions that were supposed to teach us "democratic publicness" — a la Habermas — evolved and were fostered into "collective experience (s)" like cinema and other entertainment forms where there is "the desire for entertainment taken for pleasure" [Berlant 1998]. Yet intimacy also operates outside of these institutional realms in everyday mundane practices — such as my argument of logging into social media — that reproduce, challenge, and produce the stories that hegemonic ideals encourage us to follow concerning our intimate lives. As Berlant asserts we impact each other in these public ways and thus, I theorize that it also effects our intimate lives directly: both interpersonally and with each other in public in online networks.

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Further, utilizing Berlant's "inwardness", I turn to definitions from Black studies and Black feminist scholars of interiority to assist in forming my critical intervention about Black digital fandom practices. As *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* center a Black female protagonist, I utilize Joan Morgan's "politics of pleasure" that is invested in "*black female interiority*" as it is exemplified in the storylines and their fandoms [Morgan 2015]. Morgan frames pleasure in analyzing cultural texts through different interventions such as the advent of social media and digital discourse for the possibilities of expressing interiority. Morgan's definition of interiority is "to excavate the broad range of feelings, desires, hearing, (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the 'politics of silence'" [Morgan 2015]. Morgan grounds her argument in Black feminist Evelynn Hammonds' "politics of articulation" rather than the respectable "politics of silence" thus, black female interiority provides a framework to examine Black women's sexualities [Morgan 2015]. *Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* do not shy away from this articulation of pleasure and sexuality as the characters routinely question and speculate about their desires and intimate partnerships whether they are familial, friendship, or romantic. Therefore, the usage of interiority in public digital spaces go together when discussing the plots of the cultural productions, fans engagement with them digitally, and specifically how they utilize them to explore their own interpersonal relationships.

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Queer and Black feminist theories of intimacy and interiority lend itself seamlessly to Black digital practices as they center intimate ways of knowing and resistance as scholars have demonstrated. Jessica Marie Johnson provides an anecdote for my questions by asserting that Black people use the digital in ways that are liberatory and revelatory. Johnson argues

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that black digital practice is the interface by which black freedom struggles challenge reproduction of black death and commodification, countering the presumed neutrality of the digital. Black digital practice is the revelation that black subjects have ...commodified themselves and digitized and mediated their own black freedom ideas, in order to hack their way into systems ...thus living where they were "never meant to survive"

[Johnson2018]. Black fans are exemplary to the digital practice Johnson describes and that Andre Brock examines in, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. Brock outlines that "political-economic analyses foreclose the sensual, the erotic, or the deviant by arguing that they have no value in a rational worldview, but the denial of their exchange value does not negate their existence. How does one value love or anger?" [Brock 2020]. Instead, Brock argues for libidinal economy that focuses on Black lived experience online. Especially, because "another benefit is the acknowledgement and theorization of Black communal identity as a meaning-making strategy" [Brock 2020]. Black digital fandom is a meaning making strategy because it is also libidinal as it "offers a release from considerations of Black digital practice as labor or commodity" [Brock 2020]. Black fandoms are labor, but a labor of love for Black communities in terms of navigating their interpersonal relationships. Through putting Brock in conversation with Berlant,

I argue that the libidinal economy of Black digital practice is then inherently intimate. Black digital practices that are fandom based is entertainment taken for pleasure and thus “pleasure-knowledge creates problems for the notional rationality with which collective critical consciousness is supposed to proceed” [Berlant 1998]. We can return to these places as they are produced relationally and “produce something, though frequently not history in its ordinary memorable, or valorized sense, and not always ‘something’ of positive value” [Berlant 1998]. Black digital fandom practices relationally produce hacking their way into their own systems and presenting their whole selves to the world in intimate ways through the analysis and expression of interiority.

