

# **Single as F\*\*k**

## **A Thematic Analysis of *Insecure*'s Representation of the Educated Black Woman Dating to Marry**

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## Abstract

As a Deductive Thematic Analysis, this study evaluates how themes within the literature appear in HBO's *Insecure*. The two themes from the literature this study focuses on are dating difficulties for educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community. The subthemes for dating difficulties for educated Black women are interracial dating, biphobia, online dating culture, and on-screen tropes of single educated black women. The subthemes for marriage patterns within the black community are open marriage, infidelity, and successful Black marriages. Through the lens of critical race theory, this paper adopts intersectionality and representation to analyze how *Insecure*'s co-protagonist Molly Carter experiences these themes and subthemes on her dating journey to marry. Furthermore, this project spotlights the impact of *Insecure*'s evolutionary depiction of the 'single Black female' away from past negative tropes. The findings suggest that *Insecure*'s critical acclaim and commercial success are a testament to both why representation matters and why it is important to research matters of representation. *Insecure*'s legacy will thrive in perpetuity for opening countless doors for more authentic stories to be told by and about Black women.

## Introduction

In April of 2022, Ralph Richard Banks, a Stanford Professor, and author, published an article titled “Why more Black women should consider marrying White men.” Therein, Banks emphasizes how Kamala Harris and Ketanji Brown Jackson, respective Vice President, and Supreme Court Justice of the United States, are both Black women who are married to White men (Banks, 2022). Banks discusses how the ‘African American marriage Decline,’ is most detrimental to single educated Black women, as, “the effects of racism have left well-educated Black women with a paucity of Black male partners” (Banks, 2022). When I came across this article, I was particularly intrigued as I realized that Ralph Richard Banks and his long-term wife are both well-educated Black professionals (Stanford Law School, 2018).

However, after reading Banks’ 2011 book, *Is Marriage for White People?*, I understood that his sentiments stem from his studies of the United States’ history of systemic racism, which thwarts today’s odds of educated Black women marrying educated Black men. In the book, Banks traces the root of this problem back to slavery and lists Black men dating and marrying outside of their race more than Black women, educational gaps, and infidelity, among other issues, as root causes of this societal issue. Reading this literature inspired me to write this dissertation about the plight of the single educated Black woman who desires marriage in the US, and her representation on screen.

Furthermore, I have been working in diversity and inclusion in Hollywood for the past five years. Therefore, my professional experience in entertainment focuses on increasing diverse representation that depicts the world both as it is and as it should be. My most recent roles have been at WarnerBros. Discovery, which owns and operates HBO, the network *Insecure* is on. This made the show a natural choice to analyze.

Before I delve further into my choices to study *Insecure* and use thematic analysis as my methodology, it is important to clarify some critical context. First, I am specifically focusing on the point of view of Black, educated, heterosexual women who are interested in marrying Black, educated, heterosexual men in the United States. Second, when discussing this demographic, I often conflate class, or socio-economic status, with education and professional success. I support this approach with research done by Riché J. Daniel Barnes that confirms that throughout history in the US, many

members of the “Black elite,” especially Black women, rely on higher education and professional careers to achieve financial success (Barnes, 2016).

I chose deductive thematic analysis as my methodology as this approach “takes as its departure point, the theoretical propositions that are derived from a review of the literature and applies these to the collection and analysis of data” (Pearse, 2019, p. 264). Thus, after reviewing literature on the plight of single educated Black women who desires marriage in the US, I translated the themes I found in the research into codes to analyze *Insecure* with (see Appendix B: Codebook).

Specifically, I chose to focus on the show’s co-protagonist, Molly Carter, as her story arc from dating to marriage most clearly depicts the themes of dating difficulties for educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community that I discuss in the literature review. In the methodology chapter, I elaborate on how I chose which themes to highlight in the literature review and how I applied these themes to the show.

Though *Insecure* is not a docuseries, and it is fiction, the creatives behind the show have been outspoken about their intention to use the series to represent real-life experiences of Black women. Prentice Penny, the showrunner who executive produced all five seasons of the show emphasizes this saying, “I hope that folks feel like they got a window into a world that reflected theirs and characters that reflected them, their friendships, their romantic relationships and their work situations...hopefully they felt seen and felt represented” (Jackson, 2021). Yvonne Orji, the actress who plays Molly, builds upon this notion stating, “the storylines hit because they’re borrowed from the actors’ and writers’ lives ...The reliability of the friend group comes because these aren’t fictitious people, these aren’t characters” (Young, 2021). Therefore, in this dissertation, I argue that *Insecure* accomplished this goal that Prentice Penny discusses and more.

First, the paper begins with a context section that describes *Insecure* and who Molly’s character is. Second, is the theoretical chapter, which contains a literature review, that outlines the relevant themes and subthemes, a theoretical framework, that provides the lenses through which this paper examines the themes, and a statement of the research aims and questions. Third, is the research and methodology chapter that accounts for the chosen methodology, sample selection process, and ethics and

reflexivity. Fourth, the results and interpretation chapter analyzes the themes present in each of the sampled episodes and emphasizes how the series evolves past tropes of the single educated Black woman. Lastly, the conclusion offers suggestions for future research and summarizes the implications of the study.

## Context

*Insecure* is an HBO comedy series about Issa Dee and Molly Carter, two best friends who met at Stanford and are in their 30s living in Los Angeles, striving for personal and professional success. The show also discusses the lives of their close friends Kelli and Tiffany (see Appendix A for character breakdowns). The show debuted in 2016 and ran for five seasons until its 2021 series finale (IMDB, 2022, *Insecure*). The series creator, Issa Rae, also stars in the show as its protagonist, Issa Dee, alongside Yvonne Orji, who plays Molly Carter. Issa starts out working in the non-profit world before becoming what she calls an “entrepre-noire” (Gauyo et al., 2021a). Molly is a successful corporate attorney who begins at a majority White firm and moves over to a Black-owned and operated firm (see Appendix A for character breakdowns). As this paper focuses on how Molly’s storylines represent societal realities, it is noteworthy that Molly’s character is based on Issa Rae’s real-life best friend (Bland, 2021).

A Stanford Alumna, Rae gained notoriety when her web series *Awkward Black Girl*, which chronicles her life experiences, went viral (IMDB, 2022, Issa Rae). These details encapsulate how Rae has always poured her own life experiences into her writing. Rae’s transparency and authenticity have been met with critical acclaim. The series boasts 14 Emmy nominations and 1 win. Including a 2020 nomination for Yvonne Orji in the category of Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series for her portrayal of Molly (Television Academy | Emmys, 2022, *Insecure*).

## **Theoretical Chapter**

The theoretical chapter of this dissertation has three components. The first is the Literature Review, which divides the key findings from the most relevant research into two themes: difficulties dating for educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community. The second is the Theoretical Framework, which outlines how this dissertation uses critical race theory, intersectionality, and representation as lenses to distill the information in the Literature Review, and ultimately inform the research questions and methodology. The last is the Research Objectives Statement, which lists the questions the dissertation aims to address, the rationale for this research, and its potential contribution to the field of media and communication.

### **Literature Review**

Before reviewing the literature, it is important to give background information on why the marriage market for educated Black women is so treacherous. The marriage market refers to the socio-economic factors that affect how men and women meet and marry their partners including timing, race, and education, among other aspects (Foster, 2008).

According to critical race theorist Derrick Bell, notable reasons for this struggle include a considerably larger number of women than men in the Black population, the large number of incarcerated Black men, and Black men who are addicted to drugs (Bell, 1989). In addition, there are fewer Black men who obtain undergraduate and graduate degrees than Black women. Also, some Black men are gay, or opt to marry outside of their race, younger women, or less educated women (Bell, 1989).

This historic problem continues as recent studies show, “marriage rates are lower among Black women compared to White women, even among those with a college education. The proportion of Black college graduates aged 25 to 35 who have never married is 60 percent, compared to 38 percent for White college-educated women” (Reeves and Rodrigue, 2015). What worsens this figure is that of the college-educated Black women who do marry, only 49 percent mate with a man who has a level of post-secondary education versus 84 percent of college-educated White women (Reeves and Rodrigue, 2015).



Educated professional Black women do fair better than uneducated and poor Black women in the marriage market. However, it is a bleak reality that, “college-educated Black women are no more likely to marry, or stay married, than White women who have only completed high school” (Banks, 2011, p. 15). Therefore, education and professional success are not benefitting Black women in the marriage market the same way they are benefitting White women. Overall, this is particularly concerning given Black women are one of the most educated demographics in the U.S in terms of obtaining higher education (Davis, 2020). Now that I’ve described the high-level challenges facing educated black women in the marriage market, I will move on to review the literature for the subthemes in the difficulties dating for educated black women theme.

### Difficulties Dating for Educated Black Women

Difficulties Dating for Educated Black Women is the first theme in the literature review of this dissertation. Four subthemes within this theme are interracial dating, biphobia, online dating culture, and on-screen tropes of single educated Black women. These subthemes encapsulate experiences the literature reveals many single educated black women face who are dating to marry black men of equal socio-economic status and how said women are depicted in entertainment.

#### *Interracial Dating*

Interracial Dating is increasing as marriageable Black men are few and far between, which is encouraging Black women to date outside of their race, now more than ever. Historically, Black men have married outside of their race at a profoundly higher rate than Black women. Research shows that “some 30 percent of Black men with a college degree marry outside their race compared to only 13 percent of Black women with a college degree” (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2017). Many credit this trend to Black women’s, “perceived disadvantage in the world of interracial dating or perhaps because their loyalty to the community led them to favor marriages to Black men, Black women—according to some quantitative studies from the early 1990s—both disapproved of intermarriage more than their male counterparts

and were somewhat more hesitant to date outside the race themselves” (Romano, 2018, p. 131).

However, in the past decade, there has been a sharp rise in Black women who are interracial dating. This trend is profound among educated Black women as research shows, “for Black newlyweds, intermarriage rates are slightly higher among those with a bachelor’s degree or more (21%)” (Livingston & Brown, 2017, p. 15). There are additional studies that also credit this incline to Black women achieving more educationally and professionally (Craig-Henderson, 2010). Thus, Black women who are achieving higher social status are more often seeking their equals in men of other races.

Another statistic that captures this evolving pattern of more Black women participating in interracial dating states that, “as recently as 1990, roughly six-in-ten non-Black Americans (63%) said they would be opposed to a close relative marrying a Black person. This share had been cut about in half by 2000 (at 30%) and halved again since then to stand at 14% today” (Livingston & Brown, 2017, p. 27).

As the stigma around interracial dating in the Black community declines and Black women continue reaching new heights in education and the professional world, this pattern of interracial dating and marriage will likely persist. Therefore, this pattern of more interracial dating and marriage does account for a reason why educated Black women aren’t marrying more Black men.

### *Biphobia*

Biphobia is another subtheme in the dating difficulties for educated black women theme. Biphobia in the Black community often disqualifies even bi-curious men from the marriageable category, which contributes to the dating difficulties educated Black women face. A statistic that captures the stigma around bisexuality in the Black community comes from a study done on the attitudes of Black and White college students towards gay and lesbians in the Journal of Black studies. Therein, “Blacks were less supportive of gay relationships than were Whites, whereas...White gay and bisexual men were more likely than Black gay and bisexual men to perceive that their friends and neighbors were supportive of their relationships” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 594).

In his book, *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing*, Dr. Jeffrey McCune posits, “that the legacy of racial binary thinking– ‘you are Black or White’ – informs how we understand sexuality in this contemporary moment– ‘you are either gay or straight’” (McCune, 2021, p. 133). Shame and hatred associated with bisexuality, experimentation, and questioning in the Black community often void even bicurious Black men of qualifying as ideal marriage partners.

McCune further delves into this issue when he underlines how the Black community’s heteronormative thinking around sexuality in terms of a binary disables straight men from expressing certain desires and curiosities. Such thoughts are then often perceived as down-low behaviors (McCune, 2021). Additionally, McCune speaks on the pervasiveness of on-screen representations that promote “the ‘one-drop’ rule” on sexual terms...media discourses perpetuate the system that disallows for the recognition, performance, and normality of a ‘bisexual’” (McCune, 2021, p. 134). Therefore, on-screen depictions often deem Black men who have explored their sexuality as gay and bisexual men are cast as ineligible bachelors.

