“BLACK ATLANTA”: MUSICAL COUNTERNARRATIVES OF “AUTHENTIC” BLACKNESS IN DONALD GLOVER’S *ATLANTA*

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ABSTRACT

Sierriana Terry: "Black Atlanta": Musical Counternarratives of "Authentic" Blackness in Donald Glover's *Atlanta*
(Under the direction of Aaron Harcus)

What does it mean to be black in the post-Obama era? Donald Glover's televisionseries *Atlanta* can be seen as an attempt to answer this question, but for whom? *Atlanta* represents a farcical approach to confronting the policed-hegemonic ideology behind the ideas and conceptions of "authentic blackness" both sonically and visually. I argue that *Atlanta*'s visual exploration of blackness and satirical critiques of U.S. black life, coupled with its extensive use of U.S. black popular music (especially Atlanta-based hip-hop), produces a black soundscape that counters and deconstructs policed ideologies of "authentic" black culture. Using the proposed methodological frameworks of the post-soul aesthetic, black post-blackness, and troubling vision, I will examine how *Atlanta* provides its audience with an understanding and view of the world from a black perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

"If we do this right, your kids could live good, my kids could live good, Darius's kids," Earn explains to his cousin Alfred. Alfred bluntly tells Earn that he is not his manager and sighs, "Really Earn, I'm saving you again." Earn makes another attempt to convince Alfred to let him manage his rap career but receives a brutal response: to "walk." This scene from both the trailer and pilot episode establishes the overall plot of Donald Glover's series *Atlanta*, which follows the daily lives of Earnest "Earn" Marks (Donald Glover), his cousin Alfred "Paper Boi" Miles (Brian Tyree Henry), and Alfred's friend Darius (Lakeith Stanfield) in Atlanta, Georgia. Earn tries to redeem himself in the eyes of his on-and-off girlfriend—and mother of his daughter—Vanessa "Van" Keefer (Zazie Beetz), his parents, and his cousin. After dropping out of Princeton University, Earn has no home or money and alternates between living with Alfred and Van. Alfred is an up-and-coming rapper who straddles the line between his persona reflected in his burgeoning rap career and his "street life." Once his "Paper Boi" mixtape goes viral, Alfred gains fame locally with his rap moniker "Paper Boi." Earn seeks to reconnect with and manage his cousin in an effort to improve his life and the life of his two-year old daughter, Lottie. By following the lives of these characters, *Atlanta* captures the complexities of the black experience in Atlanta.[1]

[1] Blackness is often defined in relation to whiteness. My own experiences with the concept cannot help but influence my perception and reception of black-produced television series, especially *Atlanta*. In my senior year of high school, to everyone's surprise (with the exception of my family and closest friends), I decided to attend a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) for my Bachelor's in music. In just the first month of going to classes and participating in freshman events, I heard a different tune regarding blackness: "*There isn't just one way to be black*" or "*You can be as black as you want to be*." I was around, at least for the most part, like-minded individuals who had similar or relatable experiences of everyday black life.

This thesis is about the explorations of blackness and sonic representations of the city Atlanta in Glover's series. Although the series is categorized as a comedy-drama, *Atlanta*'s soundtrack performs a function that departs from previous black-produced television shows, such as *The Cosby Show*, in that it places music at its center. As an actor and hip-hop artist, Glover is aware of the potential media and music have for being used as a political space in which identity can be shaped and redefined. *Atlanta* sheds light on the "policing of blackness" in its exploration of the daily lives of four characters. By "policing of blackness," I am referring to the imposition of specific expectations or "qualifiers" for what blackness should and can be as a cultural identity (e.g. "authentic" blackness). *Atlanta* confronts these stereotypical impositions (e.g. African American Vernacular English [AAVE] or Ebonics, musical preferences, living in the "hood") by representing a variety of black people and their experiences with these prevalent assumptions of blackness. The series also represents a farcical approach to confronting the policed-hegemonic ideology behind ideas of "authentic blackness" both aurally and visually. These ideologies of "authentic blackness," however, are not all negative. E. Patrick Johnson suggests that "the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes black culture."[2] Thus, there are forms of "authentic blackness" for black people, but the forms of "authentic blackness" constructed by black people is contingent on the historical moment in which they live as well as the subject positions taken by individuals.[3]

I argue that *Atlanta*'s visual exploration of blackness and satirical critiques of American black life, coupled with its extensive use of American black popular music (especially Atlanta-

[2] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, (N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

[3] Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 3.

based hip-hop), produces a black soundscape that counters and deconstructs policed ideologies of "authentic" black culture.[4] The purpose of this project is to place *Atlanta* within the broader history of black-produced television series that focus on black life, which have sought to address the external and internal issues (e.g. classism, colorism, etc.) of the black community and conceptualizations of "authentic blackness." Read through the lens of the concepts of "black post-blackness," the post-soul aesthetic" (PSA), and "troubling vision," *Atlanta*'s musical representations of blackness and the city of Atlanta challenges conventional depictions based on contemporary constructions/deconstructions of black culture.

Blackness: A Historical Overview

Efforts to define "blackness" poses difficulties because it, as a concept, is always shifting. Communities and individuals have different conceptions and uses for this term. Blackness is also understood differently based on disparate economic and social situations. Definitions of the term are often contested, re-invented, policed, or transgressed. Anthropologist Andrea C. Abrams defines blackness as:

a fluid concept in that it can refer to cultural and ethnic identity, sociopolitical status, an aesthetic and embodied way of being, a social and political consciousness, and a diasporic kinship. It is used as a description of skin color ranging from the palest cream to the richest chocolate. Blackness is a marker of enslavement, marginalization, criminality, filth, and evil. It is also a

[4] Soundscapes, coined by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, are generally defined as a conglomeration of sounds heard in a particular location (e.g. city, forest). The term also includes how listeners perceive sounds of an environment and mediates their relations with that environment. My use of the term here is in the context of film and television. Soundscapes in film and television attempt to evoke a feeling of being in a specific place and create a sense of place and space for the viewer. Film/television soundscapes never stand for themselves because its role is to refer to the narrative and the visuals on the screen. Thus, these soundscapes have to be analyzed from three perspectives: how they convey information, how they create meaning for the viewer, and the aesthetic or emotional qualities of a film or television series. See R. Murray Schafer. "Introduction," in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994).

symbol of pride, beauty, elegance, strength, and depth. It is elusive and difficult to define and yet serves as one of the most potent and unifying domains of identity.[5]

The various aspects of blackness Abrams describes reflect the difficulty in pinpointing a concise dictionary definition of the term. Her definition also reflects the conceptual history of the term and its ties with other identities such as class. The different articulations of blackness in Abrams' definition show that blackness is both socially constructed and historically contingent, and that it can be an emotionally bonding experience, or a form of what Margo Natalie Crawford describes as a "black interior" in which black people learn to relate to one other. [6] In my thesis, blackness is used primarily in the sociopolitical positioning of the term.

Addressing blackness in the context of *Atlanta* is pertinent because television (and film) is a medium that often determines how blackness and black people are seen and how non-black individuals respond based on their relations to these constructed images.[7] Although the series highlights issues of race and racism, *Atlanta* also addresses issues of economic disparity between white and black elites and the black poor and working class. In her text, *Black Looks*, bell hooks claims that in "theorizing the black experience, we seek to uncover, restore, as well as to deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys, are possible."[8] Through its soundtrack, *Atlanta* presents a unique vision of black experience in a way that is similar to how hooks contextualizes it in her analysis of black film. To help understand the black experience that is presented in

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[5] Andrea C. Abrams, *God and Blackness: Race, Gender, and Identity in a Middle Class Afrocentric Church*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 6.

[6] In her chapter "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," Margo Natalie Crawford uses Larry Neal as a lens to observe the satirizing of blackness. She argues that the performance of blackness through satire often fails to locate a black interior. She elaborates on this idea of the black interior, through Neal's perspective, as a "black emotional interior" where people in BAM sought to take away the focus from whiteness and focus on this interior with an emphasis on "nation-building." See Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 141-142.

[7] bell hooks examines several films to explore the field of representation of blackness and black people, especially in film. See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

[8] hooks, *Black Looks*, 260.

Atlanta, the next section briefly goes through a historical overview of discourses on blackness prior to and contemporaneous with the series' release.

The Nature of Blackness in the United States

Beginning with American minstrelsy, which has a performance life spanning from the early nineteenth to early twentieth century, the hegemonic power of white supremacy developed monolithic tropes of blackness that did more to help define whiteness than accurately portray black people.[9] In the first few decades of the twentieth century, discussions of the identity and role of negroes in American society took center stage in the writings of prominent African-American intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. These discussions consisted primarily of debates about whether the training of African-Americans should be relegated to manual labor and agricultural work or a more broadly humanistic training.[10] The debate between DuBois and Washington represents an important moment in the history of discourses on blackness in which negative notions of blackness are contested as a means of "racial uplift" in their response to the economic and social conditions of black people and their relationship with whites in the U.S. South under Jim Crow.

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[9] For important texts on minstrelsy, see Nathan Irving Huggins, "White/Black Faces: Black Masks," in *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Huggins' chapter explores the "Negro theatrical tradition" and the attempts made by Harlem Renaissance intellectuals to depart from the white creation of this tradition. Lott's text examines the role of minstrelsy in the creation of the white working-class. Miller's text examines the role of the "folklore paradigm," which describes how emerging folklore studies and the record industry helped create a sonic color line through music genres during the era of Jim Crow.

[10] In other words, Washington's agricultural and technical training versus DuBois's training in the humanities and liberal arts as expressed in his notion of the "talented tenth." DuBois's essay "The Talented Tenth" (1903) is an alternative to Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" (1895) and argues that the focus should be on providing classical education for the top ten percent of African Americans, teaching them to become leaders in their community. The talented tenth theory proposes that with an educated group of exceptional leaders, the rest of the African American community would also benefit.