Within the field of fan studies, scholars often define two distinct modes of fandom production and engagement: the affirmative and transformative. In the introduction of the *Fan Studies Reader*, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse offer a definition of the difference between affirmative fandom and transformative fandom. They explain, “affirmative fans tend to collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and critique. Transformative fans, however, take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artworks, or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take ” [Busse and Hellekson 2014]. Hellekson and Busse emphasize that many academics focus on the transformative creations of fandom as they are new creations and sites for identity formation. I argue that Black fans demonstrate an amalgamation of both affirmative and transformative fandom as defined by the field to morph and become *affirmative transformative* works of fandom expression. It is affirmative through casual engagement with fellow fans — or those that dislike the cultural productions or antifans — and content creators while also being transformative through the creativity of Black social media users and their identification with fandom objects. Black digital fandom reflects both. I argue for a simultaneous configuration of both because the ways representation, identity, and function operate for Black fans. Further, the communal aspects of fandom expressed comprise Black digital intimacies where affective interiority and transformative ideals through world making and affirming are enacted. Black fans affirm the cultural productions because of the representation they demonstrate but also transform them into something else through creative usage of hashtags, podcasts, and other modes of creative fandom. This also works interpersonally as the feel affirmed through the representations they see and express personal transformation as they encounter what they are seeing on screen and how it reflects interpersonally in their romantic, familial, and friend relationships.

Black fandom scholars account for the ways that fan studies has typically not considered Black fandom practices. Wanzo, in her critical essay about fan studies genealogies and citational practices calls for an “identity hermeneutics” which places Black fan consumption, critique, and affective fandom in the center of any approach to Fan Studies [Wanzo 2015]. I continue in this tradition of building upon Black fan studies scholars and how the field has expanded its definitions of fan works. I am in conversation with scholars who discuss fandom and the intersection of Black digital humanities with scholarship from from Kristen Warner, Aymar Jean Christian & Faithe Day, Sarah Florini, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas [2019], as well as many other scholars in the recent special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* on Fans of Color that was edited by André Carrington and Abigail De Kosnik [Warner 2015][Day and Christian 2017][Florini 2019][Thomas 2019][Carrington and De Kosnik 2019]. The amalgamation demonstrates the ways Black fans digitally practice fandom in ways outside of the intended or widely adapted usage. Black fandom practice at times connotes a different relationship to fandom for several reasons. This is in part due to a dearth of representation and/or at times harmful stereotypical depictions of Black people in media. Fandoms of the *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *Insecure* are case studies for Black digital intimacies and affirmative transformative fandoms because of the dearth of Black representation at the time of their debut and the ways the show continued the comedic traditions of the Black shows that inspired *Rae*. Digital intimacy as a subfield borrows from heavily from Berlant [Rambukkana and Wong 2020][Berlant 1998]. I am examining how Black digital intimacies work through centering fandom. To support my analysis of Black fandom fully, I preface Black feminist thought, Black digital studies, and queer analysis of intimacy. Berlant centers marginalized identities that have had to create new ways of being intimate by emphasizing that they have, and we must “rethink intimacy” and to do so is “to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living”[Berlant 1998]. Or as Stuart Hall asserts that Black popular culture is where “we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time” [Hall 1992]. Through digital fandom practices we can see how Black fans speculate, reimagine, and world-make

about their lives through sharing themselves with the world in intimate digital spaces.

Methodology

I employ close reading to analyze the cultural productions and data I gathered from fans through YouTube and Twitter. I also use participant observation as a self-identified acafan, an academic who also has insider knowledge of their object of study because they are also a fan, and autoethnography as I account for my own affective reactions to the productions. I gathered social media posts from YouTube from the first episode of *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and I documented conversations in real time from select episodes of *Insecure* on Twitter.