### *Online Dating Culture*

Online dating culture is another subtheme within the dating difficulties for educated Black women theme. Online dating culture proves to be racially exclusive of Black women, and thus contributes to the dating difficulties that educated Black women face. In today’s digital environment, especially after the start of the pandemic, online dating has become a prominent way to meet and match with potential mates. Unfortunately for Black women, “men are likely to place Black women at the bottom of the preference hierarchy” (Lin & Lundquist, 2013, pp. 191-192). Compared to Asian and White women, Black women do not fare favorably while dating online. Figures show that Black men message Black women most online whereas there is only marginal interest expressed from Latino men and virtually no interest shown by Asian men (Lin & Lundquist, 2013). These trends are completely contrary to the experience of Asian and White women who, “consistently receive messages from all men, both inside and outside their ethnic group” (Lin & Lundquist, 2013, p. 202).

To hammer this point home about Black women facing racial exclusion in online dating, “Black women are the only female minority group who are more excluded than

their male counterparts (.68 vs. .85). They are also far more excluded than White women (.36), Latinas (.45) or Asian women (.61)” (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011, p. 819). Therefore, when it comes to online dating, Black women are both more excluded than women across race lines, and more excluded than Black men.

Black women who face difficulties in online dating have linked their negative experiences with hypersexualization and fetishization. A study about Black online dating recounts a Black woman sharing “about the hazards of online dating for Black women expounding on the endless reminders of our perceived unattractiveness, such as users making guessing games out of her ethnicity and suggesting she be more physically fit” (Peteet et al., 2014, p. 89). In further research that focuses on patterns of racial-ethnic exclusion by internet daters, Black college women admit they avoid dating White men as “they believe Whites perceive them as unattractive or as stereotypically hypersexual and promiscuous” (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011, pp. 820-821). Therefore, online dating culture is undeniably problematic for Black women.

#### *On-Screen Tropes of Single Educated Black Women*

The fourth subtheme, in the theme of difficulties dating for educated black women, is on-screen tropes of single educated black women. This subtheme captures the literature’s suggestion that the history of on-screen depictions of single educated Black women is ripe with negative tropes. The Sapphire and the Jezebel are two notable tropes in this discussion. “The Sapphire image has both sexist and racist undertones. For Black women, the term and the image that comes to mind is that of the caustic, critical, hands-on hips, neck-rolling African American woman...She is the Black woman who is difficult, tough, and generally hostile to Black men” (Craig-Henderson, 2010, p. 113).

Educated Black women are sometimes characterized as Sapphires on-screen as they are portrayed as emasculating to Black men because of their higher education and professional success. In depictions as Sapphires, single educated Black women typically have bad attitudes and superiority complexes that are difficult to manage while dating and especially in marriage.

The Jezebel trope has been used throughout history to hypersexualize on-screen portrayals of Black women dating. The Jezebel is seen as a “whore, or sexually aggressive woman” (Collins, 1990, p. 271). In the past 30 years, however, there has

been a metamorphosis away from stereotypical depictions of educated Black women as Sapphires and Jezebels into liberated women whose girlfriends empower them to explore their sexuality.

In her book, *Black Women Shattering Stereotypes: A Streaming Revolution*, Kay Siebler bolsters this point. Siebler says, “in the past, young Black women were burdened with ‘respectability politics’ regarding their sexuality and shackled to damaging stereotypes such as Jezebels, Sapphires, and Hoe, defining Black female sexuality as voracious, dangerous, aggressive, and destructive” (Siebler, 2021, p. 63). However, Siebler acknowledges the evolution of the depiction of single educated Black women today as she notes, “many of today’s Black female characters are defining and exploring their own sexuality...in ways that deviate sharply from past stereotypes of what it means to be a sexually active Black woman looking for romance” (Siebler, 2021, p. 63).

*Living Single*, created in the 1990s by Yvette Lee Bowser, who is a Black woman, was one of the first television shows to see commercial success for exploring the dating lives of single educated Black women in a positive light. “Touted by some as ‘the first voice of the self-sufficient Black woman, ‘Living Single’ centered on the lives of four Black, single, young, urban women...All were professional, confident, attractive, and in American capitalistic terms, successful” (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 43). *Living Single* undoubtedly laid the foundation for a show like *Insecure* to succeed 20 years later.

As the analysis and results section will discuss further, *Insecure* uses Molly’s storyline to depict experiences, with dating difficulties and marriage patterns within the Black community, facing many singled educated Black women in the U.S. Now that I’ve reviewed the literature for the subthemes in the difficulties dating for educated black women theme, I will move on to review the literature for the marriage patterns within the black community theme.

## Marriage Patterns within the Black Community

Marriage Patterns within the Black Community is the second theme in the literature review of this dissertation. Three subthemes within this theme are open marriage, infidelity, and successful Black marriages. These subthemes highlight some

of the trends in the literature surrounding marriage patterns within the black community that affect the plight of the single educated Black woman.

### *Open Marriage*

Studies about the state of open marriages in the United States widely rely upon a YouGovAmerica survey that confirms that as younger generations become more flexible with monogamy in their relationships, the rates of open marriages are increasing (Moore, 2016). The literature shows that despite this trend, Black Americans lag in embracing open marriages, at least publicly (Levine et al., 2018). The research shows that this lack of openness is negatively impacting the odds of successful marriages, which affects the rate of educated Black women who find themselves in successful marriages to Black men.

Open relationships are those “in which couples typically retain emotional intimacy within a primary relationship and pursue additional casual and/or sexual partnerships” (Levine et al., 2018, p. 2). Meanwhile, polyamory describes relationships, “in which individuals are open to the possibility of forming loving relationships with multiple partners” (Levine et al., 2018, p. 2).

A study in the *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* offers that “it is estimated that 4% to 5% of the adult population within the United States are openly engaging in polyamorous style relationships. Black Americans are substantially underrepresented in that percentage” (Smith, 2016, p. 99). A subject within the study says in her experience, shame surrounding open marriages masks the reality of how many do exist. She says, “I think Black people are underrepresented in this community because either they are totally against it for a lot of ignorant reasons, or because they are embarrassed by it. I know a lot of Black women that know they are in a polyamorous situation, but they want to keep the illusion that they don’t know so they can save face!” (Smith, 2016, p.126).

Existing research underlines this notion that there is a significant proportion of nonexclusive marriages in the Black community and that many Black women cope with man-sharing to sustain their relationships (Banks, 2011). A recurring pattern in the literature offers that open marriages don’t exist, or are done in the dark, in the Black

community, because of religious beliefs and socially conservative attitudes that frown upon non-traditional marriage (Smith, 2016).

### *Infidelity*

Infidelity is another subtheme within the marriage patterns within the Black community theme. Infidelity permeates Black marriages and has resounding negative effects on single educated Black women. “The research suggests that married Black men are more than twice as likely as other groups of men to have affairs” (Banks, 2011, p. 88). A study, from the Black Women, Gender + Families Journal explains that “as long as there are more single Black women than there are ‘socioeconomically attractive’ Black men, ‘the overabundance of desirable women makes it easier for [Black] men to avoid a committed relationship’...As a consequence, Black women may be more willing to normalize infidelity...to keep the men they have” (Utley, 2011, p. 86). Therefore, because Black women struggle to find fit partners, they are more likely to accept marital problems such as infidelity.

Though the literature focuses on infidelity in the Black community from the point of view of Black men being the main perpetrators, “being African American is associated with higher odds of engaging in infidelity for both men and women compared to non-Black, non-Hispanic respondents” (Munsch, 2015, p. 486). A study from the 2012 national survey of sexual health and behavior reinforces this idea, as it found “Black, Non-Hispanic participants were more likely to report NCNM (nonconsensual nonmonogamy)” (Levine et al., 2018, p. 1).

### *Successful Black Marriages*

Successful Black Marriages is another subtheme in the theme of marriage patterns within the Black community. Literature on Black marriage patterns reveals a significant research gap on how prevalent successful black marriages are and what advice happily married Black couples can offer. However, two studies are widely recognized for offering rare glimpses into this subject. Both papers provide accounts from within the black community that emphasize that colloquially, many Black people can think of longstanding marriages in their communities. However, findings say that

successful Black marriages are rarely promoted in scholarly literature or on-screen representations, until recently.

The first study is from the Family Relations Journal. Using interviews with Black couples in longstanding marriages, the study finds that two essential components of a successful Black marriage are socio-economic compatibility, in terms of income and educational attainment, and generational examples of marriage (Skipper et al., 2021). The latter refers to whether the partners saw healthy marriages between their parents. The second study is from the Journal of Black Studies, and it bolsters the notion from the first study regarding socio-economic status compatibility being an essential component of a successful Black marriage. The study reads, “one could conclude that the respondents in this study simply desire partners who will enhance their economic status” (King & Allen, 2007, p. 584).

Though it is not widely reported, “scholars have documented that, generally speaking, marriage has a strong positive correlation with well-being and life satisfaction for African American couples and the children of those couples” (Skipper et al., 2021, p. 1371). Therefore, successful Black marriages do exist, though there are significant obstacles to achieving them. Also, they can positively impact future generations within Black families.

Next, the theoretical framework crystallizes how critical race theory, intersectionality, and representation provide theoretical lenses through which to analyze the themes in this dissertation.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Critical Race Theory*

This dissertation takes a critical race theory approach to account for the racist and classist socio-economic hindrances within the marriage market, which the literature shows negatively affect educated Black women who desire marriage to Black men.

In the 1970s, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman promoted critical race theory (CRT), as a framework made up of hundreds of law review articles and books, to



discuss the legal implications of the civil rights movement and racial reform in the United States (Stefancic & Delgado, 1995).

In the Marriage and Family Review Journal, there is an article that focuses on the marriage gap between Black and White people that highlights why critical race theory is essential to this dissertation. The paper specifies that “elements of critical race theory ...inform the mechanisms linking perceived racial discrimination to marriage formation. The critical race perspective contends that racism shapes life chances and allows for significant racial disparities in all sectors of social life” (Hearne et al., 2020, p. 717).

### *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is important to consider herein, as it honors the compounding ramifications of belonging to multiple marginalized communities (Crenshaw, 1989). In this paper, class, race, and gender are the coinciding identities for educated, professional, black women who this dissertation focuses on. Coined in 1989, by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is a term used to encapsulate the heightened discrimination Black women experience due to their coinciding race and gender (Rathinapillai, 2022, p. 233).

Patricia Hill Collins’ scholarly body of work also discusses intersectionality. Collins emphasizes the importance of considering intersectionality because it appraises Black women in the totality of their otherness as opposed to bifurcating their existence by individualizing their persecuted identities. Collins says, “as opposed to examining gender, race, class, and nation, as separate systems of oppression, intersectionality explores how these systems mutually construct one another” (Collins, 1998, p. 63).

Dr. Racquel Gates, who specializes in racial representation in African American media, underscores the importance of considering intersectionality in representation studies for the sake of Black women in audiences. Gates says, “Black women viewers who, because of their own intersectional identities, seek not only representations of their bodies in the images on screen but also representations of the complex experiences of living under what Deborah K. King refers to as ‘as multiple jeopardy and multiple consciousness’” (Gates, 2015, p. 624).

### *Representation*

Representation is essential to the theoretical framework of this dissertation, as it describes the process, and implications, of storytelling commenting on the realities of the world. This study invokes representation as it examines how *Insecure* depicts the single educated Black woman, drawing from real-life experiences of the show's creators, writers, and research.

Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall defines representation most aptly when he writes, "representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, signs, and images which stand for or represent things" (Hall, 1997, p. 15).