Major shifts in discourses on blackness in the U.S. throughout the twentieth century include, but are not limited to, the New Negro Renaissance,[11] Civil Rights movement, Black Arts Movement (BAM), and the Post-Soul generation.[12] During the New Negro Renaissance (ca. 1918-1938), there was a reaction against the idea of the "negro problem" by white and black intellectuals and a greater self-assertiveness and vindication of black culture in the realms of art and politics. Although the primary focus of the Civil Rights Movement was to secure equal access to and opportunities for the basic privileges and rights of U.S. citizenship for African Americans, the civil rights movement also led to a shift in the meaning of "blackness" and "whiteness" and how they concatenate in American society.[13] The Black Arts movement (BAM) is the artistic and cultural sister movement of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s that investigated blackness as aesthetics and identity by interrogating the fields of visual, verbal, and scribal representations of black people and theorizing beyond the boundaries of race and representation to formulate an entelechy of blackness. Mark Anthony Neal uses

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[11] Also called the "Harlem Renaissance," this title has been used by various scholars to encompass the role of all "black metropoles," such as Detroit and Chicago, in the 1920s-1940s during this movement. See Davarian Baldwin and Minkah Makalani, *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Robert H Cataliotti, "African American Music in Chicago during the Chicago Renaissance," in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Steven Tracy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 424-447; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Cheryl Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[12] For texts that summarize these movements see Bertram D. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review*, 41:4 (Winter 2007), 609-623; Baldwin, Davarian, and Minkah Makalani. *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Crawford, Margo Natalie. *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017); J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*. (N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950*. (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2009); Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Neal, Mark Anthony. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[13] Aniko Bodroghkozy's *Equal Time* explores the role of news networks and television series during the civil rights era. Her text contributes to communication and African American studies through the connections Bodroghkozy makes between the civil rights movement and media. See Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

"post-soul" to describe "the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements."[14] Neal identifies the post-soul generation as turning away from "essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past…but firmly in grasp of the existential concerns of this brave new world."[15] The work of the post-soul generation differs from earlier movements because they have "no lived, adult experience of that movement" and are "divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes."[16]

Current discourses on blackness that make appearances throughout *Atlanta* have been shaped by two major moments: the election and presidency of Barack Obama (2008-2016) and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement (2013-).[17] These are time posts that do not necessarily denote a "new era" in discourses on blackness, rather they mark key moments that have shaped contemporary discussions of blackness. Both the election of Barack Obama and the emergence of Black Lives Matter center on a series of controversial issues that influence the themes in *Atlanta*. 2008 and 2012, or the "Obama Era," challenged and questioned dominant notions of the identity of both multiracial and privileged members in the black community, primarily those of mixed-race backgrounds with black and white parents. During the election and first term of the Obama Era, many black voters questioned Barack Obama's "level" of blackness.

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[14] Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

[15] Neal, *Soul Babies*, 3.

[16] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic), 611.

[17] The time period of the series is currently unknown, but it was created a few years ago. Thus, the fabric of reality woven into the series show that Donald Glover is shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by these two eras by being in the U.S. at the time.

"Is he black enough" shifted to "Is he too black?" after he won South Carolina.[18] The Obama Era revealed the intensification of issues surrounding colorism that the public and black studies scholars felt the black community had not sufficiently addressed in previous discussions of blackness.[19]

In my personal experience, I can remember my first year of undergraduate studies at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) in the Fall semester of 2012, Michelle Obama came to give a speech to encourage students to exercise their right to vote and the importance of being politically active and aware. After the event, one of my friends asked if Obama would have any support from white voters if he had a darker complexion. Our other friend quickly concluded that the outcome of the election would be different because he would be close enough to looking white for white people to feel safe. On social media, NCCU students' timelines were flooded with excerpts from the "Willie Lynch Letter" as heated discussions related to colorism took place. Although it is considered a hoax, it has a popular appeal in being circulated in general discussions on blackness that address the psychological traumas of slavery and its effect on the black community.[20] Academic scholarship (primarily in black studies) related to events in the Obama Era highlights the effects of colorism, such as the economic and social preference of black people with a lighter complexion over those with darker complexion.[21]

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[18] Ytasha Womack, *Post Black: How a New Generation Is Redefining African American Identity* (Chicago, Ill.: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 184.
[19] Womack, *Post Black,* 179-182.

[20] See the following texts for information on the letter and its use: William Jelani Cobb, "Willie Lynch Letter," in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, edited by Patrick L. Mason, 2nd ed. (Gale, 2013); and Muhammad, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[21] These are the most recent texts: Fleetwood, Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences* (New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Rutgers University Press, 2012); and Ruth Thompson-Miller, Joe R Feagin, and Leslie Houts Picca, *Jim*

2013 marked the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, which was sparked after George Zimmerman was found not guilty for the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012.[22] Although addressing relations between African Americans and the police is the focal point of this movement, discussions that focused on racist stereotypical tropes of blackness were also near the forefront of this movement. Media depictions of black people led to criticisms of black producers such as Tyler Perry for playing into these stereotypical tropes.[23] In 2015, Black Lives Matter began to ask both black and white communities "Whose black life matters?" after the deaths of Freddie Gray and Walter Scott.[24] In the same year, Rachel Dolezal, former president of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP, was "outed" as white by her parents after presenting herself as black for several years. This controversy sparked discussions about the desirability of experiencing black culture without having to deal with the struggles of black life.[25] In her text *Black For A Day* (2018), Alisha Gaines specifically rejects the notion of "transracial" for several reasons. The primary reason being that she believes it is a "one-directional" concept that moves

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Crow's Legacy: The Lasting Impact of Segregation (Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

[22] Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), xi.

[23] See theoretical and methodological discussions on representation in Tyler Perry's plays and films in Jamel Santa Bell and Ronald L Jackson, *Interpreting Tyler Perry: Perspectives on Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[24] This question arose in the context of pointing out the hypocrisy of BLM only coming to the support of black victims of police brutality based on whether they fit into the mold of a politics of respectability. The deaths of Freddie Gray and Walter Scott pushed the movement to expand it to *all* black lives to include the lives of those who do not meet the standards of a "respectable" black person (e.g. any black individual who lives in poverty, has had previous encounters with police, illegal use of drugs, etc.).

[25] For a discussion of the "desirability for the appropriation of blackness" by whiteness, see Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017) and Alisha Gaines, *Black for a Day: White Fantasies of Race and Empathy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

from white to black only.[26] For example, if a black person were to somehow "feel white," the feeling of whiteness cannot offer the same protection for people of color that it does for those who are white. On the other hand, Dolezal's self-constructed blackness (mainly through physical features as Gaines and other scholars argue) does not remove her from whiteness or, more specifically, white privilege. Thus, the scholarly attention this controversy received centered on the rejection of the concept of "transracial" identity because of the unequal socioeconomic power dynamics that exist between whites and blacks.[27]

These controversies surrounding both events sparked academic and public discussions on blackness, with a particular emphasis on colorism, cultural appropriation, and "transracial" identity. Following *Black-ish* (2014), *Atlanta* made its premiere the following year and actively engaged with these contemporary discourses on blackness. The series speaks to all of these issues with episodes devoted to questions that arise from these events. The following section describes the methodologies used in this thesis to explore these themes.

On Blackness, Music, and Sound

There are a few key musicological texts that focus specifically on the topic of blackness and music (or sound). Ronald Radano's text, *Lying Up a Nation* (2003), aims to corroborate that music identified as "black" is on both sides of and transcends blurred racial realities. Thus, "black music" appears "as a cultural expression cast within and against the formations of racial

[26] Gaines, *Black For A Day*, 170.

[27] For recent discussions see Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Alisha Gaines, *Black for a Day: White Fantasies of Race and Empathy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Jesmyn Ward, *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*. (New York: Scribner, 2016); and Kevin Young, *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2017).

ideology-as a sound form expressive simultaneously of both the difference of blackness and the relation of black to white."[28] His work reads like a metahistory that explores the social construction of the representations of "black music" as part of the development of racial ideology in the U.S.—starting from the colonial period through the early twentieth century. Radano's post-structuralist lens also places him in a position to seemingly push for post-racialism, or, quite similar to what black studies commonly critiques, post-blackness.[29] *Lying Up a Nation*, however, only engages with the representations of black music and not how people racialized as black perceive black music.

Guthrie P. Ramsey's *Race Music* (2004), explores the relationship between music and African American identity and the ways African Americans have identified themselves in music. He defines "race music" as musical styles "grounded in similar techniques and conceptual frameworks identified with African American musical traditions."[30] For Ramsey, musical meanings and senses of African American culture are tightly linked to social and historical contexts. *Race Music* covers three historical periods: Afro-modernism in the 1940s, black consciousness in the 1960s, and what he calls the "postindustrial moment" of the 1990s.[31] Ramsey uses these historical periods to illustrate important times when new understandings about the relationship between racial and musical identity were conceived in African American culture. In his seventh chapter, "Scoring Up a Nation," Ramsey surveys black music styles (focusing on hip-hop) and the historical period he calls the "postindustrial moment." He provides

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[28] Ronald Radano, *Lying Up A Nation: Race And Black Music* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 279.

[29] For the most recent scholarship on post-racialism and post-blackness see Houston A. Baker and Merinda Simmons, *The Trouble With Post-Blackness* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[30] Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures From Bebop To Hip-Hop* (CA: University of California Press, 2004), 3.

[31] Ramsey, *Race Music*, 27-29.

a reading of music in his analysis of three hip-hop related films: Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood*, and Theodore Witcher's *Love Jones*. Rather than exploring critiques of "monolithic representations of black class status and representation," Ramsey explores these films as a "way to enter into an analysis of the intersection of black identity and musical practice."[32] Ramsey's text is one of the very few pieces of literature that analyzes soundtracks in black produced films.[33] There is still little to no literature that analyzes soundtracks in black produced television series—especially in the post-Cosby era.

Neither text engages with the historical periods that I am using: the post-Obama era and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. These two periods have a different set of discourses related to blackness, while the historical periods used in both texts range from defining blackness and navigating those definitions during periods of segregation and integration. I deviate from Radano's text by focusing on the reception of black music in *Atlanta* rather than representations of black music present in the soundtrack of *Atlanta*. I also deviate from Ramsey's lens of analysis as I explore how *Atlanta* critiques monolithic blackness or policed hegemonic notions of black identity. I do not focus on the musical practice of black music in *Atlanta*, instead I am interested in how the soundtrack presents a case for different modes of blackness as it challenges the idea of *the* "authentic black experience."[34]

Jennifer Lynn Stoever's text *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016), explores how sound and listening enables the persistence of U.S. ideologies of white supremacy. Stoever introduces two new concepts: "the sonic color line" and "the listening

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[32] Ramsey, *Race Music*, 170.