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As a Fan Studies and an internet scholar, I am invested in the communities I study, thus I aim to be ethical in how I utilize and engage data. To maintain ethical transparency comments that affirm fandom about the show where there doesn't seem to be any identifying attributes or revealing intimate details about their lives, I decided to forgo permission seeking. For the fandom expressions that utilize more personal thought about their relationship to the fandom object, I ask for permission to use those fandom expressions. These issues have been debated by fandom scholars and digital humanities scholars and my personal decisions are led by an ethics of care and what revealing these intimate issues will bring to the forefront for those discussing information. I aim for an ethics that centers Moya Bailey's self-reflexive observations when conducting online and digital research [Bailey 2015]. Bailey explores the networks Black trans women create through Twitter. Bailey employs a feminist tactic of informed consent to combat the paternalistic IRB process, while considering the types of harm surveillance and exposure can bring to their lives. As I study affective fandoms that center on their interpersonal lives and information it is important that I consider if fans wish to have their comments shared.

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Further, the two platforms I utilize for this article, YouTube and Twitter, have different affordances and terms of use and privacy policies. That necessitates a different engagement with the data used for each platform. I utilize pseudonyms for the usernames on YouTube because the platform's privacy policy requires it. YouTube's Terms of Service states the following: "The following restrictions apply to your use of the Service. You are not allowed to: 3. collect or harvest any information that might identify a person (for example, usernames or faces), unless permitted by that person or allowed under section (3) above" [YouTube Terms of Service]. Thus, in order to be in alignment with my ethical considerations and YouTube's agreement, I utilize specific comments and code for usernames. YouTube is also under the umbrella of Google products where users must use their e-mails and that typically features a real name over a pseudo-name.

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Ethically, in addition to seeking permission I use high profile Twitter users that I define with 5k or more followers instead of smaller accounts with more casual usage. As I am studying "Black Twitter" and the popularity of these cultural productions, I carefully choose and curate the comments I analyze, and more popular tweeters reflect the breadth of thoughts Black Twitter encapsulates due to their networks that produce high engagement. The users who have public tweets with a higher follower count expect to have a larger audience with their tweets circulating more heavily, especially with the usage of hashtags related to the popular cultural productions I am examining. Users with smaller accounts might understand Twitter's platform affordance of "publicly available" but may not desire to have their tweets to circulate beyond an audience of 200 to 500 or less due to the small nature of their accounts. Further, I will not use pseudonyms for usernames on Twitter as the public nature of the authors I use are identifiable to those who are aware of Black Twitter — both social media users and researchers. I also will not use any tweets that identify confidential information as users are tweeting their responses to the cultural productions. Finally, the affordances of each platform inform my decisions. Twitter allows me to personally message users for permission as opposed to needing to add another comment to the public discourse to ask for permission from YouTube. YouTube's commenting communities aren't as conversational as Twitter as a primarily audio-visual platform versus Twitter's primarily text-based platform.

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While YouTube's policy for publishing comments requires anonymity, Twitter does not require the same. Twitter user privacy policy states the following: "By publicly posting content, you are directing us to disclose that information as broadly as possible, including through our APIs, and directing those accessing the information through our APIs to do the same...But these individuals and companies are not affiliated with Twitter, and their offerings may not reflect updates you make on Twitter" [Twitter Privacy Policy]. I will utilize direct quotes and twitter usernames for the purposes

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of this research. In terms of confidentiality, I will abide by Twitter's rules for researchers that outlines usage of tweets that are public — not under private accounts — and have not been deleted, and I will abide by both rules even as I ask for permission.

Awkward Black Girl and Insecure Fandom

I begin by emphasizing the behavior and character construction Rae develops in both the web series and television show as an example of interiority she heralds as an essential part to the popularity and thus success of the show that began on YouTube and propelled the producer/actor/writer to mainstream media and HBO. Specifically, Black digital fan expression of affirming and identifying with this iteration of “awkwardness” and then “insecure” interiority connote affirmative transformative fandoms through Black digital intimacies on social media platforms. Some examples of the interiority expressed in the shows include the main character “J” narrating parts of the show, or Issa — the character on *Insecure* — talking to herself in the mirror and her mirrored self, talking back to her. *Insecure* also includes many daydream flashbacks as aesthetic and to aid plot development for the 30-minute comedy. Fans responded to this expression of interiority with their own thus creating intimate digital spaces through affirmative transformative fandom expression.