As this study highlights how *Insecure*'s depiction of Molly progresses the depiction of single educated Black women on screen, it is important to note the work of Black feminist scholars who explore this issue. bell hooks comments on this imperative when she says, "this is certainly the challenge facing Black women, who must confront the old painful representations of our sexuality as a burden we must suffer, representations still haunting the present. We must make the oppositional space where our sexuality can be named and represented, where we are sexual subjects—no longer bound and trapped" (hooks, 2015, p. 77). In this study, I argue that Molly's dating journey to marriage is a prime example of how *Insecure* accomplishes this exact goal bell hooks discusses.

The following research objectives statement ties together how the literature review and theoretical framework inspire the research questions in this dissertation as well as elucidate the potential contribution this research can make to the field of media and communication.

### Research Objectives Statement

*The research questions this dissertation addresses are:*

How does HBO's *Insecure* represent what the literature reveals about the plight

of the single educated Black woman dating to marry in the United States? How does this representation evolve past historic on-screen representations of single educated Black women?

*Rationale for this research*

These research questions emerge from this dissertation being a deductive thematic analysis that analyzes how *Insecure* spotlights the themes within the literature review through its depiction of Molly's journey from being a single lady to a married woman.

*Potential contribution to this field/my hypothesis*

This study is unique in that deductive thematic analysis is still an evolving methodology, which lacks extensive research and guidance. Thus, the methodological contribution this dissertation strives to make is to exemplify how to deductively analyze themes within a television show that comment on societal realities. The theoretical mark this dissertation aims to leave is to underline the power of representation. The goal of this paper is to show how Molly's journey to marriage in *Insecure* serves as a platform for the experience of the educated Black woman in America struggling to find her ideal partner. Furthermore, the show's masterful depiction of Molly provides a blueprint for future nuanced on-screen representations of single educated Black women.

## Research Design & Methodology Chapter

The research design and methodology chapter of this dissertation has four components. The first is the Research Strategy, which explains and justifies the choice to use deductive thematic analysis as the methodology in this dissertation and details its advantages and disadvantages. The second is the Data Collection Process, which describes the unit of analysis and sampling process, and explains why the chosen texts are most appropriate to analyze in answering the research question. The third is the Design of Research Tools, which defines the phases of thematic analysis and explains the approach to coding the data. The fourth addresses Ethics and Reflexivity by proving the trustworthiness of the research design while also acknowledging the effects of my positioning as the researcher.

### Research Strategy

The themes I chose to highlight in the literature review are difficulties dating for single educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community. The subthemes for difficulties dating for single educated Black women are interracial dating, biphobia, online dating culture, and on-screen tropes of single educated Black women. The subthemes for marriage patterns within the Black community are open marriage, infidelity, and successful Black marriages.

After broadly surveying sociological critical race literature that explains why single educated Black women remain unmarried at unprecedented rates, I chose to focus on these select themes and subthemes for the following reasons. First, because they encapsulate the themes I anticipated finding in *Insecure* based on my watching the series before. Second, because they aligned with many of the themes Ralph Richard Banks discusses in his research on the African American marriage decline. Third, because these themes align with my theoretical framework of critical race theory, intersectionality, and representation. Finally, due to time constraints within this dissertation, I had to be deliberate on which themes to highlight.

The above reasons for selecting the themes and subthemes discussed in this dissertation align with the procedure in a deductive thematic analysis as, “a deductive approach involves coming to the data with some preconceived themes you expect to

find reflected there, based on theory or existing knowledge” (Caufield, 2022). In this case, theory is the literature review, including Ralph Richard Banks’ research, and existing knowledge is my familiarity with *Insecure* from watching the series before undertaking this research.

Deductive thematic analysis is the most appropriate methodology for this study as the research questions at hand focus on representation in terms of how what is portrayed in *Insecure* discusses what is happening in society. A deductive approach allows me to analyze the themes in Molly’s storyline using codes that have been translated from the themes of the literature about the difficulties dating for educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community.

Of the cast in *Insecure*, Molly’s character most clearly represents the demographic reviewed in the literature, which justifies the choice to analyze her storyline from singleness to marriage. Culling through the research and data using lenses of critical race theory, intersectionality, and representation accounts for the historic racial and socio-economic underpinnings of this issue.

Furthermore, deductive thematic analysis is appropriate for this research as it allows me to focus broadly on Molly’s storylines, and the dialogue she and her co-stars use, that discuss the themes and subthemes within the literature. Another methodological approach, such as content analysis, or audio-visual analysis, would have forced me to dive into more granular details of the series including elements of mise-en-scene. This would have detracted from the goal of answering the research questions, which have a more thematic focus (Mikos, 2018).

In that vein, the strengths surrounding thematic analysis revolve around how flexibly it can be used to collect and qualitatively analyze data. Braun and Clarke support this assertion in their description of the methodology saying it, “can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions. It is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2).

On the other hand, the biggest drawbacks to adopting this methodology surround there being limited literature that outlines the best way to apply the method. Specifically, “only a small portion of qualitative studies have adopted a deductive approach...Since deductive qualitative analysis has been neglected, there is little

guidance and few examples offered that illustrate the application of these techniques” (Pearse, 2019, p. 264). I am using this dissertation as an opportunity to contribute to this gap in research and show how deductive thematic analysis can be used to study issues of representation in entertainment.

### Data Collection Process

In the data collection process, I rewatched every episode of *Insecure* paying special attention to the plot points focused on Molly’s journey from being single to married. I took notes on every scene Molly appears in, or is mentioned in, that focuses on her dating experiences. As this study is a deductive thematic analysis, my notes specifically highlight the appearance of the themes that emerged from the literature review, which showcase the dating difficulties of educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community. Again, the subthemes regarding dating difficulties include interracial dating, biphobia, online dating culture, and on-screen tropes of single educated Black women. The subthemes regarding marriage patterns within the Black community include open marriage, infidelity, and successful Black marriages.

### *Unit of Analysis*

Episodes of *Insecure*, and specific scenes within the episodes, are the unit of analysis. Appendix C outlines for each sampled episode/scene; the subtheme it represents, episode title, including season and number, timestamp for the selected scene, scene description, and visual frames. Each sampled episode and scene typify how Molly’s experiences exemplify what the literature reveals many single educated Black women face in society dating in hopes of marriage.

In the data collection process, Molly stood out as the aptest representation, in *Insecure*, of the single educated Black woman in pursuit of marriage. A scene in the series that epitomizes this notion is when the audience sees Molly’s answer on a dating app profile. To the question of “what are you looking for?” Molly writes that she’s “looking for serious partners. Must be successful, fit, one degree (two preferred), with NO KIDS. If you are not that, please swipe left” (Gauyo, et al., 2021a).

### *Sampling*

There are 44 episodes total in *Insecure*. This study samples eight episodes of the series which have scenes that embody the dating difficulties for single educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community. The sample selection criteria for the eight episodes revolves around the need for the episode of *Insecure* to feature at least one scene where Molly's character is central to a discussion or action that represents one of the subthemes presented in the literature review. The scenes selected to analyze were chosen because they explicitly feature words, and/or, actions that include the subthemes introduced from the literature as outlined in Appendix B, the codebook, and the results and interpretation chapter.

I chose to spotlight Molly's character over the other protagonists because, throughout the series' entirety, Molly's storylines are most fraught with dialogue and actions that embody the themes this study is interested in. For example, the drama surrounding Issa's long-term relationship with Lawrence is the focal point of her dating storyline. Kelli's dating life isn't featured very prominently. Tiffany is married the entire series. This sample selection approach exemplifies intensity sampling which, "involves selecting samples that are excellent or rich examples of the phenomena of interest...intensity sampling involves prior information and judgment on part of the researcher" (Shaheen et al., 2019, p. 30).

Given the time constraints of this study, I chose not to focus on other elements of Molly's life, including her career and friendship, as they would not contribute to answering the research questions. With more time, I would also study Tiffany's storylines to compare the way *Insecure* depicts single educated Black women versus married educated Black women. I would also add audio-visual analysis as a methodology as *Insecure*'s cinematography and soundtrack are well-known for their contributions to the series' storytelling (Bland, 2021).

### Design of Research Tools

There are 6 phases of thematic analysis; 1) transcribe, re-read, and annotate data 2) produce the original codes 3) divide the data into themes 4) review and map themes according to the codes 5) finalize themes and 6) analyze themes in the results section

using a selection of examples from the data that best characterize each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, by selecting scenes from each episode that were most relevant to the themes and subthemes presented in the theoretical chapter, I pre-coded the data (Saldana, 2016). Within the codebook (see Appendix B), I rely on both semantic and latent codes derived directly from the themes presented in the literature review.

Semantic coding describes explicit word use and actions that capture the themes (Byrne, 2021). Latent coding unearths the implicit meanings and implications of certain dialogue and actions in the selected scenes (Byrne, 2021). As is customary in developing a coding framework, “the codebook was refined as the thematic analysis was conducted, with unnecessary codes removed or definitions/labels refined (Guest, 2012). Several codes emerged from the texts which had not previously been drawn from the theoretical framework and literature” (Gilchrist, 2020, p. 76). I specify such codes later in the thematic map rationale.

### Ethics and Reflexivity

It is noteworthy that before commencing this research, a proposal for this study was approved by a supervisor and the London School of Economics and Political Science for meeting its ethical guidelines (Grinfeld, 2022). Given that the data being analyzed herein are episodes from *Insecure*, which is a show I have access to via my HBO Max subscription, and employment by WarnerBros. Discovery, which owns HBO Max, I did not identify any significant ethical issues (Grinfeld, 2022).

To ensure the research undertaken in this study is ethically sound, I rely on Lincoln & Guba’s 1985 guide to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research. The framework suggests researchers demonstrate the ability to prove their data collection and analysis processes meet four main criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to demonstrate the noteworthiness of their study (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Credibility refers to the reliability of a researcher’s interpretation of the data. Thus, it is important for a third-party to read a researcher’s analysis of the data and understand its basis. Transferability addresses “the generalizability of inquiry” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). That is, how applicable are the research process and findings to other related studies. Dependability demands the research process is “logical, traceable, and



clearly documented” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). Finally, confirmability requires evidence that the process of arriving at conclusions in the analysis and results section is fully data-driven. Referring to the data throughout the analysis and results section is therefore critical.

In this study, establishing trustworthiness is especially important given my proximity to the data. As a single educated Black woman who is dating to marry, I am a part of the demographic this study focuses on. However, I am confident that I check and balance my positioning with the trustworthiness criteria as outlined above. There is an ethics and reflexivity section in each of the thematic analyses of the eight sampled episodes where I detail my relevant positioning (see Appendix D). I highlight this reflexivity to confront the obvious impact my alignment with Molly’s character makes on my interaction with the data.

Topline similarities for me to spotlight between myself, the researcher, and Molly, the character I am analyzing in this study, are as follows. Molly and I both: received undergraduate degrees from highly competitive universities: Stanford and Cornell, respectively. Molly has a Juris Doctor, and I am currently pursuing a Master of Science and Master of Arts. We are both members of the first historically Black college sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Our moms both died in our relatively young adulthood. There was infidelity in both of our parent’s marriages. Overall, Molly and I are both very clear about our preference to marry an equally educated Black man.

## Results & Interpretation Chapter

The results and interpretation chapter of this dissertation has three components that work together to analyze the eight sampled episodes and answer the research questions. The first is a Thematic Map Rationale that describes the themes and subthemes discussed in this dissertation. The second introduces the concept of the Representative Character, which I argue describes how Molly's dating journey to marriage represents the themes identified in the literature review regarding the plight of the single educated Black woman. The third is an Analysis of the Eight Sampled Episodes that exhibit Molly as a representative character. Throughout this section, I highlight where intersectionality and critical race theory are relevant in how *Insecure* depicts Molly as a progressive character relative to past on-screen tropes of single educated Black women.