[33] Greg Tate also explores connections between music and black identity (in general and through films). See *Flyboy In The Buttermilk: Essays On Contemporary America*, (Touchstone, 2015); and *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader*, (NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

ear." She defines "the sonic color line" as "the process of racializing sound…and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between 'whiteness' and 'blackness'."[35] She defines "the listening ear" as "a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line's norms."[36] Stoever also explores sonic challenges to the U.S.'s racial regime and evidence of what Nina Eidsheim calls *sonic blackness*, "the attribution of 'black' qualities to classical voices based on visual impression."[37] Stoever summarizes Eidsheim's use of "sonic blackness" as a phenomenon in which the audience's auditory perception was distorted by their visual perspective.[38] Stoever describes the sonic color line as an articulation of the "socially constructed, historically contingent relationships *between* sight and sound, voice and the body."[39]

I do not engage with sonic divisions of "whiteness" and "blackness," nor do I engage with listening practices that requires the listener to conform to dominant modes of listening. My analysis of "sonic blackness" in *Atlanta* focuses on how "sound can disrupt the visual logic of race."[40] In other words, how does *Atlanta* treat blackness as a sonic experience and how is the audience's *visual* perception disrupted by their *auditory* perception? As an attempt to answer these questions, my thesis relies on non-musicological texts that engages with the historical periods and current discourse on blackness that I use.

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[35] Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race And The Culutral Politics Of Listening* (NY: New York University Press, 2016), 7.
[36] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7.

[37] Definition of "sonic blackness" by Eidsheim quoted in Stoever, *The Sonic Color* Line, 78.

[38] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 113.

[39] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 113.

[40] Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 143.

A Show to Make People Feel Black: Methodologies

This thesis uses conceptual frameworks from black studies and urban ethnomusicology to explore the depictions of blackness and black space(s) in *Atlanta*. The first is the "post-soul aesthetic" (PSA) as presented by African-American English Literature scholar Bertram D. Ashe in his article "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic." Ashe defines the PSA as "the resultant exploration of the boundaries of blackness."[41] He then identifies the various criteria of PSA and constructs a post-soul "matrix" that helps determine which works are or are not examples of PSA.[42] Ashe describes the post-soul matrix as an "interpretive 'net'" that can be "hung" on three points, and when a post-Civil Rights movement text is 'thrown' at this matrix, the text will "either *stick* where the text 'fits,' or, based on the post-criteria…the text will 'bounce off' the net because it *does not* 'fit.'"[43] This matrix consists of "the cultural mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness (termed blaxploration); and the signal allusion-disruption gestures" performed by post-soul works.[44] Ashe explores the "cultural mulatto" through the works of Trey Ellis and Reginald McKnight. Ashe quotes Ellis' definition of the "cultural mulatto" archetype from his essay "The New Black Aesthetic": "Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world."[45] McKnight's use of the term "cultural mulatto" in his short story "The Honey Boys," on

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[41] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction", *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007), 611.

[42] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613.

[43] Original emphasis. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613.

[44] Ashe's use of the term "blaxploration" to signify, in the sense of Henry Louis Gates Jr., on "Blaxploitation." See Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613.

[45] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613.

the other hand, is much darker than Ellis': "I wanted to tell him how it gave me roots in a way that my blackness could not. Black was nothing more than a color to me. I was a cultural mulatto…My color was a nuisance. I was too black to be white, too white to be black."[46] For Ashe, McKnight's mulatto "signifies the tragic plight of 'victims' of the Civil Rights movement" while Ellis' mulatto "embraces the healthy, self-aware cultural mulatto."[47] Thus, the cultural mulatto archetype is for Ashe a crucial point in the post-soul matrix in which post-soul artists "trouble blackness, they worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination…struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity."[48]

"Blaxporation" is the "propensity to trouble blackness." Ashe begins with Ellis's third novel *Right Here, Right Now* and claims that it "interrogates the idea of a fixed black identity in its very structure."[49] The narrative of the novel is an edited collection of transcripts of the main character, who is a cultural mulatto, talking into a micro-cassette recorder. The narrative structure of Ellis's novel, for Ashe, implicitly questions the main character's "black" identity. Simply put, blackness is "constantly in flux" as a result of PSA's reaction to the "1960's call for a fixed black aesthetic."[50]

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[46] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613.

[47] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613.

[48] The use of "post-soul artists" is how Ashe describes the playwrights and authors of the literature he examines throughout his article. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 614.

[49] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 614.

[50] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 615.

Ashe describes the third point of the matrix "allusion-disruption" as a strategy or trope employed by authors that signifies on earlier eras of black history and on earlier texts.[51] The "allusion disruption strategy" illustrates identity by making use of and satirizing cultural allusions to bridge the gap between the past and present. Through the "triangular post-soul matrix" we can see what allows artists, such as Donald Glover, to "trouble blackness" by raising concerns about their cultural heritage, questioning allusions to their past, and expressing the complex, contradictory nature of black identity.

In *Black Post-Blackness*, African American English and Literature scholar, Margo Natalie Crawford's produces a reading of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) that goes against the grain. She explores how twenty-first-century black arts share common traits with the black arts movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 1970s, but the former is on a quest for a blacker identity and world that is not yet here. The return of the term "black," or rather the transformation of "negro" to "black," as an acceptable label for people of African descent is a key component to Crawford's conceptual theorization of "black post-blackness." Crawford defines "black post-blackness" as "the circular inseparability of the lived experience of blackness and the translation of that lived experience into the world-opening possibilities of art."[52] For Crawford, *black post-blackness* remains in a "state of suspension" where "black consciousness-raising and black experimentation are inseparable" and "being and becoming cannot be separated."[53] In theorizing "black post-blackness" in her introduction, Crawford claims that "the black post-blackness of the

[51] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 616.

[52] Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 2.

[53] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 2.

twenty-first century is most nuanced when it troubles blackness without worrying about the loss of blackness."[54]

Crawford's use of "*black* post-blackness" challenges the belief that twenty-first century notions of "post-blackness" are incompatible with the BAM. She writes that "The push [by the second wave of BAM in the 1970s was] for a post-blackness that is actually 'blacker' than the 1960s enactments of blackness."[55] Contrary to some critical readings of BAM, to become "blacker" in the second wave of BAM is to "become" post-black. According to American writer and cultural critic Touré, post-blackness has a goal of extending the boundaries of blackness by re-signifying blackness with counter-stereotypical traits or characteristics.[56] Blackness is not an identity exclusive to the U.S., but the idea of post-blackness was developed with reference to black artists in the United States. Post-blackness implies the rejection of restrictive ideas about what black people can or should be. In the edited volume *The Trouble with Post-Blackness* (2015), K. Merinda Simmons, Stephanie Li, Greg Thomas, and Heather D. Russell critique Touré's concept primarily because "post-blackness" does not also imagine ideas of "post-whiteness" or "post-racial."[57] Critics of Touré's notion of "post-blackness" also take issue with the concept's rejection of history in the continuous conceptualizations of blackness. In her essay in this collection, Crawford argues that "post-blackness" is "a dangerous surface, a surface that

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[54] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness,* 6.

[55] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 4.

[56] Touré writes, "to experience the full possibilities of Blackness, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African-American culture and also from within it." See Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness: What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 4.

[57] See Houston A Baker and Merinda Simmons, *The Trouble with Post-Blackness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

pretends to have the depth and enlightenment that blackness seemingly cannot contain."[58] She also notes that post-blackness "relies on a fetishism of individuality and the dead end of exceptionalism."[59] Crawford's examination of the BAM through the lens of black post-blackness shows a collective resistance to dominant images and mobilizes blackness as a trajectory of always "becoming" black.[60] "Becoming black(er)" as a form of movement as opposed to static and essentialist understandings of blackness is a defining characteristic of Crawford's conceptualization of black post-blackness.

Nicole R. Fleetwood's text *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011) examines how blackness is constituted and exists through visuality. She calls into question the utility of iconicity in shaping the fields of vision that humanize black subjects. Iconicity, as Fleetwood defines it, is "the ways in which singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes."[61] For example, the election of Barack Obama supposedly marked the end of racism in the U.S.[62]

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[58] Margo Natalie Crawford, "What Was *Is*: The Time and Space of Entanglement Erased by Post-Blackness," in *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, edited by Houston A. Baker and Merinda Simmons (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 25.

[59] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness,* 16.

[60] Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness,* 16.

[61] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

[62] See Womack, *Post Black*, 187.

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Ohio

Pennsylvania

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Figure 1: 11/05/2008 Issue of USA Today

Iconicity in black cultural productions attempts to elucidate the weight placed on them to "produce results" or make a change.[63] Thus, she contends that the problem with black iconicity is that there is a "desire to have the cultural product solve the very problem that it represents: *that seeing black is always a problem in a visual field that structures the troubling presence of blackness*."[64] In other words, no image produced in the hegemonic visual field of American media (television, online platforms, magazines, etc.), no matter who produces the image, can "represent" blackness in a way that is unproblematic. However, blackness can be "troubled" in

[63] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 3.

[64] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 3.

these images.[65] Fleetwood also emphasizes the complexity of feeling, recognizing, and seeing black subjectivity and draws attention to how black interiority continues to be seen. She writes that blackness "circulates and attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such, but it always exceeds these attachments."[66]

Fleetwood places great emphasis on production over product and on how artists across media visualize the black body, which reveals the normative conditions of scopic regimes—the spectatorial labor involved in how we see and assign meaning to blackness. She establishes her theoretical concept of "troubling vision" in her introduction and defines it as "the result of blackness' ability to disrupt the visual field and thereby redirect the gaze."[67] The process of "troubling vision" is how black people have to negotiate (and, possibly, disrupt) this metaphorical "field of vision" in ways that simultaneously challenge and unintentionally reinforce the problematic nature of this field. The cultural workers examined in the text trouble inscriptions of blackness (e.g., detrimental qualities such as the association of blackness with danger) and require viewers to take a second look at what appears before their eyes. Visual culture is thus explored as a site to recognize how an audience comes to know about the black body and the meanings attached to it.

Each theory recognizes the agency of people racialized as black and how they are constituted within and against dominant discursive frames in the construction of alternative (black) realities. PSA, black post-blackness, and troubling vision are concepts that recognize that blackness is always in flux. More specifically, the fluidity of blackness these texts explore refers to the ways blackness is rearticulated or redefined. Nonetheless, this is dependent on the different

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[65] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 4.

[66] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 6.

[67] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 6.

social positions of black people at different historical moments. To be black has a different meaning depending on one's economic, political, and social circumstances.