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There are Other Awkward Black Girls

While interiority and intimacy can connote many different types of emotion and affect, I want to focus on pleasure as aforementioned by Morgan due to *Awkward Black Girl's* and *Insecure* comedic aesthetic, genre, and expression of a different representation of Black women that was lacking in the entertainment landscape at the time. Ariane Cruz analyses *ABG* before *Insecure's* 2016 premiere. Cruz argues that Rae was successful in exploring Black female sexuality through her usage of “awkward” in relation to the character’s identity and specifically J’s sexuality. Cruz contends, “the epithet of awkward mediates performances of Black female racial and sexual authenticity on the show, unveiling the ways that black female sexuality becomes authenticated in and through its ontological failure and nonbelonging, however comic” [Cruz 2015]. Cruz places *Awkward Black Girl* in relation to other dominant representations of heterosexual Black women in the media at the time. Rae represented a different take on Black women’s singleness and sexuality at the time by being awkward and not being a “wife” a la *Basketball Wives*, *Love & Hip Hop* [all on Vh1], and *The Realhousewives of Atlanta* [Bravo] as depicted in many of the popular reality TV shows that were in their infancy at the time [Cruz 2015]. Cruz analysis of Rae’s exploration of sexuality focuses on the plot’s themes and construction of the web series as other scholars such as Carmel Ohman and Yael Levy have done for *Insecure* concerning the same interior subject [Ohman 2020][Levy 2020]. I argue that understanding the behavior mediation of awkward and insecurity that *ABG* and eventually *Insecure* underscores alongside the fandom provides another analysis of the work these shows are doing for Black fans. Studying the series plot and aesthetic choices paired with fandom engagement demonstrates how a breadth of expressed emotions are received by fans — we can learn what fans learn from and ultimately do with their fandoms.

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Additionally, Rae took advantage of YouTube’s new media promise through their slogan “Broadcast Yourself” through passing some of the constraints and challenges that come from pursuing a greenlight from traditional media may have posed. Aymar Jean Christian’s book *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* examines the ways in which web series become sites where producers and content creators can connect directly due to the digital nature of the comment section [Christian 2018]. Christian’s argument is that web series allow for Black creators, who have been marginalized from the process of producing shows on mainstream television, to produce original content without the “single-story/cookie-cutter” narrative mainstream producers perpetuate. By examining the digital ways fans interact and reflect on their fandom object, specifically focusing on the interiority expressed, I trace how digital community intimacy is built and how fans reflect interact with their fandom objects. YouTube prefaces audio-visual consumption due to its platform affordances and the commentary and interaction happens after an episode airs unless it is a live streaming event as opposed to Twitter where one can tweet simultaneously. Therefore, comment sections often reflect affirmative fandom which is the fandom that discusses and analyzes [Busse and Hellekson 2014]. Analyzing representation alongside platform affordances, Christian continues, “She (Issa) created an original representation and then experimented with distribution in ways that deviated from and continued a tradition beginning with BET. *Awkward*

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Black Girl proposes to represent its community of fans — primarily but not exclusively black women — in a way unseen on legacy television, and does so convincingly” [Christian 2018]. The web series allowed for Rae to “push the boundaries of normative Black female representation” [Christian 2018]. I argue that mainstream television has seen awkward Black girls in mainstream television before 2011. Characters such as Sinclair from *Living Single*, Lynn from *Girlfriends*, Kim Parker from *Moesha* and *The Parkers* can arguably be seen as source references for J’s character. However, to build upon Christian’s point, new media allowed Rae the opportunity to circumvent censorship of legacy media by expressing explicit sexuality, as Cruz analyses [Christian 2018][Cruz 2015]. To reiterate, the awkward mediation adds another layer of interiority and thus identification with fans while YouTube provides a platform for fans to comment.