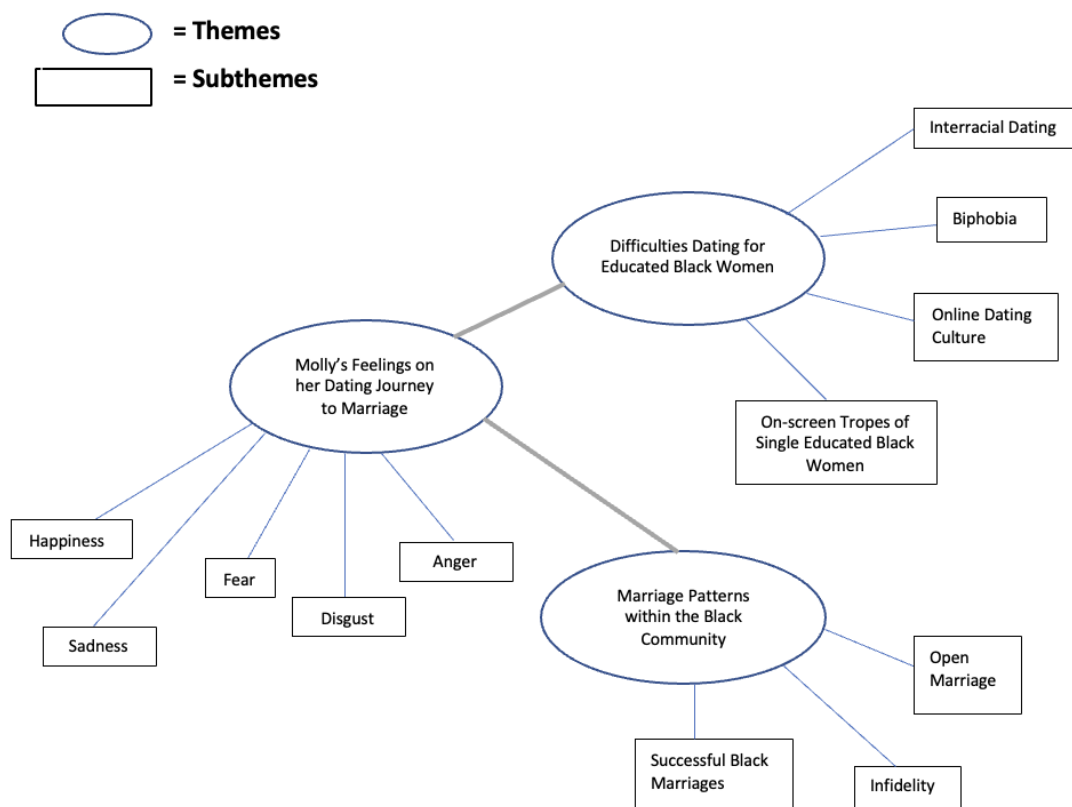


Figure 1. Thematic Map: *Insecure*'s Representation of the Single Educated Black Woman Dating to Marry

### Thematic Map Rationale

As this study is primarily a deductive thematic analysis, the predominant themes of interest were derived from the literature review which focuses on research about the plight of the single educated Black woman dating to marry in the US and her representation on screen. Figure 1 shows that the predominant themes of difficulties dating for educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community both have subthemes. In section three of this chapter, I analyze episodes of *Insecure* that spotlight each of these subthemes, starting with interracial dating down to successful AA Marriages (see Figure 1).

The central operating theme here is Molly's feelings on her dating journey to marriage (see Figure 1). Braun and Clarke define the central operating theme as the throughline, or core concept, that all themes relate to (Clarke, 2018). I derived this theme inductively throughout the thematic analysis process. That is, as I was analyzing how *Insecure* represents the themes of difficulties dating for educated Black women and marriage patterns within the Black community, I realized the focal point of these themes was how *Insecure* depicts Molly experiencing these themes. Therefore, this is a theme that you will also see in the Codebook (see Appendix B). The addition of this central operating theme after I began the thematic analysis process is not uncommon, as studies show, "coding and analysis rarely fall cleanly into one of these approaches and more often than not, use a combination of both" (Byrne, 2021, p.1397) Here, "these approaches" refer to deductive and inductive thematic analysis.

Overall, this combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis worked well, as the results show Molly experienced a myriad of emotions on her dating journey to marriage. *Insecure* successfully depicts Molly as a complex educated Black woman throughout the series as opposed to an angry, bitter, or desperate Black woman, as past tropes may have portrayed her. For instance, In Episode 1 of *Insecure* when we meet Molly, she expresses fear and pessimism about her dating life and prospects of marriage (Rae et al., 2016). However, in the series finale, she proclaims genuine happiness on her wedding day (Gauyo et al., 2021b). Next, I will introduce the concept of the representative character, which accounts for representation being an essential part of the theoretical framework for this dissertation.

## The Representative Character

S.P. Baty, a Scholar whose work focuses on American political thought, women's studies, and media originated the idea of the representative character. In her book *American Monroe*, Baty puts forth that representative characters are fixtures in culture whose experiences reflect the social and political lives of the communities they belong to (Baty, 1995). Baty says, "the representative character's life is made to chart various cultural courses... one representative character's story may be written as a cautionary tale, while another may be erected as a monument to human achievement" (Baty, 1995, pp. 8-9).

I model my argument that Molly Carter is a representative character in *Insecure* after Dr. Patricia Leavy's analysis of Ally McBeal as a representative character in the 1990s series *Ally Mcbeal*. Leavy argues that Ally McBeal's character "discuss[es] the larger socio-cultural-political American context in which the show and character have emerged" (Leavy, 2007). Some of the themes Leavy identifies that Ally McBeal's character explores are feminism, body image issues, and postmodernity.

In *Insecure*, Molly is a representative character as her storylines show that in American society, educated Black women, who desire marriage to equally as successful Black men, face challenges exacerbated by their intersectionality and the systemic factors linked to the institution of marriage, which aligns with the critical race theory perspective. The following section, which analyzes the eight sampled episodes, illustrates how Molly's dating life features the themes and subthemes presented in the literature review and how she experiences them.

## Analysis of the Eight Sampled Episodes by Subtheme

### *Interracial Dating*

Interracial dating is a subtheme of the dating difficulties for educated Black women theme introduced in the theoretical chapter. The literature review shows that throughout history, educated Black women hesitate to date outside of their race significantly more than educated Black men (Livingston & Brown, 2017). There are two episodes wherein *Insecure* shines light on this societal reality. In Season 1, Episode 1, Molly confronts her feelings after her co-worker, an Asian woman, gets engaged to a

Black man. In Season 3, Episode 6, Molly discusses why she is not interested in dating Andrew, an Asian man.

In *Insecure* Season 1, Episode 1, Molly is talking to her coworker Diane, who is an Asian woman dating a Black man named Jamal, about interracial dating. After Diane tells Molly that she and Jamal aren't each other's typical types, Molly fires back saying, "Girl, Jamal is frontin'. Niggas love Asians and Latinas and Indians and White chicks and mixtures. But you know what, if they are not checkin' for me, I ain't checkin' for them" (Rae et al., 2016). Here, Molly emphasizes how Black men shamelessly date outside the race. In addition, she admits that she doesn't want anybody who doesn't want her.

Later in the episode, after Molly hears the news of Diane's engagement, she rushes into the bathroom to call Issa and vent. Several phrases Molly says in this conversation highlight her fear about her future and envy of Diane. These include, "it's never going to happen for me" and "i'm not trying to be shady, but why does she deserve to get married, and I don't?" (Rae et al., 2016). Issa validates Molly's concerns when she responds to her saying, "Damn. they wife others up with a quickness" (Rae et al., 2016). When Issa says "they" she is referring to Black men who, as the literature shows, do marry outside of their race at higher rates than Black women (Romano, 2018).

Despite this painful reality for Molly, *Insecure*'s depiction of her as human enough to confide in her friend about feeling jealous and uncertain of her destiny shows growth from past depictions of Black women in this scenario. Historically, Molly may have been portrayed as a Sapphire, for example, where she could have hostilely confronted Diane (Craig-Henderson, 2010).

In Season 3, Episode 6, there's a scene where Molly is talking to Issa and Kelli about why she does not want to date outside of her race. This exemplifies how Molly's experience with interracial dating shines light on the large demographic of Black women who resist interracial dating. Molly begins the scene saying, "I'm not going out with that nigga" (Kittrell et al., 2016). When Issa responds, "why aren't you excited about him? Is it 'cause he's Asian? 'Cause no judgment! But judgment" (Kittrell et al., 2016). Molly explains, "I've dated outside my race before, but I know I want to end up with a Black man, so what is the point?" (Kittrell et al., 2016). Here, Molly reminds her

girlfriends that she has dated outside of her race in the past. However, given the fact that she knows her long-term goal is to marry a Black man, she doesn't want to waste her time with Andrew, who is Asian.

Furthermore, Molly explains her hesitation to pursue anything with Andrew when she says, "I don't have time to catch him up on the culture, teach him about red beans and rice. There are a lot of Jewish men who only date Jewish women, and nobody calls them out! So, why can't I be Orthodox Black?" (Kittrell et al., 2016). Though Molly is talking about this subject in jest, the substance remains. Being Black is something Molly is proud of and she wants to have that value in common with her future husband.

The intersectionality between race and gender is evident here as Molly represents the Black woman who desires a Black man as her husband. She does not want to have to find her equal in a man who does not share her racial identity. *Insecure's* depiction of Molly here as brutally honest does not make her a Jezebel or Sapphire. Instead, it makes her bold enough to demand what she wants and dare to wait for that. Molly does end up dating Andrew in the series, although their relationship does not work out (Lin, 2021).

### *Biphobia*

Biphobia is a subtheme of the dating difficulties for educated Black women theme introduced in the theoretical chapter. To reiterate what the literature review reveals, research includes educated Black women as members of the Black community who often disqualify men who identify as bisexual or bicurious as marriageable (Jenkins et al., 2009). In Season 1, Episode 6, Molly is dating a Black guy named Jered, who admits to sexually experimenting with a man in his past. Two scenes discuss this subtheme of biphobia within the episode.

In the first scene, Molly is having a conversation with Jered where he shares that he once had oral sex with a guy friend. Molly panics and suggests she believes having one sexual experience with someone of the same sex deems you gay. The crux of the conversation happens when Jered says, "He went down on me" to which Molly responds, "So you're, like, bi?" and Jered refutes saying, "No. No, definitely not. I mean, I had never done anything like this before, and I knew afterwards it wasn't for

me” (Aniobi et al., 2016). However, Molly wasn’t convinced and goes on to ask several additional questions qualifying Jered’s heterosexuality (Aniobi et al., 2016).

In the second scene, Molly discusses this situation with Issa, Kelli, and Tiffany. Molly and Tiffany express biphobic comments. After Molly recounts what Jered told her, Tiffany says, “Sweetie, you can’t keep dating him. He’s gay.” To which Molly responds, “Because that totally makes him gay, right?” Kelli pushes back on this saying in disbelief, “okay, wait, wait, wait. You’re telling me that once a dude touches a dick, he’s gay?” To which Molly & Tiffany respond in harmony, “yes.” Issa also pushes back on this asking, “why can’t Black men explore their sexuality without being labeled gay or bi or whatever?” However, Molly solidifies her position when she responds by saying, “because I want my man to be a man” (Aniobi et al., 2016). Here, Molly is conflating heterosexuality with masculinity.

Therefore, these two scenes reveal not only how Molly’s experience with biphobia mimics the sentiments of some educated Black women in society, but also why intersectionality is pertinent. In this case, intersectionality encompasses race, gender, and sexuality. Molly’s perspective on excluding men from the marriageable category who do not conform to a strict heteronormative sexual history is like what the literature says about some educated Black women in the US.

In addition, here we see *Insecure* evolve the on-screen depiction of single educated Black women again through how it shows Molly questioning whether to continue dating Jered. Molly’s humanity shines through as she asks problematic but genuine questions in this situation.

### *Online Dating Culture*

Online dating culture is a subtheme of the dating difficulties for educated Black women theme introduced in the theoretical chapter. As the literature suggests, although online dating is becoming increasingly popular in the Black community, educated Black women are disproportionately disadvantaged in the process, as we experience issues like the least number of matches and hypersexualization (Peteet et al., 2014).

In *Insecure* Season 1, Episode 2, there is a scene where Molly differentiates OkCupid, Tinder, and Hinge to Issa by explaining how each of these apps introduced her to different kinds of Black men that all led to unsuccessful dates. This scene

epitomizes why Molly is a representative character as her experiences mirror those of many educated Black women struggling on dating apps to find their ideal partner.