Although PSA, black post-blackness, and troubling vision looks at the characters, these conceptual frameworks do not account for space, or the setting of *Atlanta*. The concept of "urban ethos" adds nuances to these frameworks and takes the narrative space, the settings of each scene, into an account (something that is lost in the PSA, black post-blackness, and troubling vision). "Urban ethos" is a concept developed by music theorist Adam Krims in his book *Music and Urban Geography*. Krims's text is a theoretical approach to the study of urban life that examines the role of music in the creation of how we experience the (urban) world. In the first chapter of his text, "Defining the Urban Ethos," Krims defines "urban ethos" as "the scope of that range of urban representations and their possible modalities in any given time span…The urban ethos is thus not a particular representation but rather a distribution of possibilities, always having discernable limits as well as common practice."[68] Thus, the urban ethos is a "multimedia phenomenon" (e.g. music, films, television, newspapers, and so on) that provides impressions of the city as it is understood, experienced, or imagined.[69] He also defines "urban ethos" as a "set of representations of who can do what in the city and with what degree of autonomy from the effects of space."[70] Krims uses *Sex and the City* to illustrate this aspect of the "urban ethos" and argues that the city enabled, rather than blocked, the ambitions of four women (the main characters) and their unlimited mobility throughout the city, but there was a "need for a purified urban space for staging a certain conception of femininity."[71] The mobility of the characters

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[68] Adam Krims, "Defining the Urban Ethos," in *Music and Urban Geography* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 7.

[69] Krims, "Defining the Urban Ethos," 8.

[70] Krims, "Defining the Urban Ethos," 20.

[71] Krims, "Defining the Urban Ethos," 20-21.

leads to consideration of the city's (urban) geography and the concept of urban ethos allows the consideration of history of the city's geography at that particular time. Music, for Krims, is the primary point to ground the theoretical relationship between space and place through urban ethos. I use Krims's concept of "urban ethos" to show how *Atlanta*'s representations of the city are dependent on the use of the soundtrack and the role of the soundtrack in defining the spaces that the characters must navigate.

Outline

Chapter 1, "Am I Black Enough For You?" examines how *Atlanta* "plays with" and "troubles" blackness through the lens of PSA, black post-blackness, and troubling vision. In an interview with the *Vulture*, Glover tells Rembert Browne, "I needed people to understand I see Atlanta as a beautiful metaphor for black people."[72] He also makes the claim, in the same interview, "I wanted to show white people they don't know everything about black culture."[73] The concepts of PSA, black post-blackness, and troubling vision are lens through which to examine both claims. The title of this chapter is borrowed from the title of the opening song of the fifth episode of the first season to emphasize its explorations of blackness. Blackness in *Atlanta* is explored through overlapping themes by the sounds that are interconnected with the black bodies (and spaces) on the screen. Most themes in the series are "hidden messages" encoded in the songs used throughout an episode, which can be unlocked by interpreting these songs in conjunction with the script or actions of the characters. This chapter examines how the "sonic blackness" of the soundtrack disrupts and troubles dominant aural and visual fields of

[72] Rembert Browne, "Donald Glover Turns His Eye to His Hometown and Black America in *Atlanta*," *Vulture*, August 23, 2016, a. http://www.vulture.com/2016/08/donald-glover-atlanta.html.

[73] Rembert Browne, "Donald Glover Turns His Eye to His Hometown and Black America in *Atlanta*."

Atlanta's viewers who are forced to interpret the "hidden messages" in the songs to understand the themes of specific episodes.

Chapter 2, "A Black Place for Black Spaces," focuses on the "urban ethos" of Atlanta as presented in the series. The soundtrack is a "snapshot" of the city of Atlanta as it is now and throughout the city's history. The concept of "diegetic" and "non-diegetic" music in film music studies serves as the primary model for understanding how the soundtrack creates the "urban ethos" of Atlanta.[74] With the soundtrack at the center of the series, *Atlanta* primarily uses diegetic sounds. However, the soundtrack sometimes shifts between its use of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, which results in metadiegetic sounds. The extensive use of diegetic music amplifies how both the audience and characters experience the (urban) world of the city of Atlanta. It is further amplified by the use of music by Atlanta-based artists, which emphasizes a sense of locality where the city, as it exists in the series, can immediately be identified. This chapter examines how the soundtrack creates a musical representation of fictional Atlanta. "A Black Place for Black Spaces" aims to explore the relationship between the public and private black spaces in *Atlanta* that collectively form Glover's metaphorical location-place Atlanta that critiques the city's status as a "Black Mecca."

Overall, Donald Glover's *Atlanta* plays with the perceptions of his viewers and dominant constructions of blackness. By placing it within the broader history of black television and discourses on blackness, this thesis hopes to present *Atlanta* as one of many new television series that seek to challenge conventional representations of how blackness and black people are seen on television. In particular, *Atlanta* offers *musical* representations that trouble blackness and contribute to the "urban ethos" of Atlanta. The soundtrack, which often accompanies the actions

[74] Sounds in the background that cannot be heard by the characters in a film or television series is termed *non-diegetic* or *extradiegetic*. Sounds heard by both the character and the audience is termed *diegetic* or *source music*. Sounds that are imagined by the character(s) and heard by the audience is termed as *metadiegetic*.

and conversations of the characters, foregrounds the identity of the characters and the space(s) they navigate. Although the actions of the characters (in the context of "urban ethos") is also important in helping to define specific spaces in the city, the soundtrack reveals that the characters are affected by the city rather than the opposite. *Atlanta* thus provides a social commentary on blackness and Atlanta as a "Black Mecca."

CHAPTER 1: AM I BLACK ENOUGH FOR YOU?

Am I black enough for you
Am I black enough for you
Get in line
Stop marching in time
You better make up your mind
We're gonna leave you behind
We're gonna move on up
Three by Three
I got to stay black
Black enough for you
I got to stay black
Black enough for you
—Billy Paul "Am I Black Enough for You?", 1973

Donald Glover's *Atlanta* aims to push back against the hegemonic narrative surrounding blackness constructed by whiteness. Through the soundtrack, *Atlanta*'s audience members experience and see Atlanta through the (black) bodies of the characters, which picks up nuances of black life to interrogate and reframe hegemonic notions of blackness. In conjunction with the premiere of its second season ("Robbin' Season), *The New Yorker's* most recent profile on Glover and his show *Atlanta* features an interview with Glover where he voices his frustrations with making "*a very black show*" in a "world run by white people."[75] Entitled "Donald Glover Can't Save You," the article explores the issue of trying to produce hard truths on television. In this case, Glover's attempt to reveal the realities of being black in the U.S. via television is a difficult task when both the audience and network executives are in a position to decide what

[75] Emphasis mine. Tad Friend, "Donald Glover Can't Save You," *The New Yorker*, February 26, 2018. Accessed February 28, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/05/donald-glover-cant-save-you>.

gets produced. FX's chief executive officer, John Landgraf, says, "Donald and his collaborators are making an existential comedy about the African-American experience, and *they are not translating it for white audiences*. If they were, the show would have white characters in it to say it."[76] Blackness in *Atlanta* is explored through overlapping themes that are interconnected by the sounds that are coupled with the black bodies (and spaces) on the screen. Most themes are "hidden messages" that are "encoded" in the songs used throughout an episode that can only be unlocked through the script or actions of the characters. This chapter examines the configuration of *Atlanta*'s "sonic blackness." By "sonic blackness," I mean the treatment of the soundtrack as a sonic signifier of a character's identity or experience. I do so by examining the following questions: What specific themes are being addressed by the opening or ending themes? How does "sonic blackness" emphasize, reflect, or counteract "visual blackness" in the series? Using the concepts of "black post-blackness," the "post-soul aesthetic" (PSA), and "troubling vision" as a lens of analysis, "Am I Black Enough for You?" aims to answer these questions and explore how *Atlanta* reflects and challenges current discourses on blackness in the U.S. To understand *Atlanta*'s importance and uniqueness in relation to other black-produced television series, the next section briefly traverses the history of some of the most popular black television series in the U.S.

Black Television: A Brief History

The Civil Rights Movement broke barriers for black people in the entertainment and television industry. Although black people in the U.S. made gains with Civil Rights legislation, black actors and actresses were still cast in stereotypical representations.[77] During the 1970s,

[76] Emphasis mine. Friend, "Donald Glover Can't Save You."

viewers began to see an increase in the number of roles for black actors. For example, *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) is known as one of the highest-rated black sitcoms of all time.[78] Following the lives of George and Louise Jefferson and their son Lionel, who stumble upon a large sum of money, the series describes the life of a black family living the "American Dream." The series pushed against traditional representations of African Americans (e.g., as servants) in television and film, and, significantly represented the gains of the struggles of the civil rights movement through the portrayal of George and Louise.[79] *Sanford & Son* (1972-1977) is another black sitcom that focuses on the misadventures of a junk dealer and his frustrated son.[80] In her chapter "This Ain't No Junk," Christine Acham analyzes articles by various black political groups that protested the series because they felt it reinscribed stereotypes about black people.[81] Acham argues that the series "exhibited resistance to mainstream co-optation."[82] *Sanford & Son* and many other black television series reflect black humor "rooted in notions of realism" with the "potential for satire and critique."[83] Although Bill Cosby hit the television screen in the early

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[77] See Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012) and Jon Else, *True South: Henry Hampton and Eyes on the Prize, the Landmark Television Series That Reframed the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Viking, 2017).

[78] Kimberlee Buck, "The History of Black Television," *Los Angeles Sentinel,* Feb 08, 2018. <http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/docview/2013160199?accountid=14244>.

[79] Stacie McCormick's essay "I'm Every Woman" analyzes the cultural influence of one of the character, Florence Johnson, and the overall reception of the series in *The 25 Sitcoms That Changed Television: Turning Points in American Culture*, edited by Aaron Barlow and Laura Westengard (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2018) 94-107.

[80] The series is based on a British television comedy, *Steptoe and Son* through a black lens using black humor. See Christine Acham, "This Aint't No Junk: *Sanford and Son* and African American Humor," in *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 86.

[80] Acham, "This Ain't No Junk," 86.

[81] Acham, "This Aint't No Junk" 2004), 86.

[82] Acham, "This Ain't No Junk," 86.