In the comment portion of *ABG*’s first episode, “The Stop Sign” which was uploaded to YouTube on February 3, 2011, fans readily affirm the show and relate to Issa’s short pilot episode — only 3 minutes and 40 seconds — where she introduces us to her awkward relationships with her coworkers, ex-boyfriend, and ultimately herself. The episode introduces us to J’s world where she states that she is Black and awkward which are “the two worst things anyone can be” [Rae 2011]. To sum the episode: J pretends to be in a music video when she’s by herself in the car, tries to avoid her co-worker at stop-signs as they both drive in their respective cars to work, shows a montage of her boyfriend breaking up with her, J’s subsequent sleeping with the co-worker she’s trying to avoid because of her heartbreak, and making up rap lyrics disparaging the ex-boyfriend as coping mechanisms. J narrates the episode with rhetorical questions to set up her awkward misadventures. J’s awkwardness and Rae’s scripting drew the audience in and resulted in fans affirming the series through their comments. As representation for a new audience in the landscape of Black media in the early 2010s, women identified with a representation that reflects their interiority and could express it to the creator and others on YouTube. Under the first episode, a commenting fan wrote,

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BAHAHAHAHAA my first time watching this [yes, I live under a rock] and I am soooo happy to find another "awkward black girl" like myself :,D don't feel so alone in this world happy dance I also shaved my head to change my life's scenery, loved a guy named "D" [big mistake ___], and rap/sing while alone while trying SO hard not to have a nicki vibe XD lolz, #sigh what i'm trying to say is: you're cool, and ima insta-fan :]

[Commenting *ABG* Fan #1, #2, #3]. The fan affirms every aspect of J’s character in the episode relating to being another awkward Black girl. The fan also includes reference to Nicki Minaj, a rapper known for her sexually explicit lyrics and branding representation as J’s character raps an original song for the show about a rapper’s sexual exploits. The fan also shaved her head to “change” her “life’s scenery”, and made a “mistake” loving a guy named D like J did in the episode. These other interior expressions of the fans’ life are both affirmative of the show, while being transformative to her life personally due to her relationship with the show and being “happy to find another ‘awkward black girl’ like myself”. By commenting her pleasure with the show, she is invoking an affirmative transformative work and Black digital intimacy through naming herself a fan for Rae and others to see. It is affirmative by praising the show but also transformative that she can relate to and laugh about her interior and interpersonal relationships in the process.

Generally, fans also expressed desire for the show to remain small to insulate it from changes that can happen on a larger production stage. One commenting fans discusses this aspect specifically:

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I've watched the whole season, and I know this is selfish to say, but I don't want this show to be on TV, I want it to be my little secret, and plus if it was TV it wouldn't be the same, they would have to censor everything, but at the same time I would want this show to make a lot of money, they deserve it, good script

[Commenting *ABG* Fan #1, #2, #3]. The fan affirms the series, recognizes the platform affordances, but also transformatively understands its impact on the industry, and to a certain extent, other fans through sharing. I also recognize this comment to express affective ownership of the show as they identified so closely and enjoyed the web series, while also wanting it to do well without losing authenticity. Black fans have had a contentious relationship to media forms regarding representation. Alfred L. Martin’s describes the political ways Black fans engage with their

fandom objects. The four interlocking discourses Martin introduces are: must-see blackness, economic consumption, pedagogical properties, and understanding the machinations of the culture industries [Martin 2019]. The comment about the show not being censored but desiring it to make a lot of money collapses three of Martin's assertions: the move to television and the potential economic boost underscores fan understanding the precarity of Black media such that it becomes must-see by knowing that money talks to produce more representations of Black media. The comment also prescribes Martin's fourth way that Black fans engage through pedagogical properties which are the ways Black fans examine "how fit fan objects are for learning and role modeling" or "what can be learned from a particular fan object" about how to move throughout the world as a Black person [Martin 2019]. Relatedly, to Martin's exploration of Black fans I assert that the pedagogical properties for Black fans where pleasure and interiority allow them to learn more about their own interpersonal lives through transformative affective fandoms. Simply, what can fans learn about themselves with each other and from these cultural productions to world-build their own romantic, familial, and friend relationships?