Intersectionality is important to consider here as Molly emphasizes the value she places on class and desiring a relationship with a man who also values upward mobility. She acknowledges this when she says, “I was a hoodrat. All I knew was Florence and Crenshaw” (Jones et al., 2016). Florence and Crenshaw is an intersection in a historically low-income part of South Los Angeles (Los Angeles Times, 2022). A successful lawyer herself now, Molly desires a class equal in a partner when she admits, “I just wanna up the quality of dudes that I meet. There's this one app called The League. It's for elite dating. Like, girl, you gotta be a professional just to get in” (Jones et al., 2016).

Despite the difficulties Molly faces on dating apps, she still clings to hope that the next date could prove fruitful. This sentiment comes through when she says, “you gotta fuck a lot of frogs to get a good frog...I’m going on a date with this frog tomorrow. He could be different. You never know” (Jones et al., 2016). Here we see Molly simultaneously expressing her frustration and hope to Issa. This range of emotion exemplifies how *Insecure* represents Molly’s feelings as complex and valid, which evolves the representation of a single educated Black woman seeking marriage.

Instead of seeming desperate, Molly appears vulnerable as she expresses her desires to her friend. She also comes off as empowered enough to keep championing herself to find love. This kind of representation shows tremendous growth from past portrayals showing single educated Black women dating to marry as desperate and willing to do anything to secure a man. Films like Terry McMillian’s (1995) *Waiting to Exhale* are often criticized for this portrayal of the desperate ‘single black female’ (hooks, 2009).

### *On-screen Tropes of Single Educated Black Women*

On-screen tropes of single educated black women is a subtheme of the dating difficulties for educated Black women theme introduced in the theoretical chapter. Shows like *Insecure* are groundbreaking in their reclaiming of the representation of Black female sexuality. Instead of depicting Molly as a Jezebel or Sapphire on her dating journey to marriage, *Insecure* represents Molly as human enough to experience



the myriad of feelings that come with dating to marry. An example of this representation is in *Insecure* Season 2, Episode, 3 when Molly and Issa discuss how they are supposed to experience a “hoe phase” together. A scene in this episode that epitomizes how Molly’s character pushes past stereotypical representation is when Molly says to Issa, “we were supposed to do this hoe shit together” (Jones et al., 2017a).

This scene further nods to past on-screen representations of Black female sexuality when Issa says, “I just wanna be on my Halle Berry shit, okay? I just want to feel good” (Jones et al., 2017a). At this moment, Issa is referring to Halle Berry’s Academy Award winning performance in *Monster’s Ball* where she was both lauded and criticized for her sex scene with White male actor Billy Bob Thornton where she asks him to make her feel good before they have sex (Simpson, 2003). The important context here, from a critical race theory perspective, is that in the film, Halle Berry’s Black son had just been killed while his father awaited the electric chair in prison, and her character chose to find solace in having sex with a racist White man.

*Insecure* harkening back to this moment in the history of trope-like representations of Black women’s sexuality on screen shows how *Insecure* acknowledges these past representations and adds levity to them. Furthermore, *Insecure* depicts Molly’s sexual exploration differently than these tropes. In this scene, Molly says, “it’s not like I don’t want somebody,” signifying her fear of being alone and recognizing that this dating journey isn’t easy (Jones et al., 2017a).

However, by the end of the scene she suggests that in the meantime, she and Issa will move forward, dating and embracing their “hoe phase” together. Specifically, Issa asks Molly “can you teach me how to hoe?” To which Molly says, “Bitch, that’s rude. And yes” as she sips her wine. (Jones et al., 2017a). This kinship Molly and Issa share over sexual exploration allows audiences to see that it’s okay for Black women to be sexually free. This depiction is progressing from past tropes which would have suggested that such behavior is not allowed for single educated Black women (Siebler, 2021).

### *Open Marriage*

Open marriage is a subtheme of marriage patterns within the Black community theme introduced in the theoretical chapter. Research within the literature review

reveals that though open marriages are increasing in the United States, and supporting the marriage success rate, the Black community is not embracing them at the same rate as other races (Moore, 2016). The Black community's hesitation to be more open and transparent around nonmonogamy, is negatively impacting single educated Black women who desire marriage. The conservative and religious beliefs, and upbringings, of many Black people, are one reason researchers use to account for this lag (Smith, 2016). *Insecure* showcases this pattern in Season 2, Episode 4, when Molly grapples with whether to pursue an intimate relationship with Dro, a guy friend she grew up with, after he reveals he's in an open marriage and expresses romantic interest in her.

After Dro tells Molly that he and his wife are "in an open marriage. We're allowed to be with other people," and further explains, "traditional marriage, that shit didn't work for us," Molly responds saying, "you got married in a church." When Dro tries to explain his and Candice's agreement, Molly pushes back further saying, "you just can't be out here cheating" (Jones et al., 2017b). Here Molly's feelings of disgust and fear are clear. Despite Dro clarifying that he and Candice are not cheating on each other, but rather are pursuing a nontraditional marriage, Molly hesitates to engage with Dro romantically.

In addition, Molly firing back at Dro about he and Candice subscribing to the institution of marriage with their church wedding has critical race theory implications. Molly's comment aligns her with members of the Black community who deem the sanctity of marriage a religious and conservative value that must be upheld. However, The CRT literature on how marriage disadvantages Black couples emphasizes that, "it is important to recognize that there is a racialized and gendered institutional and cultural apparatus that makes it particularly difficult for Black couples to have lasting and satisfying marriages" (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015, p. 164).

### *Infidelity*

Infidelity is another subtheme of the marriage patterns within the Black community theme introduced in the theoretical chapter. Returning to the findings within the literature review, infidelity is so rampant in the Black community that it has been normalized to a certain extent (Utley, 2011). One root of the normalization is the surplus of educated and professional Black women in comparison to Black men. Because Black

women have more social mobility than Black men, when a Black woman finds a suitable Black man to partner with, and he cheats, she is more likely to stick with him than end the partnership and restart the challenging journey to finding a suitable partner all over again (Utley, 2011). Though *Insecure* does not depict Molly directly experiencing infidelity, the show touches on the issue within the Black community through Molly's parents' relationship and how it affects her.

In Season 2, Episode 5, Molly finds out that her dad cheated on her mom and her mom decided to stay with him. There are two scenes in the episode that demonstrate the impact of infidelity in the Black community according to the literature. In the first scene, Molly's brother Curtis reveals to her that their dad cheated on their mom, but that their parents worked through it. Molly fires back not understanding what working through it even means. Once Molly's parents hear the commotion between the siblings, they enter the kitchen. That's when Molly addresses her parents directly, questioning her mother for staying and her father for putting her mother through infidelity. Molly first asks her dad, "how could you cheat on mom?" and then asks her mom, "why would you stay?" After Molly's mom explains to her that her dad, "made a mistake," Molly furiously storms out of the house (Dogan et al., 2017).

In the next scene, Dro drives Molly home after she leaves the party in disbelief after finding out her parents' "perfect marriage" is flawed. In the car, Molly expresses her feelings about her parents' infidelity to Dro. The line that summarizes Molly's sentiments is when she says, "man, I just feel so fucking stupid. Here I am, trying to find a nigga like my dad, thinking that my parents' marriage is 'the thing.' All the while, their whole shit is fucked up, too" (Dogan et al., 2017). Here, we see Molly's anger and disgust about the infidelity in her parents' marriage. More than anything, she realizes she has been extremely naive by striving for a marriage like her parents' now knowing theirs is imperfect.

### *Successful Black Marriages*

*Successful black marriages* is another subtheme within the marriage patterns within the Black community theme introduced in the theoretical chapter. The literature review emphasizes that research lacks on successful marriages within the Black community. However, existing literature emphasizes three main factors for successful

African American marriages; partner income, educational attainment, and whether the couple saw successful marriages within their households growing up (Skipper et al., 2021). *Insecure* illustrates aspects of this through Molly's storyline as in the series finale, she ends up marrying Taurean, a Black man, who is equally as successful as she is. Taurean is a partner at the same law firm where Molly works. Therefore, they have similar incomes as well as educational backgrounds. Though the show does not detail whether Taurean's parents had a successful marriage, he and Molly both being successful attorneys is a great example of how Molly is a representative character.

Though *Insecure* did a remarkable job of crafting Molly as a human who experiences justifiable frustration while dating to marry, the show never showed her content in her dating life until she marries Taurean. One scene in the episode that epitomizes this is when the wedding DJ announces Molly and Taurean as a married couple and we see Molly smiling ear to ear in her stunning white gown as she begins her first dance with her husband. The DJ says, "finally, it's who you've been waiting for. I'm gonna need everyone to clap a little louder. That's right. And now, introducing... Mr. and Mrs. Taurean Jackson!" (Gauyo et al., 2021b). The emphasis the DJ makes when she says, "it's who you've been waiting for" underlines that finally, Molly is a wife to the man of her dreams. Another scene in the episode that underlines Molly's happiness on her wedding day is when she's talking to Issa as Issa helps her change from her formal wedding dress. Issa says, "How you feelin?" to which Molly audibly sighs with relief and says "Girl... happy. Like, really, really, really, happy" (Gauyo et al., 2021b).

For five seasons, *Insecure*'s audience journeyed with Molly as she faced the challenges associated with dating difficulties and marriage patterns within the Black community, encompassed by the themes, and subthemes in this dissertation. To see her get her happy ending accents why she is a representative character whose story arc provides a "cautionary tale," as S.P. Baty posits, for the possibilities that await the single educated Black woman who desires marriage.

## Conclusion

The key theoretical takeaways from this dissertation revolve around *Insecure* exemplifying the power of representation in television. *Insecure*'s use of its co-protagonist Molly Carter as a representative character typifies how the show is revolutionary in its depiction of the societal realities facing single educated Black women. This dissertation highlights the impact of *Insecure* advancing on-screen tropes of single educated Black women towards a new generation of multi-dimensional Black women characters who empower themselves, and are encouraged by their friends, to feel complicated feelings as they strive for marriage.

The critical methodological contribution of this dissertation is that it exemplifies how deductive thematic analysis is effective in analyzing issues of representation in television shows. The way this paper identifies the themes of dating difficulties for educated Black women and marriage patterns in the Black community in the literature, and their respective subthemes, and searches through *Insecure* for how the show depicts these themes, is a nuanced exercise of the methodology.

This topic would benefit from further research that includes interviews with educated Black women, who watch *Insecure*, regarding their experiences dating to marry. It would be prudent to use said interviews to examine how the interview subjects experience the themes in the literature review, depicted in *Insecure*.

*Insecure* undoubtedly ushered in a new generation of television shows told by and about educated and professional Black women striving for success at home and at work. *Insecure* has set a new standard for the representation of Black women away from hypersexualized tropes, such as the Sapphire and Jezebel, towards authentic and complex representations. Therefore, beyond its legacy of increasing positive representation on screen of Black women striving for partners that are their equals, *Insecure* will forever be known for opening the door for new shows.

Some examples of shows that continue the work that *Insecure* started, in boosting the representation of educated Black women, include BET's *Twenties*, STARZ's *Run the World*, and Amazon Prime Video's *Harlem*. In 2020, Producer Lena Waithe's *Twenties* premiered as a series loosely based on her life as a queer Black woman aspiring for love and success in Hollywood (Obenson, 2020). In 2021, Producer Yvette Lee Bowser's *Run the World* premiered as a series chronicling the New York

City personal and professional lives of a group of Black girlfriends including a Banker, Journalist, Marketing Exec, and Ph.D. Candidate (Framke, 2021). Yvette Lee Bowser is most known for her aforementioned series *Living Single*. Also in 2021, Producer Tracy Oliver's *Harlem*, premiered on Amazon Prime Video, which is a series about another group of Black girlfriends living and loving in New York City. This group features an Ivy League Professor, Queer Woman in Tech, Fashion Designer, and Singer/Actress (Hill, 2021). It is noteworthy that Tracy Oliver, a Black woman, attended Stanford with Issa Rae and co-starred in, and helped produce, many of Rae's web series leading up to her big break with *Insecure* (Kwateng-Clark, 2020).