1960s, his main success in television came in 1984 when he produced and starred in *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), the first black sitcom to have a primarily black cast.[84] The show focuses on the Huxtables, an upper middle-class black family living in Brooklyn, New York. *The Cosby Show* avoids negative images of black life (e.g. poverty, maids, butlers, "ghetto" kids) that previously dominated television screens. This series also highlights a wider spectrum of black culture, history, and contemporary social issues. A poignant example of this is the presence of racial heritage in the Huxtable family. The most prominent example is the family's multigenerational tradition of attending the fictional historically black college (HBCU hereafter) Hillman College. HBCUs are generally not portrayed on sitcoms and references to Hillman College on the show brought the history of racial segregation in America that spurred the creation of HBCUs to the forefront. The appearance of Hillman College represents Cosby's attempt to debunk long-standing assumptions that HBCUs are less rigorous than predominately white institutions. This is apparent in family conversations about the value of attending an HBCU and more subtly through the HBCU collegiate sweatshirts (e.g. Tuskegee University, Howard University, Winston-Salem State University) Cliff Huxtable wears in the series. *The Cosby Show* received much criticism for its representation of race because it was said to be not "black enough" because it "lacks overt conversation concerning race and poverty and focuses on a middle-class family."[85] In her essay "Deconstructing *Good Times* and *The Cosby Show*," African-American studies scholar Patricia D. Hopkins argues that African Americans who accuse *The Cosby Show* of not being "black enough" imply that authentic black experiences are

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[83] Acham, "This Ain't No Junk," 93.

[84] The series premiered on NBC.

[85] Jacqueline Jones, "It Still Matters: *The Cosby Show* and Sociopolitical Representation on Television," in *The 25 Sitcoms That Changed Television: Turning Points In American Culture*, edited by Aaron Barlow and Laura Westengard (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2018), 186.

"rooted in the impoverished and uneducated," which are the stereotypes Cosby sought to challenge.[86]

In 1987, fans of *The Cosby Show* received a spin-off series in *A Different World* (1987-1993), which was another game changer in the history of black television. The first season of the series is centered on the life of *The Cosby Show*'s star Denise Huxtable at Hillman College, a fictional historical black college/university (HBCU). Following the first season, the series broadened its scope and followed the lives of several students at Hillman College and their day-to-day challenges with college. *A Different World* features a different black experience that *The Cosby Show* only alluded to (through fashion), black life at an HBCU. The series, however, only offers a glimpse of the HBCU experience since certain aspects of the HBCU experience are missing, such as a Black diasporic-informed curriculum, which Robin R. Means Coleman and Andre M. Cavalcante claim contribute to a deficiency of authenticity in the series.[87] For Coleman and Cavalcante, the absence of a Black diasporic-informed curriculum contributed to the lack of attention to the American history that necessitated the creation of HBCUs. Thus, the HBCU setting is only "incidental to the overall plot" of the series.[88]

In the 1990s, television viewers saw another shift in black television series, which appear to be modeled after themes from *The Cosby Show*. This wave of black television represented a sense of social progress, engaged with the cultural politics of diversity, and situated the audience

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[86] Patrica D. Hopkins, "Deconstructing *Good Times* and *The Cosby Show*: In Search of My 'Authentic' Black Experience," *Journal of Black Studies* 43(8) (2012), 965.

[87] Robin R. Means Coleman and Andre M. Cavalcante, "Two Different Worlds: Television As A Producer's Medium," in *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*, edited by Beretta E. Smith-Shomade. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 35.

[88] Coleman and Cavalcante, "Two Different Worlds," 35.

within the domain of multiple black experiences.[89] Black television in the 1980s was still largely produced by white producers and writers. The new wave of black television in the 1990s, however, had more black producers and writers involved in the production process, which effected how black people were represented on television.[90] There was also a shift in television stations. NBC was the main network that premiered black television series in the 1980s, but in the 1990s, Fox became the primary channel to see the latest black television series.[91] This surge of black-produced television series after *The Cosby Show* began to contest narratives surrounding the very notion of "blackness" itself.[92] In 1990, Will Smith stars as a fictionalized version of himself in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996). Will, a street-smart teenager from west Philadelphia ("West Philly") is sent to move in with his wealthy aunt and uncle in their Bel-Air mansion in Los Angeles after getting into an altercation at a local basketball court. Throughout the series, Will's lifestyle often clashes with the lifestyle of his relatives in Bel-Air, which highlights issues of classism within the black community. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* also offered commentary on contemporary social issues (e.g. racial profiling) over the course of the series. From 1993 to 1998, *Living Single* became one of the most popular sitcoms in the era of black television. The show is centered on the lives of six friends who share personal and professional experiences while living in a Brooklyn brownstone. *Living Single* appeared on Fox with other black sitcoms such as *Martin* (1992-1997), which was one of the network's highest-rated shows during its run.

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[89] See Zook, Kristal Brent. *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[90] See Zook, *Color by Fox*.

[91] See Zook, *Color by Fox*.

[92] Zook, *Color by Fox*, 2.

Kristal Brent Zook locates this era of black-produced television both before and after the success of *The Cosby Show* in her text *Color By Fox*. She writes that these series "wrestled with the unspoken pleasures (and horrors) of assimilation, the shock of integration, and the pain of cultural homelessness."[93] This generation "experienced a certain, strange inclusion, one that blurred established notions of race" due to the "'success' of integration and affirmative action' that granted economic mobility for many black people."[94] Questions regarding the meanings of blackness and black culture in the post-civil rights generation were on the rise as these various sitcom series featured a wider range of representations of black experiences in the United States. These representations included business owners (*Living Single*), black lawyers (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*), and DJs and radio talk show hosts (*Martin*). However, with the exception of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *A Different World*, which highlights issues of class, the majority of these series in both eras primarily feature black professionals. This is likely because black producers and screenwriters wanted to contest negative depictions of black people in television as comical, poor, and uneducated individuals. However, the interest in the 1990s' model (e.g., *The Cosby Show*) of black productions fizzled out in the early 2000s.[95]

Beginning in 2014, American television viewers began to see yet another surge of black-produced television series with *Being Mary Jane* (2014), *Black-ish* (2014), *Empire* (2015), *Queen Sugar* (2016), *Insecure* (2016), and *Atlanta* (2016) among the most popular series. 2016, however, became identified as the year for "black people in front of and behind the camera."[96]

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[93] Zook, *Color by Fox*, 2.

[94] Zook, *Color by Fox*, 2.

[95] For a full history of black television and related scholarship see Smith-Shomade, Beretta E. "Introduction," in *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*. New Brunswick, N.J. ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2012.

This new "golden age" of black television began to shift away from both the focus on black professional life and the standard geographical settings of New York and Los Angeles. These shows also focus on contemporaneous sociopolitical issues related to the black experience in the United States (e.g. police brutality, gentrification). *Atlanta*, in fact, is the one series in this new group of black television shows that deviates most from the 1990s model of black television. Rather than presenting an alternative view of black life from the perspective of the black middle-class, the series shifts the perspective to the black poor and working classes. The perspective of the black poor and working classes is a crucial aspect of the series because it challenges the negative stereotypes associated with this group. Along with the difference in characters and setting, *Atlanta* places great emphasis on the use of music throughout the series. In the following section, I analyze the relationship between the soundtrack and blackness in the series through the conceptual frameworks of the *post-soul aesthetic*, *black post-blackness*, and *troubling vision*.

Conceptual Framework and Overview

The post-soul aesthetic (henceforth, PSA) serves as a lens for moments in the series where blackness is "troubled," drawing attention to current discourses on blackness. By "troubled," I am referring to specific moments in the series where an alternative vision of blackness is put forth in service of black people. On the other hand, black post-blackness is a lens to examine the use of satire in the series to present alternative conceptualizations of blackness. I use the concept of troubling vision in order to examine the use of hip-hop in the series, but flip Fleetwood's focus on visual culture to sonic culture in which the soundtrack is the "fashion" of the series. Fleetwood's analysis of hip-hop culture primarily focuses on fashion and how hip-hop artists and

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[96], Angelica Jade Bastién, "Claiming the Future of Black TV," *The Atlantic*, January 29, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/01/claiming-the-future-of-black-tv/514562/>.

fans dress defines the culture. *Atlanta*'s emphasis on the soundtrack helps to define blackness, its characters and the city of Atlanta in the series. In other words, the soundtrack is an interpretive attire of the characters' experienceand mindset, as well as the city they live in. As a result, the soundscape of the series is ("authentically") expressed by the sounds and voices of the musicians that are current or former residents of Atlanta.

Glover's use of the soundtrack results in a sonic blackness being attached to characters. Moreover, this blackness exceeds its attachment to these black bodies and attaches itself to the places and spaces that the characters navigate throughout the series. Although this sonicity seems to point to the policing of blackness that Glovers claims to push back against in the series, the prominence of the soundtrack—foregrounded in diegetic, nondiegetic, and, sometimes, meta-diegetic music—adds to the disruption of monolithic notions of blackness in which the lyrics and/or genre help emphasize the alternative notions of blackness present in the visual images. This chapter is organized around a set of three themes present throughout both seasons of *Atlanta*: satirical blackness, character vs caricatures, and individuality. "Satirical Blackness" explores Glover's use of satire, both sonically and visually, in shaping alternative views of what it means to be black (for example "multicultural blackness" with the [virtual] appearance of a Mexican Drake). "Character vs Caricatures" examines moments in which the stereotype and counter-stereotype encounter each other in the same space and shows how the soundtrack is used to identify each. The result of these encounters are moments where the boundaries of blackness are contested. "Individuality" focuses on the use of the soundtrack as an invitation into the minds of individual characters and their own black experience. The analysis in this section seeks to interrogate the ways that a sonic blackness is attached to characters and how they surmount impositions of "authentic" blackness (e.g. "the gangster rapper" Paper Boi).

The Satire of Black Post-Blackness in *Atlanta*

Margo Natalie Crawford claims that "the satire of the 1970s second wave of the Black Arts Movement (BAM, hereafter) "anticipated much of the satirical play with imagining the unimaginable and unnaming that shapes twenty-first-century black aesthetics."[97] Glover's "satirical play" in *Atlanta* is coupled with surrealism—a mixture of fact and fantasy. *Atlanta*'s subtle satire and parody of the Rachel Dolezal controversy and transracial identity is a poignant example. A subplot of "B.A.N." (Season 1, Episode 7) features an interview with a black teenager named Antoine Smalls who believes he's really a "35-year-old white man" and now identifies himself as "Harrison Booth" from Colorado. Similar to Dolezal, Antoine takes on the appearance of his imagined racial identity through his dress and use of a wig. In the context of blackness, *Atlanta* takes another angle by satirizing whiteness and racial ambiguity (hereafter referred to as "multicultural blackness").