Another fan that commented on the show supports this the pedagogical effects of learning about oneself after watching a trailer for *Insecure* on HBO in 2016 before its premiere. She claims,

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Just saw the trailer for her new HBO show and had to come back and reminisce. In high school, there was no show on television I could relate to. Then a friend told me about this show and I was hooked instantly. I'm overjoyed Issa made the bold choice to share with the world her incredible talents. And, in doing that, she gave so many of us a show we could actually relate to and helped us realize we weren't the only awkward black girl out there. So proud of Issa. I can't wait for *Insecure* to air!

[Commenting ABG Fan #1, #2, #3]. She has learned that she is essentially not alone in her understanding of herself as she was represented in media. Notably, the comments I've chosen and their specific refrain of relating to the "awkward" is important as it created bonds both digitally and in their personal lives to the television show. They are learning from their interior lives that they are not alone in how they feel as "awkward back girls" even with their "awkward" sexualities that aren't mired in the types of sexualities that were circulating widely in the media at the time. The digital intimacy Rae fostered for her fans to explore and world-build through continued with *Insecure*. The popularity of the series garnered a built-in audience for *Insecure* to build upon and shifted to other social media platforms, namely, Twitter and Black Twitter specifically.

A Real Ass Conversation

Once *Insecure* premiered on HBO, Rae could push the boundaries of sexual expression to become more explicit and kept the affective interior plot device of being centered on one behavior from awkward to insecure. Cruz later acknowledges in the *ABG* article concerns about the creative authenticity in the show as it transitioned in form and platform from YouTube to HBO [Cruz 2015]. Rae curated *ABG* alongside Tracy Oliver as independent creators with full creative control as they didn't have to answer to television executives about the direction of the series. While Cruz's concerns were valid as the platform changed, they were expanded in an innovative way through the insecure mediation and pushing the boundaries of storytelling due to HBO's established credibility in television. Specifically, with the move to HBO, Rae certainly pushed the sexual, language, aesthetics, and content boundaries even further, which may be an affordance of HBO as a platform that regularly pursues characters with blatant and expressed sexuality. As an innovative story arc, Rae flipped the romantic aspects of the show by depicting the woman cheating on her boyfriend, which is typically represented as a man cheating on a woman when heterosexual storylines are depicted. The audience is also privy to how issues in her relationship also reverberated in other areas of her life, such as her career and friendships. *Insecure*'s characters are educated 30-somethings that run in a tight circle with each other due to romantic, professional, and friendship connections in present day Los Angeles. As viewers, we can explore the main character's motivations through the long arc of many of the ancillary characters and how they navigate their many insecurities with themselves, their relationships, and their careers.

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One evening on Twitter resulted in a flurry of conversation as a major turning point in the plot of *Insecure*. The

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comments happened in response to a conversation between Lawrence, Issa's ex, and his new romantic interest, Tasha, on the third episode of the second season "Hella Open" where she calls him out on his actions, which inevitably ends their connection. The first season chronicled how Issa and Lawrence's relationship devolved from what appeared to be Lawrence's retreat into himself after losing his job and subsequently the loss of intimacy in their relationship. Instead of ending it, Issa cheated, and Lawrence enters a rebounding "friends with benefits" relationship with Tasha who he met at his bank. He told Tasha that he would return to help her with her family's cookout and doesn't return from leaving to drink with his new co-workers. Tasha calls out the ways his intentions, both in words and actions, don't align and is evident when he attempts to apologize for his actions by citing that he wasn't ready for a serious relationship. She calls out his lack of accountability by stating that he is "a fuck nigga...who is worse than fuck nigga. You a fuck nigga who thinks he's a good dude." [Insecure 2017]. Lawrence's "good guy" credibility is questioned. I found myself engaging with the dialogue on my timeline as I follow many fans of the show and realized at this point that I wanted to study *Insecure* rather than remaining only a fan of the web series and at the time the new the show on HBO. The sympathy fans garnered for Lawrence being cheated on were placed under scrutiny because of his behavior with Tasha.