The birth of these new series, on the heels of the *Insecure* series finale in 2021, shows that representation matters. Intersectional storytelling on screen about the experiences of educated Black women is not only beneficial for audiences but also for brands as these shows are commercially viable. Northwestern Communication Professor AJ Christian supports this sentiment saying, "the value of stories by and about characters who live on the margins of the intersections between race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, disability, citizenship, religion, and so on... elicit critical attention for their novelty" (Christian, 2019, p. 459). Therefore, I hope we continue to see more stories by, and about, educated Black women on screen as they not only make a difference, but they make 'cents.'

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## Appendices

### APPENDIX A: *Insecure* Character Breakdowns

Character Name	Actor	Character Description
Molly Carter	Yvonne Orji	Late 20s – Early 30s. Black woman. Graduate of Stanford Undergrad. Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (First Black Women’s Sorority). Corporate Attorney. Issa’s best friend. Part of the friend group with Issa, Kelli and Tiffany who all went to undergrad together.
Issa Dee	Issa Rae	Late 20s – Early 30s. Black woman. Graduate of Stanford Undergrad. Works at a non-profit, then drives Uber for a period before becoming a successful Entrepreneur.
Kelli Prenny	Natasha Rothwell	Late 20s – Early 30s. Black woman. Graduate of Stanford Undergrad. Accountant.
Tiffany DuBois	Amanda Seales	Late 20s – Early 30s. Black woman. Graduate of Stanford Undergrad. Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (First Black Women’s Sorority). Publicist.
Diane Nakamura	Maya Erskine	Late 20s – Early 30s. Asian woman. Fellow Associate at Molly’s Corporate Law Firm.
Jered	Langston Kerman	Late 20s – Early 30s. Black man. Did not attend College. Works at Enterprise Rent-a-Car as a Manager.
Alejandro ‘Dro’ Peña	Sarunas Jackson	Late 20s – Early 30s. Afro-Latino man. Unknown level of education/career but is portrayed as professional and successful.
Taurean Jackson	Leonard Robinson	Early 30s. Black man. Partner at the same Black owned/operated Corporate Law Firm where Molly works.
Curtis Carter	Richard Nevels	20s. Black man. Molly’s younger brother. Portrayed as working class. Still lives at home.
Carol Carter	L. Scott Caldwell	60s. Black woman. Molly’s mom. Working class. Lives in the Florence/Crenshaw area in LA, which is lower income.
David Carter	Gregg Daniel	60s. Black man. Molly’s dad. Working class. Lives in the Florence/Crenshaw area in LA, which is lower income.

## APPENDIX B: Codebook.

### **I. Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage**

#### **Definition:**

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to Molly's feelings while she is dating with the intention to marry. The range of emotion discussed includes happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger (Cherry, 2021). This theme is an example of inductive thematic analysis as opposed to deductive thematic analysis. I did not derive this theme from the literature. Instead, I derived it from the data, that is episodes of *Insecure*.

#### **When to use:**

Whenever the data provides insight into Molly's feelings around her dating life leading up to marriage it should be coded.

#### **Subtheme #1: Happiness**

##### **Definition:**

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how *Insecure* depicts Molly's happiness surrounding her dating experiences.

#### **Subtheme #2: Sadness**

##### **Definition:**

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how *Insecure* depicts Molly's sadness surrounding her dating experiences.

#### **Subtheme #3: Fear**

##### **Definition:**

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how *Insecure* depicts Molly's fears surrounding her dating experiences.

#### **Subtheme #4: Disgust**

##### **Definition:**

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how *Insecure* depicts Molly's disgust surrounding her dating experiences.

#### **Subtheme #5: Anger**

##### **Definition:**

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how *Insecure* depicts Molly's anger surrounding her dating experiences.

### **II. Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Single Educated Black women**

#### **Definition:**

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to difficulties one experiences as an educated Black woman dating with the goal of marrying a Black man, from Molly's perspective. This theme is an example of deductive thematic analysis as I derived this theme and all respective subthemes from the literature.

When to use:

Whenever the data, that is episodes of *Insecure*, exemplify any of the subthemes that fall underneath this theme, it should be coded. The subthemes within this theme are interracial dating, biphobia, online dating culture, and on-screen tropes of single educated black women.

#### **Subtheme #1: Interracial Dating**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to Molly's experience with interracial dating.

#### **Subtheme #2: Biphobia**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to Molly's experience with biphobia. Biphobia defined as, "a fear or dislike of someone because of prejudice towards, or negative attitudes about, bi people. Biphobia can be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, bi" (Gooch et al., 2020, p. 5).

#### **Subtheme #3: Online Dating Culture**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to Molly's experience with online dating and using dating apps.

#### **Subtheme #4: On Screen Tropes of Single Educated Black Women**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how *Insecure* depicts Molly's dating experiences in a way that evolves the legacy of representations of single educated Black women on Television. Per the literature review, relevant tropes here to consider are any nuanced representations via Molly's character of the sapphire and, or, jezebel.

### **III. Theme #3: Marriage Patterns within the Black Community**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to marriage patterns within the Black community, from Molly's point of view.

When to use:

All subthemes that fall underneath this theme align with marriage patterns within the Black community, per the literature review. Additionally, all subthemes refer to marriage patterns within the Black community that impact Molly through her dating life, her parents' marriage, and ultimately once she gets married at the end of the series.

#### **Subtheme #1: Open Marriage**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how Molly experiences open marriage within the Black community affecting her dating life and journey to marriage.

**Subtheme #2: Infidelity**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how Molly experiences infidelity within the Black community affecting her dating life and journey to marriage.






**Subtheme #3: Successful Black Marriages**

Definition:

Explicit words said, implicit meaning conveyed, or actions done, directly related to how Molly experiences a successful Black marriage affecting her dating life and journey to marriage. It is important to note: Molly could experience this firsthand, through her own experience, or secondhand, through the experience of witnessing such relationships.

## APPENDIX C: Sampled Episodes Background Information

Table 1: Sampled Episodes for **Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women Theme**

Subtheme	Episode (Title + Season/Ep.#)	Timestamp of Selected Scene (s)	Scene Description	Visual Frame(s)
Interracial Dating (1)	Season 1, Episode 1: "Insecure as F**k"	4:55 - 5:58	Molly tells her coworker, who is an Asian woman dating a Black man, that Black men don't like Black women.	 Source: (Rae et al., 2016).
		13:07 - 13:44	Molly then complains to Issa about said coworker getting engaged and feeling like marriage is never going to happen for her.	 Source: (Rae et al., 2016).
Interracial Dating (2)	Season 3, Episode 6: "Ready Like"	10:28 - 11:38	Molly talks to Issa and Kelli about her hesitation to date outside her race.	 Source: (Kittrell et al., 2018).
Biphobia	Season 1, Episode 6: "Guilty as F**k"	14:57 - 17:08	Molly talks to Issa, Kelli and Tiffany about her hesitation to date Jered because he has sexually experimented with a man. Their conversation embodies biphobia.	 Source: (Aniobi et al., 2016).
Online Dating Culture	Season 1, Episode 2: "Messy as F**k"	5:33 - 7:42	Molly talks to Issa about the strengths and weaknesses of the dating apps she has used and describes her overall experience with online dating.	 Source: (Jones et al., 2016).








On Screen Tropes of Single Educated Black Women	Season 2, Episode 3 “Hella Open”	7:43 - 9:00	Molly and Issa discuss having a “hoe phase” together and Issa asks Molly if she can teach her “how to hoe.”	 <p>Source: (Jones et al., 2017a).</p>
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Table 2: Sampled Episodes for **Marriage Patterns within the Black Community Theme**

Subtheme	Episode (Title + Season/Ep.#)	Timestamp of Selected Scene (s)	Scene Description	Visual Frame(s)
Open Marriage	Season 2, Episode 4: “Hella LA”	17:30 - 18:43	Molly considers dating Dro after he explains his open marriage to her.	 <p>Source: (Jones et al., 2017b).</p>
		21: 21 - 22:02	Molly explains to Issa and Kelli that Dro hit on her and revealed his open marriage.	 <p>Source: (Jones et al., 2017b).</p>
Infidelity	Season 2, Episode 5: “Hella Shook”	22:27 - 23:25	Molly finds out about the infidelity in her parents’ relationship.	 <p>Source: (Dougan et al., 2017).</p>
		24:40 - 25:27	Molly expresses to Dro how this new information about her parents’ marriage affects her dating life.	 <p>Source: (Dougan et al., 2017).</p>

Successful Black Marriages	Season 5, Episode 10: "Everything Gonna Be, Okay?!"	33:14 - 34:00	Molly gets married to Taurean, who is everything she's ever wanted. He's a childless Black man and partner at the law firm where they both work.	 <p>Source: (Lee, 2021).</p>
		35:34 - 36:11	On her wedding day, Molly expresses her happiness and gratitude to Issa.	 <p>Source: (Gauyo et al., 2021b).</p>



## APPENDIX D: Thematic Analyses of Sampled Episodes.

### Key

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

### Sampled Episode #1

#### Subtheme: Interracial Dating (1)

#### Episode: Season 1, Episode 1: "Insecure as F\*\*k"

#### Timestamp of Selected Scenes

5:05 - 5:58 & 13:07 - 13:44

Diane

Me and Jamal are always talking about how we're not each other's types but, I don't know, it works.

Molly

Girl, Jamal is frontin'. Niggas love Asians and Latinas and Indians and White chicks and mixtures. But you know what, if they are not checkin' for me, I ain't checkin' for them.

**Interracial Dating.** Literature does show that Black men date outside of the Black community at a higher rate than Black women do.

Diane

Jamal said I was his first.

**Disgust.** Here Molly feels rejected by Black men so rejects them back.

Issa

Hi, girl.

Molly

It is never happening for me.

**Fear.** Molly is afraid she will never find love in this marriage market. Especially as she sees her co-worker who is Asian seemingly "steal" a Black man from the market.

Issa

You sound like you're exercising  
You don't exercise.

Molly

Diane got engaged.

Issa

To her Black boyfriend?

Molly

Yes.

Issa

Damn. They wife others up with a quickness.

**The Marriage Market.** The literature confirms that Black women do not date outside of our race at the same rate as Black men.

Molly

Right? And they don't even have to be that cute. You know, I'm not trying to be shady, but why does she deserve to get married, and I don't?

Issa

Girl, stop, who says you don't deserve to be married?

**Anger.** Molly is envious of her Asian co-worker who got engaged. She says Diane isn't even that cute and she feels angry because it seems Diane is more deserving of marriage than she is.

**Molly**

Jesus, apparently. He the nigga that gave me this broken-ass pussy.

**Issa**

Okay, listen, I promise Jesus isn't conspiring against you and your pussy. You need to go out tonight.

**Molly**

No.

**Issa**

I'm taking you out. Be ready at 8:00. Bye

**Molly**

Wait. Issa? Issa?

### **Ethics & Reflexivity**

**I relate to Molly and Issa's feelings around Black men dating outside of our race, as I have witnessed this pattern having grown up in spaces from private high school, to attending an ivy league school and living in Los Angeles where I see this every day. Also, my younger brother, who is 20, has had two girlfriends and neither of them have been Black. I often speak openly about how the marriage market is made more difficult for educated Black women, like myself, because many Black men opt to date outside of our race. Issa's statement of "they wife others up with a quickness" and Molly's statement, "it is never happening for me" are feelings I have felt before and have expressed similarly. Therefore, I come to the literature and text in Insecure with these personal experiences.**

**Key**

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

**Sampled Episode #2**

**Subtheme: Interracial Dating (2)**

**Episode: Season 3, Episode 6: "Ready Like"**

**Timestamp of Selected Scene**

**10:28 - 11:38**

**Molly**

Girl, I'm not goin' out with that nigga.

**Disgust.** Molly rejects the idea of dating Andrew because he is Asian.

**Issa**

Girl, what's the problem? Andrew's cute! And he must really like you, 'cause I would've thrown that jacket away and chalked it up to God.