Crawford writes that "the satirizing of whiteness also leads to a satirizing of blackness, which is not only a satire of black people performing whiteness but also a satire of some performances of blackness that fail to locate a black interior."[98] She comes to this conclusion in her analysis of the depiction of the character Safecracker from Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. Safecracker performs the poem "Harlem Tom Toms" in blackface to a "bourgeois" black audience, which "foregrounds the BAM focus on black people needing to recover their own faces underneath the layers of blackness."[99] For Crawford, satire, through the lens of black post-blackness, explores a spectrum of blackness through performance as it satirizes both "blackness"

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[97] Margo Natalie Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," in *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 137.

[98] Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," 141-142.

[99] Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," 141.

and "post-blackness."[100] Using Crawford's framework of black post-blackness, this section examines the use of satire in *Atlanta* and the role of the soundtrack in helping to create these satirical moments. This analysis features characters and scenes from the episodes "Nobody Beats the Biebs" (Season 1, Episode 5) and "Champagne Papi" (Season 2, Episode 7).

In "Nobody Beats the Biebs," Alfred and Earn go off to a charity celebrity basketball game that mainly features actors and artists from the city with the guest appearance of Justin Bieber (played by Austin Crute). In the world of *Atlanta*, Justin Bieber is the same pop star that misbehaves and yet charms everyone in real life. The only difference between this Bieber and the real one is that…he's black. However, this racial transformation is never acknowledged in the dialogue of the episode because in the world of *Atlanta* Justin Bieber just *is* black. Black Bieber's appearance in the series, however, raises several issues. Imagine if the real Justin Bieber behaved the way he does and had the same controversies but looked like the actor playing him in *Atlanta*. Would he receive the same level of redemption and be able to bounce back from his mistakes? This question points to the idea that celebrity personifications of race and ethnic identities are performative at their core. The ways in which racial identity is embodied and enacted through an imaginary blackness reflects a bodily reality. By bodily reality, I am referring to the existence of a real-life individual who becomes black physically, but not behaviorally. Although Black Bieber is an overly exaggerated version of the real Bieber, he forces, or should at least prompt, the audience to reevaluate the real Bieber's behavior through the lens of someone who would not receive the same treatment as the real Bieber had he inhabited a black body.[101]

[100] Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," 166.

The satire does not end with changing Justin Bieber's physical appearance. Glover (as Childish Gambino) takes this satire of black performativity to a new level in his vocal performance of black Justin Bieber's apology song "Whatever I Did" (also known as "Forget About It"), which serves to distract from the fact of having ruined a charity event. Glover's performance of the song extends the parody of Bieber as he mimics the soft breathy and nasal vocal qualities of the real Bieber's voice to match the personality of the black Bieber dancing and lip-syncing on the screen. The parodied personality of Justin Bieber also appears in the lyrics of the song's refrain that closes out the final scene:

> You know what I did, it doesn't matter.
> You know that I'll always be there.
> Sometimes I'm crazy and you know it.
> That's how I show you that I care.

The refrain (and the song overall) is a strange mix between black Bieber's "sincere" apology for his behavior and acknowledgement that his behavior will continue. Also, this section shows that black Bieber possibly knew that he would be forgiven for his actions whether the lyrics made sense or not. Glover's portrayal of this character implies that the acceptance by the Canadian popstar's fans of the real Bieber's public controversies is likely a result of his white privilege. Thus, black Bieber makes white privilege seem more ridiculous than frustrating.

After a scuffle with Alfred, black Bieber is able to reinvent himself in one move by giving a public apology, turning his hat forward to the gasps of the crowd, saying, "This is me. I'm not a bad guy. I actually love Christ." Alfred tries to follow suit and make his own public apology, but the reporter "offers" him a piece of advice: "Play your part. They don't want Justin to be the asshole. They want you to be the asshole. You're a rapper. That's your job." Alfred's desire to be

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[101] The most prominent example is when he drops the n-word with a hard r in the middle of the basketball game. Nonetheless, he does not receive any form of retaliation from the other players on the court for it because he is black.

someone else and reframe himself does not give him the same results that were granted to black Bieber. Glover's black Bieber is one of several instances in the series where a character satirically performs whiteness, but also satirizes blackness as Crawford discusses. Glover takes on a kind of "vocal whiteface" to mask his own voice in his parody of Bieber. Switching from his deep and raspy tone, Glover's vocal inflections attempt to match a mixture of Bieber's adolescent voice and his current "seductive" tone. His light and breathy voice sings over a fast-paced, retro-flavored, light tropical-house pop beat. Crawford's analysis of BAM literature and artwork that "satirizes the end of blackness" also plays with the question of what "makes sounds seem black or not black" as a frame for these satirical works.[102] Black Bieber provokes the idea of the "end of whiteness" or the objectification of blackness by whiteness.[103] If the "end of whiteness" is provoked by the flipping of Bieber's racial identity from white to black, what happens to the boundaries of blackness when the multicultural blackness of Drake is reconfigured to include Latin American roots?

The series continues to stretch the bounds of reality as we know it as Van concludes that Drake is Mexican after meeting his grandfather at the end of the episode "Champagne Papi."[104] Van and her three friends attend a New Year's Eve party that takes place at Drake's mansion. Van ends up in Drake's closet during her quest to snag a photo with the rapper for her IG page and walks past a Mexican flag hanging in his closet. Van continues to roam the mansion and eventually runs into Drake's Spanish-speaking grandfather, who is believed to be speaking with a Cuban or Puerto Rican accent according to several discussions on the social forum reddit as

[102] Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," 144.

[103] Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," 144.

[104] The title of this episode comes from the Instagram handle of Drake in real life.

they attempt to unpack the joke of Drake being Mexican.[105] At this point, Van learns that the whole party was a hustle and that Drake was never there in the first place. The only "reality" or "truth" she discovers is that Drake is Mexican.

"Champagne Papi" takes on the theme of "fakeness" (most likely a reference to Drake's song "Fake Friends") in terms of cultural and social identity. Drake being Mexican, as presumed by Van, is meant to make the audience think about the line between truths and lies. Of course, there are "black" Hispanics and Latin Americans, but they appear as mutually exclusive categories in this episode. Thus, as a "simulation of reality" viewers can take in the episode with any and all information on Drake and come to a wide range of different conclusions, whether they be true or false. *Atlanta*'s simulation of reality features Drake as Mexican (possibly Afro-Mexican based on the facial expressions of Darius and Van's friends after her claim), while the Drake in real life is perceived as biracial (black and white parents). "Champagne Papi's" theme of fakeness in conjunction with Van's "epiphany" is the implicit (and problematic) assumption that a "black and white" biracial identity is mutually exclusive to a Mexican identity—especially given the history of mestizaje throughout Latin America and the presence of Afro-Latinos in the U.S. The satire of this assumption represents a way in which multicultural blackness is troubled. In this instance, a certain conception of Drake's blackness is removed (one that goes beyond the black-white binary) while a new identity is mapped onto his (virtual) body. However, his blackness can be consolidated with the second identity depending on the expectations of *Atlanta*'s audience.

[105] "r/AtlantaTV - Can Someone Explain the 'Drake Is Mexican' Line?" n.d. Reddit. Accessed May 1, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/AtlantaTV/comments/8bwc8f/can_someone_explain_the_drake_is_mexican_line/.

Van's epiphany sets up the comedic ending of the episode, which is accompanied by the use of a Spanish-language "Hotline Bling," "Cuando Suena El Bling" by Fuego. Audience members are left with a reimagined Drake who in reality identifies as black and has no apparent Latin American roots, but is Mexican in the world of *Atlanta*. This "reality" is similar to that of the black Justin Bieber, but stretches the boundaries of multicultural blackness from "The Streisand Effect" (Season 1, Episode 4) in thinking about racially ambiguous people who identify with and participate in blackness.[106] Crawford discusses the "inner zones" of the BAM as making "individuals *feel* most post-black when assaulted by the 'blacker than thou' forces."[107] Although Drake does not appear in this episode, the satire in the episode represents the confrontation between Drake and the "blacker than thou" forces that make him feel black, or even post-black, in reality. The most prominent, yet subtle, example being the title of the episode, which is an allusion to his appropriation of and experimentation with Dominican culture.

The use of "Cuando Suena El Bling," featuring the artist Fuego (Miguel A. Duran, Jr.) who was born to Dominican parents and received a part of his education in the Dominican Republic, as the closing song adds another layer to the satire of "Dominican Drake." Drake is also known for experimenting with other popular music genres from Latin America such as reggaetón.[108] Drake's "indeterminate blackness," however, is not to be confused with racial

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[106] In "The Streisand Effect," Alfred is the central character of the episode instead of Earn. Alfred is left to deal with social media troll Zan, which leads to the internet criticism and exploitation of his rapper persona Paper Boi. Zan is a racially ambiguous character who tells Alfred he is black, but Darius and Earn, along with Alfred, wonder about his exact background, which is left unknown.

[107] "During the BAM (in the interior of the movement), the cultural mood was blackness, not post-blackness, of course. But, just as Beatty [African American author and associate professor of writing at Columbia University] shows that the cultural mood of post-blackness makes individuals *feel* most black when assaulted by oppressive white gazes, the cultural mood of blackness, in the inner zones of the BAM, made individuals feel most post-black when assaulted by the 'blacker than thou' forces." See Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness,* 145.

ambiguity. Drake contains and moves through blackness by appropriating blackness from other regions outside of the U.S., mainly Latin America and the Caribbean. The "indeterminate blackness" of Drake (as emphasized by the ending song and his Instagram photos) introduces a satirical way of exploring multicultural blackness since the idea of a "Mexican Drake" is left open for both the characters and audience members to interpret. [109]

These two characters explore different dimensions of the satire of black post-blackness. The first ridicules the power of white privilege while the other playfully deals with multicultural blackness (after previously dealing with racial ambiguity in the first season). In both instances, the soundtrack operates in what Crawford describes as sound's ability to "disrupt the logic of race."[110] For example, although Glover's performance of Black Bieber's voice is a satirical "whitened one," it does not remove the blackness from his (Bieber's) body. In the case of Drake, if one expands Van's epiphany of Drake being Mexican to Afro-Mexican, the Spanish remix of "Hotline Bling" expresses the multicultural blackness of Drake's (virtual and cardboard cut-out) body.