I follow the author of one fan that tweeted a long thread after that episode. In it, @peoplesoracle writes about her views on relationships that was spurred by Lawrence's behavior. She did not use the #InsecureHBO hashtag to make her comments visible to the fans and Twitter users that might click on the hashtag. This could be due to not wanting to engage in the dialogue about the show that centers hegemonic representations of relationships as she instead pushes the boundaries of these constructions with her comments or wanting the thread to stay within the confines of her followers. Black digital intimacy and knowledge of the timeline topics assisted me in knowing that she was indeed discussing *Insecure* at the beginning of the thread without mentioning characters. The fan states that she wishes to "preach a sermon" — which is a nod to Black oration and church culture — and discusses her views about the scene. In a thread with over 30 tweets, she discusses accountability and relationships needing core values as well as for a relationship to change you with the desire to change for the better [@peoplesoracle 2017]. She expounds upon relationship requiring skills and that Lawrence's lack of self-reflection meant that he did not possess those skills by stating: "If being a 'good guy' or 'not one of those chicks' means that you can get to stay exactly who you are, then you can stay exactly by yourself" [@peoplesoracle 2017]. At the end of the thread, she mentions how she wishes her future relationships to "aid me in becoming more in alignment with my core values" [@peoplesoracle 2017]. Bringing her thoughts back to Lawrence and reading a "real life" situation into Lawrence's actions she states, "So many say they want that. But like Lawrence, they act shocked and appalled when it's time to stand & be accountable. He wasn't sorry. tuh." [@peoplesoracle 2017]. She then drops the proverbial mic by tweeting "Love = accountability/fin" [@peoplesoracle 2017]. This thread is an example of affirmative transformative fandom as she expresses her thoughts about the show, her thoughts about relationships, and refers to her own experience. Her tweets garnered a modest amount of engagement and several people responded with various affirmative memes to her comments about the show and relationships. Her interior life as expressed on Twitter exemplifies Black digital intimacies as others joined in by affirming her comments. It is also transformative as other fans possibly learned something new about themselves building upon Martin's argument about the pedagogical aspects of Black fandom [Martin 2019]. They could reflect about their own relationships thus constitute world-building, rethinking, and reimagining their own intimate lives. The original fan also stated that she was considering putting the thread on her blog, which is another iteration of Black digital intimacies where she can engage another audience. The thread is an example of self-making and the affective usage of digital platforms that Black DH brings to the discipline of Black Studies, Fan Studies, and Digital Humanities.

Towards the end of the fourth season Lawrence and Issa encounter each other enough through mutual friends and situations that keep them in each other's orbits. They decided to meet up and have a conversation about the demise of their relationship as a way of closure. "Insecuretea" is an HBO sponsored podcast about *Insecure* by @crissles and @heyfranhey, two prominent podcast hosts with their own amassed followings due to their podcasts *The Read* and *The Friend Zone*, respectively. The recaps of the show are another place of intimacy where fans can immerse themselves further as a fan practice to produce self-making. By naming it "Insecuretea", Rae signals that the podcast is a Black fan space to further explore the real world and fictional implications of the show. "Spilling tea" is a Black American queer lexicon of providing the latest information and/or gossip about a person but has expanded to indicate a hot topic or other salacious information. Rae is directly marketing to her targeted audience, those who know Black idioms thus indicating

that this show is for Black audiences.