**Kelli**

Which one is Andrew? Is he the Black one or the Asian one?

**Molly**

The Asian one.

**Kelli**

Good, 'cause I been fuckin' the Black one. A lot.

**Interracial Dating.** Molly typifies what the literature reveals about Black women dating outside of their race. Research shows Black men are twice as likely as Black women to date outside of our race and Molly identifies with that demographic.

**Issa**

OK, well, why aren't you excited about him? Is it 'cause he's Asian? 'Cause no judgment! But judgment.

**Molly**

Uh, I've dated outside my race before, but I know I want to end up with a Black man, so what is the point?

**Fear.** Molly expresses a bit of hopelessness here as she has failed dating outside of her race before.

**Kelli**

The point is, you are single. You are very single.

Kelli emphasizes here that Molly is single with no prospects. This moment symbolizes that Molly is a representative character in that she fits the demographic of a single educated Black woman dating to marry facing many challenges.

**Issa**

Tell her.

**Kelli**

You are so single, a tumbleweed just rolled out your pussy.

**Molly**

OK, everybody calm down. Listen, I don't have time to catch him up on the culture, teach him about red beans and rice. There are a lot of Jewish men who only date Jewish women, and nobody calls them out! So, why can't I be Orthodox Black?

**Disgust.** Molly makes plain that she is not interested in dating outside of her race because men outside of her race aren't as versed on Black culture as Black people, and that does not interest her.

**Issa**

Cause that's not a religion.

**Kelli**

Uh, speak for yourself. That's my religion.

**Issa**

Kelli, shut up. You don't even go to church.

**Kelli**

I go on important days! Like when I come back from Miami. The Lord knows I get turnt.

**Issa**

Molly, just try it out!

**Anger.** Molly shuts her friends down who are trying to help her as she refuses to date outside of her race.

**Molly**

I don't care what you say. I'm not going out with him. Thank you.

**Interracial Dating.** Here, Issa urges Molly to be open to dating outside of her race. This sentiment is similar to Ralph Richard Banks' who I mention in the introduction of this dissertation. Banks urges educated Black women to consider dating outside of our race if we want partners of equal education.

**Issa**

Hm. It's a shame to be all closed-minded and ignorant.

**Molly**

Wow.

**Issa**

I'm just sayin', sometimes, people can surprise you.

### **Ethics & Reflexivity**

**It is important that I acknowledge sharing similar feelings to Molly on knowing that I would prefer to marry a Black man of equal, or similar education, and social mobility. Like Molly, though I am open to dating outside of my race, marrying an educated Black man is my goal. Therefore, the way I interpret Insecure's depiction of Molly is colored from that perspective. It is important to say that just as Molly ends up getting into a relationship with an Asian man within the show, I too have dated outside of my race. Overall, though my personal experiences are like Molly's, I am still able to make a conscious effort while analyzing to separate my positioning from my interpretation of Molly's experiences.**

**Key**

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

**Sampled Episode #3**

**Subtheme: Biphobia**

**Episode: Season 1, Episode 6: "Guilty as F\*\*k"**

**Timestamp of Selected Scene**

**14:57 - 17:08**

**Jered**

When I was 20, I kind of had a sexual experience like yours.

**Molly**

What you mean?

**Jered**

I messed around with a guy before.

**Intersectionality**— Jared introduces sexual exploration into the conversation from a Black male perspective which is very taboo in the Black community.

**Molly**

Wait, you did what?

**Jered**

I mean, it was, like, a long time ago. My friend and I were at this party in New York, both super drunk. Went back to his place and then, you know, it just kind of happened.

**Molly**

What kind of happened?

**Fear.** Molly is very hesitant that Jared is going to confess to doing something she wouldn't be ok with...

**Jered**

He went down on me.

**Intersectionality**— Jared expresses he has explored his sexuality, but Molly assumes that makes him bisexual.

**Molly**

So you're, like, bi?

**Jered**

No. No, definitely not. I mean, I had never done anything like this before, and I knew afterwards it wasn't for me.

**Molly**

Like, how long after, though?

**Jered**

Like, immediately.

**Molly**

Okay, like, but immediately when? And, like, was this, like, a one-time thing with this one guy? Or was it, like, a one-time thing with other guys or...

**Jered**

Molly, one guy, one time. That's it.

—

**Molly**

Okay.

**Kelli**

I have so many questions.

**Molly**

Shit, me, too.

**Tiffany**

Okay, how many times?

**Issa**

Did he like it?

**Kelli**

Okay, did he come? Did they both come?

**Tiffany**

Kelli, that's enough.

**Biphobia.** Tiffany expresses that Jered is gay because he has experimented with his sexuality. Molly agreeing to this statement is also problematic.

**Kelli**

Shit, we're all thinking it!

**Tiffany**

Sweetie, you can't keep dating him. He's gay.

**Molly**

Because that totally makes him gay, right?

**Fear.** Molly makes this biphobic remark here. A man having a sexual experience with another man doesn't make him bisexual, but that's what Molly's remarks imply.

**Issa**

Bitch, sophomore year, you hooked up with that chick who looked like Lisa Turtle.

**Molly**

Okay, who didn't?

**Tiffany**

It's different for women.

**Biphobia.** Tiffany says that women experimenting with their sexuality is different than men experimenting. This is another biphobic comment.

**Kelli**

Okay, wait, wait, wait. You're telling me that once a dude touches a dick, he's gay?

**Molly & Tiffany**

Yes.

**Biphobia.** Molly and Tiffany double down on this binary that you're either gay or your straight. There is no room for questioning or exploring your sexuality.

**Kelli**

So, it's, like, straight, straight, straight, straight, straight, straight, straight, straight, Lee Daniels?

**Biphobia.** Tiffany owns that her comment is biphobic when she acknowledges her double standard.

**Tiffany**

Yes. It's a double standard. But, oh well, that's how it is.

**Intersectionality**—why can't gender and sexuality be subjective in the Black community?

**Issa**

Okay, bitch, so she's supposed to stop seeing Jared just because he doesn't subscribe to the heteronormative rejection of sexual fluidity?

**Kelli**

One Woman's Studies class and this bitch talk like she doing the spoken word in Flawless. I love it.

Issa

I'm just saying why can't Black men explore their sexuality without being labeled gay or bi or whatever?

**Disgust.** Here Molly makes a remark that perpetuates toxic masculinity. She implies heterosexuality denotes masculinity.

Molly

Because I want my man to be a man.

**Critical Race Theory**—why is homophobia rampant in the Black community? Why is sexuality black and White?

Issa

That's homophobic as fuck, okay? And if Jared were White, you would chalk that shit up to the game.

Kelli

Preach! Why do Black men have to fit in a box and be super masculine all the time? I mean, damn!

Can't a nigga get his dick sucked?

**Intersectionality**— Here, this discusses the intersection between race, gender, and sexuality in the Black community

### Ethics & Reflexivity

I can say I have had conversations with friends, who are also educated Black women, about how we'd feel about dating men who have experimented with men, or who identify as bisexual. My feelings on this subject have evolved as I've gotten older and lived in a place like LA where sexuality is openly more fluid. However, I empathize with Molly and Tiffany's sentiments on this issue just as much as I do Kelli and Issa's as I don't think this is a Black and White issue. Therefore, my openness around this subject allows me to be neutral in my analysis.

**Key**

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

**Sampled Episode #4**

**Subtheme: Online Dating Culture**

**Episode: Season 1, Episode 2: "Messy as F\*\*k"**

**Timestamp of Selected Scene**

**5:33 - 7:42**

**Issa**

Lawrence hasn't put it down in a very long time, okay? And maybe I need to get on one of those apps like you, girl.

**Molly**

Girl, calm your deprived ass down. You are not about this app life.

**Issa**

Try me. Bitch, I'm not gonna sign up. I just wanna see what's out there.

**Molly**

All right. You asked for it. Check it, that's OKCupid. It's free, so it's, like, bottom-of-the-barrel dudes.

*[Intercuts to a scene of Molly on an OKCupid date. Her date says:]*

I bought a bunch of new movies  
at the barbershop. Bootleg and chill?]

**Online Dating Culture.** Tinder is an app known for its hook up culture. The literature review emphasizes that Black women are fetishized in online dating culture.

**Online Dating Culture.** OKCupid is a dating app that is free, but because there is no cost associated with it, the men you find on there may not be elite, according to Molly.

**Molly**

Tinder used to be cool, but now it's basically a fuck app.

*[Intercuts to a scene of Molly on a Tinder date. Her date says:]*

So, what are you in the mood for?

We could ditch the menus and have our own dinner for two. I'll be six, you be nine.]

**Online Dating Culture.** Hinge pulls from your network of friends/community. But Molly's community isn't providing the kind of dates she desires.

**Molly**

Hinge at least pulls from your network of friends, but, apparently, all my friends only know Hotep niggas.

*[Intercuts to a scene of Molly on a Hinge date. Her date says:]*

I just want a queen that respects herself, who lays off the swine, who stands beside her king like a strong Black woman should. But my queen gotta be a freak, too.]

**Molly**

I fucked that nigga 'cause he was fine. But then, he had the nerve to dump me, 'cause I told him I never went to the beach till college. Nigga, you sell Obama puzzles at the African marketplace and you gonna judge me?

**Issa**

You grew up in LA and you never went to the beach?

**Molly**

Okay, Windsor Hills, I was a hoodrat. All I knew was Florence and Crenshaw. Whatever, I am still fly.

Basically, most of these dudes are not looking for a relationship. They're just trying to fuck.

**Online Dating Culture.** Molly's experience feeling sexualized from dating apps confirms what the literature suggests as Black women do face this often.

**Intersectionality**— race/gender/class are intersecting here. Molly, a Black woman, grew up in the Florence/Crenshaw District of Los Angeles. This is a notoriously poorer area. She admits she was a "hoodrat."



Molly expresses her desire to meet more successful men.

**Issa**  
Really?

**Molly**

Yep. I mean, I just wanna up the quality of dudes that I meet. There's this one app called **The League**. It's for elite dating. Like, girl, you gotta be a professional just to get in. I mean, I've been on, like, a three-month waiting list.

**Online Dating Culture.** Literature shows Black get the least number of matches on dating apps.

**Issa**  
Three months? To meet one nigga? Yeah, this is a lot.

**Intersectionality**— Here gender and socio-economic status are intersecting. Molly considers men who are professional as having higher value.

**Molly**

You gotta fuck a lot of frogs to get a good frog.

Molly is very clear about dating being a difficult and long process.

**Issa**  
That's not the saying, or any saying.

**Molly**

The point is, it's a numbers game. Check it. I'm going on a date with this frog tomorrow. He could be different. You never know.

On the other side of fear, Molly expresses hope for meeting a potential match.

## **Ethics & Reflexivity**

**I am a single educated Black woman myself who has used dating apps while living in Los Angeles, very similar to Molly. Friends of mine, who are also educated Black women, and I have had conversations very similar to the conversation I'm analyzing in this sampled episode. Thus, when I identify Molly's feelings regarding her experiences with online dating culture, my bias naturally may come out.**

### Key

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

### Sampled Episode #5

#### Subtheme: On Screen Tropes of Single Educated Black Women

#### Episode: Season 2, Episode 3: "Hella Open"

#### Timestamp of Selected Scene

7:43 - 9:00

Molly

Oh, you got jokes? Okay. Because there's plenty of brown dicks in the sea, too. But you ain't got one.

Issa

Okay, first of all, trying to fuck is hard.

Molly

No, it's not. It's like riding a bike.

Issa

Yeah, I don't know how to do that either. Like, I kept on thinking, "What if he's not good? Or what if I'm not good?" And... I don't know, I'm just stuck in my own head.

Molly

Well, what you think therapy is? I'm stuck in my head talking to a stranger. At least you get the option to fuck at the end.

Molly is frustrated that while she is in therapy, which she knows she needs to do, she has not seen tangible results yet, which having sex does yield.

Issa

Yeah, but you chose not to be out here.

Molly

But it's not like I don't want somebody.