Characters vs Caricatures

This section explores *Atlanta*'s use of stereotypical and counter-stereotypical characters through the lens of PSA. The sonic and visual collision of the two types of characters are moments where blackness is troubled the most. The "troubling" here is not simple anti-

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[108] See Isabelia Herrera's article "The Evolution of Dominican Drake: A History," < http://remezcla.com/lists/culture/the-evolution-of-dominican-drake-a-history/>. Accessed May 5, 2018.

[109] "Indeterminate blackness" is one of the factors of the satire of "the end of blackness" Crawford discusses, which is black people's desire for the unknown foregrounded in the boredom with "known blackness." See Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," 144-145.

[110] Crawford, "The Satire of Black Post-Blackness," 143.

essentialist critiques because it is done "*in service of black people*."[111] These encounters act on behalf of black people by flipping the traditional meanings of stereotypes and counter-stereotypes. What would traditionally be seen as a stereotype is the counter-stereotype used to challenge the boundaries of blackness. Here blackness is held out and examined through the stereotypical and counter-stereotypical characters in the show. Simply put, the "caricatures" (stereotype) are no more and no less black than the "characters" (counter-stereotype). Characters and scenes from the episodes "Juneteenth" (Season 1, Episode 9), "Sportin' Waves," (Season 2, Episode 2), and "North of the Border" (Season 2, Episode 9) serve as case studies to explore examples of the "characters" and "caricatures" of *Atlanta*.

"Juneteenth" features Earn and Van, who attend a Juneteenth celebration at the home of one of Van's black bourgeois friends, Monique.[112] As soon as Earn and Van enter Monique's home, the camera shifts to a group of black men, dressed in 1930s-esque attire, leaning on a staircase singing the negro spiritual "Ain't That Good News." Earn, mockingly, asks Monique if the quartet of men are "up for auction," slightly expressing his discomfort with her social status and the set-up of her home. The quartet of men are a caricature of former roles of black people in television by being musical entertainers in the background. The performance of "Ain't That Good News" by the quartet differs from popular arrangements of the negro spiritual by composers such as William L. Dawson and Moses Hogan. The most notable difference between this performance and choral arrangements of the song is the change of tempo. It is usually performed at approximately 96-104 beats per measure, but this quartet of men performs it at

[111] Emphasis mine. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 614.

[112] Juneteenth (June 19, 1865) is the day freedom came to the last of slaves in the south. It is observed as the African American Emancipation Day in at least 45 states. For more information, see Angela Johnson and Earl B Lewis, *All Different Now: Juneteenth, the First Day of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2014).

approximately 48-54 beats per measure. Also, each line of the verse performed by the lead singer is interrupted by a unison and aggressively articulated "Huh!":

> Verse: I got a robe
> All: Huh!
> Verse: In that kingdom
> All: Huh!
> Verse: Ain't that good news?

This dark, heavy, and slow performance of the spiritual suggests the anxiety and difficulties Earn and Van would experience as they socialize with the other guests while maintaining their faux-bourgeois lifestyle. In other words, if Monique's home was "that kingdom" it would not be one Earn and Van would happily want to be a part of, especially with the compromises they would have to make to maintain their place in a higher rung of black society.

The next caricature to appear is the mega-church pastor that speaks to Earn and Van as James Cleveland's "Save Me Lord" is heard in the background. Cleveland is known as the "King of Gospel music" for revolutionizing the modern gospel sound by incorporating musical elements from soul, jazz, and sometimes pop into traditional black gospel music, extending the boundaries of the genre beyond that of the Baptist hymnal.[113] In "Save Me Lord," Cleveland's baritone voice is heard against his small group of backup singers, which are the most prominent voices heard in the refrain "save me Lord, I want to be a child," as the reverend speaks. Although the reverend tells Earn, "all you got to do is give it up to Jesus, playboy," as the song suggests, the reverend recommends the opposite. The reverend wants to teach Earn and Van money management and teach Earn how to treat Van "with respect." As the reverend describes what a woman wants, "a new him, a saved man with a bangin' body, and money in the bank," he, however, treats his wife like a piece of furniture by placing items on her and not acknowledging

[113] Anthony Heilbut, "The Crown Prince of Gospel: James Cleveland," in *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2002), 205.

her presence. Here, *Atlanta*'s mega-church reverend's actions reflect the stereotypes associated with the mega-church, especially capitalism, greed, emphasis on teachings of prosperity, and hypocrisy. The song's appearance might also be an allusion to Earn and Van's desire to be "saved" from the reverend as they try to talk their way out of this awkward encounter.

The last caricatures in the episode are Monique and her guests who fit the characteristics and traits of the black bourgeoisie. Their sonic identity is projected through an unlisted "smooth" jazz piece. In *Shaping Jazz* (2013), Damon J. Phillips discusses the separation of jazz subgenres in terms of highbrow and lowbrow culture. The critiques published in the *New York Times* examined by Phillips "classified jazz as either highbrow (symphonic) or lowbrow ("hot") depending on the race of the performers and the instruments used in the recording."[114] The sonic signifiers of the caricatures and characters (Earn and Van) feature subgenres of jazz, but the subgenres are coupled with the characters based on the classification of "highbrow" or "lowbrow." Glover's choice of songs draws on this distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" jazz to emphasize the class difference between Monique and her guests and Earn and Van.

The jazz song used to identify Earn and Van (counter-stereotype characters), however, only appear before the events at Monique's home. Jazz musician Kamasi Washington's "The Rhythm Changes" (sung by Patrice Quinn) is used to represent Earn and Van before attending Monique's Juneteenth celebration. The use of counter-stereotypes here is an inversion of the traditional meaning of the term (an idea or representation that directly goes against an oversimplified and stereotypical representations of members of a group). Throughout the episode, Earn and Van pull a ruse of being married and Earn being an Ivy League graduate in

[114] Damon J. Phillips, *Shaping Jazz. Cities, Labels, and the Global Emergence of an Art Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 101.

order to gain the acceptance of Monique and her guests. Rather than constructing a plot that focuses on their ruse being exposed, the episode focuses on how the two, especially Earn, attempt to slide back into their real selves in an uncomfortable environment (Earn calls it a "Spike Lee-directed *Eyes Wide Shut* setting") after each awkward encounter—mostly, with Monique's white husband, Craig. Craig has no formal education in African or African-American culture, but his passion for black culture is quite obsessive. Monique and her guests are representative of the city of Atlanta's status as a "Black Mecca." Monique makes this confession to Van that her life as a member of Atlanta's black high society is not as glamorous as it appears:

> Craig, Craig, Craig, Craig. You don't think I know how crazy my husband is? This whole *Black people as a hobby* shit? Slam poetry? 'Martin' reruns? That nigga told my 95-year-old grandmother that she was cooking her collard greens wrong. [laughter] …I get this big-ass house, and he gets the black wife he always wanted. [chuckles] That's marriage. I like Craig, but I love my money. Only way to stay fed in this world is to keep the right company.

In this quote we see that Monique is all about her money, so she compromises herself to make a life with a man who does not understand her.

The chorus of "The Rhythm Changes" focuses on the relativity and interdependence of seeming opposites (e.g. light and dark):

> Daylight seems bright
> because of night.
> It's shade we need
> So we can see.

In the context of *Atlanta*, the counter-stereotypes (characters, Earn and Van) are relative to the stereotypes (caricatures, Monique, the preacher). One cannot understood one without the other, especially in the context of the specific class relations of black Atlanta. When the valet boy recognizes Earn as Paper Boi's manager, his cover is blown. Monique turns up her elitism and rudely makes comments to Earn such as, "You aren't going to shoot up the party, are you,

Earn?" or "Every decent person has at least one trifling thug [referring to Alfred] in the family." Monique's comments about Alfred and Earn represent Atlanta's black class relations in which "standardized" behaviors (i.e. the black bourgeoisie speaking "proper English" versus "lower class" blacks speaking black dialect) makes each class "different" from the other.

The two characters also represent Ashe's post-soul matrix to a degree. Here, Earn and Van relate more closely to the cultural mulatto that Ashe describes in his analysis of Reginald McKnight's short story because they signify "the tragic plight of 'victims' of the Civil Rights movement."[115] Van, in particular, has anxieties about "prostituting herself for an opportunity" to enter the upper/upper middle-class after her discussion with Monique. Would Van make the same compromises as Monique? Earn, on the other hand, calls it "dumb" and would rather not experience integration into the upper/upper middle-class. Their "propensity to trouble blackness," or "blaxporation," is reflected in their dual identities as Earn and Van switch back and forth between acting as themselves (working class) and pretending to be a part of the elite. Their encounters with Monique, Craig, and their house guests often consist of questions related to their "elitist" identity, such as "What do you do?" "What do you think of black theater?" and so on. For example, Earn and Van both respond to "What do you think of black theater?" (while stammering) that the "quality is just gone." Even after hearing the plot of a new play by a playwright at the party, Earn and Van's facial expressions and response shows their unfamiliarity with this type of "black high art." The playwright they are speaking to responds to their comment, "Black Americans have to keep fighting for good art." The play she (the playwright) describes, however, seems to be obsessed with black tragedy.[116]

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[115] Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613

[116] She describes the play as a hostage situation in a strip club involving two drug dealers, a preacher, and a pregnant teen during Hurricane Katrina.

"Juneteenth" is the only episode so far that focuses on the intersection between wealth and blackness. The actions of the characters and caricatures provide dynamic portrayals of blackness. This episode troubles blackness through questions of compromise, code-switching, and performativity. Earn and Van's debutante performance turns on the charm of *Atlanta*'s caricatures (certain bastions of it) of black high society in the city of Atlanta. Even though she knows her husband is fetishizing her, Monique takes on the role of the black wife in exchange for a comfortable life that his money provides for her. Her conversation with Van reflects how her performative blackness removes her from the realities of the black working class and poor. Thus, she does not see the irony in spending her Juneteenth celebration yelling orders at an predominately black staff. Monique's guests, the preacher and the playwright, are steeped in religious stereotypes or obsessed with black trauma and grief. Earn and Van, on the other hand, often slip in and out of the black vernacular as they take mini-breaks between their ruse and conversations with the caricatures. Yet, how can the post-soul matrix catch PSA in *Atlanta* when the musical identities of the caricature and character are the same?