As an example, the episode “Lowkey Happy” aired on the Sunday after heightened protests due to news circulating around George Floyd’s death which defined the Summer of 2020 worldwide amidst Covid-19 pandemic [Insecure 2020]. One of the hosts, @crissles, of “*Insecure*” primed the audience for the show’s distractive nature from the constant news cycle when she tweeted: “if you need a break from reality you should *definitely* tune in to Insecure tonight, trust me. #InsecureHOB #Insecuretea” [crissles 2020]. At the time of writing this article, the engagement on the tweet had 299 and over 1,300 likes as her followers anticipated her livetweeted thoughts about the show. A few minutes later during the episode, @crissles later commented about the dialogue on the show “a real ass conversation only happens when both people are ready to put down their ego and be vulnerable. #InsecureHBO #Insecuretea” [crissles 2020]. This tweet garnered over 3,300 retweets and over 8,600 likes as it centered the more mature characterization the fans were seeing in the development of the characters. While much of the conflict and drama in the series consisted of the characters acting out of their insecurity, fans anticipated this episode as they saw the reconciliation of the main characters through relationship closure and them ending the show by engaging in sex after their conversation. While retweets and likes do not necessarily signpost agreement, they do demonstrate popularity and engagement with the sentiment and discourse surrounding the show. As a popular podcaster and the official show’s podcaster @crissles is also asserting and advertising her insider positionality to promote the show, the podcast, and continue to create community around both by using the hashtags. While the first tweet about the nature of the show is not affirmative transformative fandom, it does connote Black digital intimacy. Temporally, the show acted as a reprieve from the news cycle for Black Twitter users who “come together as a family” — an oft repeated phrase — for livetweeting Black cultural productions.

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Rae is aware of the effects of fandom and social media’s affordances and how it fosters fan engagement and growth from fans, thus fans can continue to engage with the content beyond the episodes. The podcast is corporately sponsored by HBO; however, the emphasis is on what the episode can do transformatively for audiences in the crisis of the protests and recognizing continuing police brutality. To that end @crissles realizes the cultural necessity of the moment and the digital intimacy that formed by Black Twitter users and fans of the show. The second tweet about the “real ass conversation” is affirmative transformative fandom in the same way @peoplesoracle’s thread is in that it is expressing commentary on a general observation about relationships [crissles 2020]. Add in the specific analysis on the stagnation or growth of the characters interior lives while indicating hashtags to inform followers about the context of the tweets. It is affirmative in the sense that it supports the show’s development and transformative in the way that one can reflect upon and think about their own egos and vulnerability when it comes to their interpersonal relationships. The interiority reflected upon is done publicly with other fans and we can learn a lot about the status of interpersonal relationships from these fandom exchanges as fans engage with each other.

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Conclusion

By focusing on Black digital intimacies in Black Digital Humanities we can delve into the ways in which culture can assist in identity development beyond hegemonic representations and center the quotidian. Another aspect of my research, and other Black digital humanists, contend that Black life is not always about recovering and responding to the injury of white supremacy, but that the mundane and quotidian aspects of life, like social media usage, should be considered as well. This is a project of Black DH as Kim Gallon writes, “Black studies as a unique role to play in dismembering how we think about humanity and the digital humanities by extension. A black epistemology will generate questions about the relationship between the racialization of humanity and the digital as power, ultimately fostering new inquiries and deeper understandings about the human condition” [Gallon 2016]. Through studying digital fandom, epistemologies of interiority as expressed in cultural productions and fueled by Black digital intimacies opens a world of understanding about the human condition. As evidenced by @crissles stating that watching the show would be a break from the world in 2020. In a *Cosmopolitan* article, Rae was asked about the intention of centering the mundane. The interviewer states “*Insecure* also proves that it’s OK to just show the mundaneness of black lives — not everything needs to be about harrowing black suffering, which can be overwhelming” [Jerkins 2017]. Rae replies, “It’s important to show the mundaneness because it shows us as human, and we don’t get to have those moments of celebrating ourselves. We have a very specific struggle even in the mundane, like with microaggressions. But that doesn’t mean the

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world stops. We still keep moving. We're so trained to continue" [Jerkins 2017]. Affirmative transformative usage of the digital and understanding of fandom practices centers how we continue and open ourselves up to the world to foster new connections online and in our personal lives. The small ways Black people experience joy and heal their intimate relationships drives my interest in this subject. I center Black intimacies because I believe by centering affect and how communities relate to each other and attempt to express joy, healing, forgiveness, and pleasure that the propensity for activism against oppression is strengthened. We go on.

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