**Sadness.** Molly does desire a relationship despite her unsuccessful dating history thus far.

Issa

Then, girl, get yours.

Molly

I should. We should. I mean, we were supposed to do this hoe shit together.

Molly and Issa were supposed to both be single at the same time. That idea is desirable to her and Issa.

Issa

Girl, I always wanted to have a hoe phase. But then I met Lawrence and he made me fall in love with him and shit.

Molly

Tsk, yeah, y'all did get boo'd up real quick.

Issa

You know what? Fuck love, okay? Fuck getting to know these niggas. Fuck feeling feelings. I just wanna be on my Halle Berry shit, okay? I just wanna feel good.

**Representation/Jezebel Trope**— this is a reference to Halle Berry's iconic sex scene in *Monster's Ball*

Molly

Cool, cool, cool. Well, can you fuck with my bookshelf, though?

Issa

Mm. Uh-huh. Yeah, yeah. Hey... let's go somewhere tonight. Can you teach me how to ho?

**On Screen Tropes of Single Educated Black Women.** Here, Molly and Issa embrace their sexuality and discuss it in jest. Molly agrees to help Issa learn how to be sexually free as Molly has been single and dating for a while whereas Issa just got out of a relationship. Instead of being Jezebels or Sapphires here, these are friends talking about wanting to be sexually free in an empowered way.

## **Ethics & Reflexivity**

**What is most pertinent to my ethics and reflexivity for this scene is the reference Issa makes to wanting to “be on her Halle Berry shit.” As discussed in the results and interpretation chapter, this reference is to the film *Monster’s Ball* which I have seen multiple times. The point in the film Issa is referring to is Halle Berry’s iconic sex scene. My familiarity with this reference definitely informs my interpretation of the scene. Furthermore, I can say that I have friends with whom I’ve had similar conversations of this where they’ve expressed their desire to explore their sexuality while dating before settling into relationships. Therefore, I empathize with Issa and Molly in their desire to feel supported by friends in expressing the desire to be sexually free without judgment. In addition, I have seen many additional films featuring educated Black women from the 1990s and early 2000s where these kinds of conversations depict the characters as negative tropes instead of empowered as in this conversation. I bring those comparisons and background information to my analysis of this material.**

**Key**

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

**Sampled Episode #6**

**Subtheme: Open Marriage**

**Episode: Season 2, Episode 4: "Hella LA"**

**Timestamp of Selected Scenes**

**17:30 - 18:43 & 21:21 - 22:02**

**Molly**

We should probably stop 'cause I'm sure Candice would not be too thrilled with all this high school grinding. Plus, she got them mollywhoppin' arms and I can't fight like I used to, so.

**Dro**

Nah, she'd be fine with it.

**Molly**

(SNORTS) No, she would not.

**Dro**

Molly, it's... It's cool. Candice and I, we're... we're open.

**Molly**

Open?

**Dro**

Mm-hmm.

**Molly**

Open how?

**Dro**

Like we're in an open marriage. We're allowed to be with other people.

**Molly**

What? Since when?

**Dro**

A year ago. I'm serious, I'm serious. Traditional marriage...that shit just didn't work for us.

**Molly**

You got married in a church.

**Dro**

I didn't expect things to go this way either. (SCOFFS) Look, look, it's a lot of pressure. To be all things to one person?

**Molly**

Come on. Well, then make friends! You just can't be out here cheating...

**Dro**

But it isn't cheating. We're very honest with each other. Isn't that how relationships work?

**Molly**

I mean, I guess. Yeah.

**Open Marriage.** Dro drops the bombshell that he and Candace are in an open marriage. The literature review suggests open marriages are becoming more popular in the Black community though they're not openly discussed and are under-researched.

**Open Marriage.** Dro further explains that a traditional marriage where you remain committed solely to one another was not working for him and Candace.

**Critical Race Theory**—In the Black Community, Marriage is largely institutionalized through religion

Molly makes it clear that she believes open marriages are a form of cheating.

**Dro**

It's not like we out in these streets, hoing around. But if something happens, yo, it happens.

**Molly**

(SIGHS) I don't know.

Molly expresses ambivalence towards Dro's open marriage and certainly her participation in it.

**Dro**

Look, people just need to figure out what works for them. And this works for us.

**Successful AA Marriages.** Dro argues different things work for different couples.

**Molly**

Y'all, my motherfucking life. Dro hit on me, hard. Like he's trying to fuck.

**Issa**

What?!

**Disgust.** Molly is frustrated at where her dating life is. It's gotten to the point where her childhood friend, Dro, feels comfortable enough to ask to date Molly while in an open marriage.

**Kelli**

What the fuck? Why would he do that?

**Molly**

He said he and Candice are in an open marriage.

**Open Marriage.** Molly reveals the bombshell news to Kelli and Issa that Candace and Dro are in an open marriage. Kelli does their taxes and didn't even know that information.

**Issa**

Dro? Like, Dro, Dro? Dro who we know?

**Kelli**

Shit, I didn't even know, and I do their taxes.

**Issa**

So, they both step out?

**Kelli**

Damn, that's progressive as fuck.

**Molly**

Or is it messy as fuck?

**Issa**

I thought that was some White people shit.

**Molly**

I know!

**Critical Race Theory**—open marriage is not seen as valid or recognized in the Black community.

**Kelli**

Mm.

**Issa**

Well, as long as they're both being honest.

**Molly**

He said they are.

**Infidelity.** Though Issa wasn't married to Lawrence, she cheated on him while they were living together and had been in a long-term committed relationship. Her infidelity is what ended their relationship.

**Issa**

I mean, I guess it's better than doing shit behind your person's back... Lying, cheating, moving out.

**Kelli**

You talking about you.

**Issa**

I'm not talking about anybody specifically.

**Kelli**

You talking about you specifically.

**Molly**

**Damn, is anyone married like my parents anymore?**

**Successful AA Marriages.** Molly has always looked up to her parents' relationship as a loving and enduring union. Until later in the series where she finds out their marriage is not so perfect.

### **Ethics & Reflexivity**

**Given I am a product of Black parents who were married for nearly 30 years before my mom passed away, I appreciate where Molly is coming from and bring my bias to this scenario. This sentiment applies especially in the moment where Molly says, "damn is anyone married like my parents anymore?" Here, Molly is naïve to what she will soon learn about the reality of her parents' imperfect marriage due to her father's infidelity. I bring my own experience with my parents' imperfect marriage to my analysis of Molly's feelings here. In addition, I am Episcopalian and grew up attending private religious schools and going to church regularly, so I do bring those beliefs to my assessment of the sentiments here. When Molly says, "you got married in a church," she is referring to the institutional nature of marriage within the Black community that strongly embraces religion.**

**Key**

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

**Sampled Episode #7**

**Subtheme: Infidelity**

**Episode: Season 2, Episode 5: "Hella Shook"**

**Timestamp of Selected Scenes**

**22:27 - 23:25 & 24:40 - 25:27**

**Molly**

So, is it true?

**Curtis Carter**

[sighs] Molly.

**Molly**

**Dad cheated on Mom?**

**Curtis Carter**

**They worked through it.**

**Infidelity.** Molly's brother reveals that there was infidelity in their parents' marriage.

**Molly**

**They worked through it? What the fuck does that even...? So, Mom knew, and she's cool with it?**

**Curtis Carter**

Molly, calm down.

**Molly**

**Fuck that! Fuck this ceremony. Fuck all this fake-ass shit.**

**Carol Carter**

Molly! Lower your voice, please.

**David Carter**

Molly, what...

**Anger.** Molly is pissed at her family! She is angry at her dad for cheating on her mom. Angry at her mom for staying with her dad. And Angry at her brothers and extended family for knowing about this and never telling her.

**Molly**

**Infidelity.** Molly's father cheated on her mother in their marriage and Molly's mother decided to stay, as they were able to work through it.

**How could you cheat on Mom?**

**David Carter**

Oh, Molly, listen.

**Carol Carter**

It was a long time ago.

**Molly**

**Why would you stay?**

**Carol Carter**

**Molly, he made a mistake.**

**Infidelity.** The literature review confirms that Black women very often stay in marriages despite their husbands infidelity because the opportunity cost of leaving and finding a new suitable partner is too high.

**David Carter**

Listen, honey...

**Molly**  
No, no. I can't.

**David Carter**  
Honey...

**Molly**  
No.

—

**Molly**  
I never would have thought in a million years that my dad could... [sucks teeth]

**Dro**  
Sorry.

**Sadness/Disgust.** Molly feels so disappointed in her dad for cheating on her mom. She never felt he was the kind of man who could do something like that.

**Molly**  
He wasn't supposed to do something like that.

**Dro**  
I'm sure he feels terrible, though.

**Molly**  
Good. He should feel terrible. Why are you even defending him?

**Dro**  
I'm not. I'm on your side. I'm just trying to...

**Molly**  
Man, I just feel so fucking stupid. Here I am, trying to find a nigga like my dad, thinking that my parents' marriage is "the thing." All the while, their whole shit is fucked up, too.

**Dro**  
That doesn't make you stupid.

**Sadness/Disgust.** Molly is heartbroken that she feels she has been so naïve believing her parents had an ideal marriage that she's been aspiring to for her own life, meanwhile her parents worked through her dad's infidelity.

**Molly**  
Tsk.

**Dro**  
It doesn't. You're just trying to find someone who loves you and...makes you happy. You should.

### **Ethics & Reflexivity**

**It is particularly important that I address my positioning here, as like Molly, my knowledge of infidelity in my parents' marriage has largely impacted my dating expectations and experiences as a single educated Black woman. Therefore, I empathize with Molly's negative feelings here, which comes through in my analysis of her feelings. Furthermore, when searching the data for the appearance of themes from the literature, I identified Molly's experience with infidelity through her parents' relationship largely because of my own similar encounter.**



**Key**

Theme #1: Molly's Feelings on her Dating Journey to Marriage

Theme #2: Dating Difficulties for Educated Black Women

Theme #3: Marriage Patterns in the Black Community

Theoretical Frameworks (Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality & Representation)

Ethics & Reflexivity

**Sampled Episode #8**

**Subtheme: Successful Black Marriages**

**Episode: Season 5, Episode 10: "Everything Gonna Be, Okay?!"**

**Timestamp of Selected Scene**

**33:14 - 34:00 & 35:34 - 36:11**

(applause)

**Wedding DJ**

Finally, it's who you've been waiting for. I'm gonna need everyone to clap a little louder. That's right. And

now, introducing... Mr. and Mrs. Taurean Jackson!

(applause and cheers)

**Issa**

Go off, girl!

**Kelli**

Ooh, girl, don't hurt him! No, hurt him.

(all laughing)

—

**Issa**

One more row, and you should be good. How you feelin'?

**Molly**

(SIGHS) Girl... happy. Like, really, really, really, happy.

**Issa**

I'm happy for you. Like, for real. You look gorgeous. The baddest bitch there ever was.

**Molly**

Was it me?

**Issa**

That was all you, baby. (BOTH LAUGHING)

**Molly**

All right... Mmm. Was my booty in your face?

**Issa**

It was. I liked it. (BOTH LAUGHING)

**Molly**

Thank you so much for everything, Issa.

**Successful Black Marriage.** We see Molly get married to Taurean who is also an attorney, she met at work. The literature review asserts that social mobility for both partners is a key success factor for successful marriages in the Black community.

**Happiness.** This is one of the first times in the series, and certainly in the episodes this dissertation analyzes where the audience sees Molly experience pure happiness, on her wedding day.

### **Ethics & Reflexivity**

**As I've discussed throughout the dissertation, I see myself in Molly's character in many ways. We are both educated professional Black women who come from families where our parents had successful marriages despite challenges with infidelity. In addition, we both are open about our desires to marry equally educated Black men. Therefore, Molly achieving this goal of marrying the kind of man she always dreamed, in this scene, gives me hope that despite the odds discussed in this dissertation, I can meet my match as well. Thus, my connection to Molly is another example of how she is a representative character in *Insecure*, as her challenging, but ultimately successful, journey dating to marry serves as a "cautionary tale" to educated Black women dating to marry (Baty, 1995).**