The second episode of the second season, "Sportin' Waves," features Alfred, who is making it big but appears to be getting crucified for his new-found fame, or as the season's title suggests, "robbed" along the way. One of the themes of this episode is the performance of authenticity and code-switching. At the streaming company, Not Spotify, Alfred and Earn go to a meeting to explore the potential of Alfred going mainstream to increase their earnings. The company, however, is the first time in the series that features a majority of white actors in one place. After several takes of recording lines for the radio station at the company, Alfred, along with Earn, walks back to the meeting room only to see the only black worker at the company

dancing to an inaudible rap song (most likely "Yoohoo" by Clark County[117]) seemingly entertaining his white coworkers who blankly stare and do not participate at all. In his live performance, however, Alfred decides to do the opposite of Not Spotify's black worker and refuses to perform for an audience that cannot give the same energy back to him.

The criteria of the post-soul matrix are represented by different characters in this scene. The Not Spotify worker represents the "healthy, self-aware cultural mulatto" that can "navigate easily in the white world" he works in. Alfred, on the other hand, embodies "blaxploration" through code-switching between his "thug" identity from the first season and his reformed identity that Earn asks him to perform in order to get the deal. The most obvious example of this is when Alfred deadpans his way through recording his radio spots for one of the platform's playlists; he starts with "This is Paper Boi, and you're tuned into the Fresh Mix Rap playlist. Long live fresh" and ends the recording with "This is Paper Boi, and you're tuned into the Fresh Mix Rap playlist. Long live fresh, nigga." The engineer tries to give Alfred scenarios such as "cool" or "being at a party" to change Alfred's tone of voice in his delivery. Instead, Alfred only becomes annoyed (based on his facial expression) and delivers each line with less and less enthusiasm. Both the Not Spotify worker and Alfred are used to employ Glover's "allusion disruption strategy." These scenes allude to how a largely white, corporate America profits off the culture and performance of black people, especially hip-hop. The "vibe," as Earn describes it, of Not Spotify in both scenes also alludes to issues of cultural exchange between black and white Americans. None of the white employees of the company appear interested in the musical expressions associated with the identities of the Not Spotify worker and Alfred.

Read through the lens of PSA, these two episodes portray a troubling of blackness. The dialectic relationship between the caricatures and characters as a result of being in the same

[117] Clark County is introduced in this episode of the second season as Paper Boi's rival.

space reflects Glover's notion of "blaxploration." In "Juneteenth," Earn and Van are expected to stay within the boundaries of the black bourgeoisie, which are represented by the language, dress, and actions of Monique and her guests. However, Earn and Van continue to move outside of those boundaries in their "breather" moments until they finally push themselves out after Earn reacts to Monique's comments stated above. "Sportin' Waves," on the other hand, has the same musical representations for both the caricature (the black millennial worker) and the character (Alfred). The musical representations likely reflect the expectations of blackness that Not Spotify has of Alfred and their sole black worker. However, Alfred refuses to perform a stereotypical role in fulfillment of their expectations. Both episodes also bring "code-switching" to the attention of both black and white audience members. "Juneteenth" focuses on "code-switching" in black high society, while "Sportin' Waves" focuses on "code-switching" in predominately white social spaces. In "Juneteenth," Monique also reveals that she is also "code-switching," but through her performative blackness she is unable to relate to the realities of Earn and Van. In "Sportin' Waves," Alfred calls Earn out for being on "house slave shit" and sticks by the term "nigga" throughout the episode around Not Spotify's white workers. Alfred's facial expressions also show his disgust for being expected to act in a way that is perceived to be acceptable by Not Spotify's workers (e.g. the black millennial who shares black colloquialisms with and dances for his white co-workers). Rather than have every black character act the same way, Glover reveals the slippages of the boundaries of blackness through the experiences and, in the context of these episodes, economic circumstances of the characters. The critical lens that the caricatures (stereotypes) are put under provoke thoughts about the characters (counter-stereotype) and how they contest the boundaries of blackness.

Individuality

What kind of blackness is attached to individuals and how is it expressed through their experiences? This section explores the use of *Atlanta*'s soundtrack as a glimpse into the minds of individuals. In particular, I explore the sonic attachment of blackness to individual characters. I explore these themes in Alfred and Darius's experiences in the episodes "The Club" (Season 1, Episode 8) and "Alligator Man" (Season 2, Episode 1) through the lens of Fleetwood's concept of troubling vision.

"The Club" presents an aggravated Paper Boi as an NBA star named Marcus Miles is in the same club as Paper Boi hogging the drinks, limelight, and women. As if things could not get any worse for the two cousins, the club promoter Chris is avoiding Earn, who attempts to chase him down throughout the night for their check for the event. Frustrated with his time at the club, Alfred reaches his breaking point when he learns that Earn was hustled out of the money Chris owes them. As he walks to Chris' office toward the back of the establishment, Baby Huey's "Hard Times" begins to play. "Hard Times" has been sampled in dozens of hip-hop tracks by artists from hip-hop's main locations: Los Angeles, New York, and Atlanta. Baby Huey's lyrics in "Hard Times" help provide a lens into Alfred's mind as he walks up to confront the devious club owner.

> Cold, cold eyes upon me they stare.
> People all around me and they're all in fear.
> They don't seem to want me, but they won't admit
> I must be some kind of creature up here having fits.
> From my party house, I'm afraid to come outside.
> Although I'm filled with love, I'm afraid they'll hurt my pride.
> So I play the part I feel they want of me
> And I pull the shades, so I won't see them seein' me.

The lines "They don't seem to want me, but they won't admit/I must be some kind of creature up here having fits" and "So I play the part I feel they want of me" reflect how Alfred wrestles with showing people "the real" Alfred and forcing himself to play "the rapper" described by the news reporter in "Nobody Beats the Biebs." No one, with the exception of Earn and Darius, seems to want the real Alfred. Thus, the "rapper" is attached to him even as the song shows Alfred's attempt to contradict this ascription and show the complexities of his blackness. "Hard Times" is a representation of Alfred's struggle between his personal life and "street" life in maintaining his musical persona Paper Boi. Alfred does not want a negative image as a rapper, but he often ends up in situations (e.g. the shooting in the pilot episode) that result in negative attachments to his Paper Boi persona. The episode's final scene shows Alfred, Darius, and Earn eating at a Waffle House, laughing off their experience at the club. When Paper Boi is announced on the news as a suspect for the club's shooting that night, "The Club" ends with Young Thug's "Digits." Young Thug's song is a reflection of his own street life before becoming a rapper where he and his friends committed armed robberies and drug dealing. "Digits" directly points to Alfred and helps portray his awkward reconciliation with having a "street life" attachment to his musical persona Paper Boi. Alfred's internal struggle provides an "alternative visual index of black lived experience" that Fleetwood describes in her conceptual theory of troubling vision.[118] For instance, Fleetwood examines the work and life of documentary photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris who is significant because his archive captures the images of everyday people versus heroic individuals (e.g. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X).[119] *Atlanta* presents Alfred's day-to-day experiences while the characters in the series (with the exception of his friends and family) only see his "gangsta rapper" image. He constantly fights against this figure

[118] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 37.

[119] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 37.

(or icon) that is imposed on him, whether it is telling children that are fans of his music that gun violence is not okay or his initial discomfort with selling weed versus just buying it. Although his voice is left unheard by the characters that impose this image on him, audience members can hear Alfred's voice and thoughts in the lyrics of the diegetic and nondiegetic songs that accompany his scenes. By listening to Alfred in these lyrics, the audience comes to know the real Alfred, his black body, and how the rapper image becomes attached to him.

Near the beginning of "Alligator Man," we are left believing that something is not right between Alfred and Darius when Earn visits in hopes of staying at their place after being evicted from his storage unit home. Darius's return to the series continues to deconstruct notions of the "weird black dude." Poignant examples include how he defends naming his gun "Daddy" to Alfred or his, "bizarre," intellectual musings, as when he suggests "life itself [is] a series of close calls. I mean, how would you know you were alive unless you knew you could die?" Another example is how he introduces himself with, "I would say it's nice to meet you, but I don't believe in time as a concept, so I'll just say, 'We always met.'" Black people are not often allotted the privilege of being "weird" or doing things outside of the "norms" of blackness as defined by both white and black people. Darius's blackness, which would likely be considered inauthentic, is authentic in the reality of *Atlanta*. Aside from his often comical, yet frequently deep, comments, this episode features a song that pulls viewers into Darius's blackness quite loudly. As Darius drives Earn around to complete a couple of errands, Death Grips' "Hot Head" blasts loudly from his car speakers. Death Grips is an experimental hip hop and punk rock band who made an appearance in the 2015 headline performances for the AFROPUNK festival.[120] AFROPUNK is a festival that was originally carved out as a space for black people in alternative

[120] Originally a documentary by James Spooner in 2003, AFROPUNK began holding festivals in 2008 and currently operates as an online community between festival artists and participants. For more information, see http://afropunkfest.com/brooklyn/about-the-festival/faq/

black culture, or aspects of blackness deemed "inauthentic." Not only is this song choice a reflection of Darius's blackness, but it also reflects the current tension between him and Alfred (which is never revealed after the two resolve their differences). The lyrics heard are a combination of Darius's alleged fall out with Alfred and his overall personality.

> Self-inflicted
> What'd you tell them?
> I just told 'em hell's existence
> But you know me, don't nobody
> Know my business
> My presence flogs your confidence
> Who want a brand-new complex?
> Now on, I'll call you, go fetch
>
> Self-inflicted
> What'd you tell them?
> I just told 'em hell's existence
> But you know me,
> don't nobody Know my business
> Get used to fetch, I'll shoot, you catch
> I snap, you come, I don't call you back
> Act natural, my style attack.

Darius disrupts a different visual field for *Atlanta*'s audience members. Darius is complicated, expresses complex emotions, and often contradicts what appears to be his role as "comic relief." Glover's portrayal of Darius as Alfred's best friend, in fact, emphasizes a "second look" at both characters. There is an implied imposition of blackness, through the representation of Alfred, on Darius rather than an explicit one. Darius often wears head wraps and other eccentric accessories, while Alfred wears the usual shirt, jeans, and sneakers with a few gold accessories. Rather than being dismissed for being high most of the time, Darius' intellectual rants are taken seriously by the other characters (and audience). Thus, Darius represents an alternative vision for "weird black dudes" (and girls) whose blackness is never challenged or questioned by anyone, especially Alfred and Earn. Alfred, on the other hand, does

not try to be mean, menacing, and violent, but is often pushed into that role based on the actions of others. The shooting is constantly brought up and discussed throughout the entire first season of the series. For Alfred, drug dealing is a game where he is "exploiting his situation to make rap."[121] He also seems to care about how his actions affect the people around him, especially the influence of violence in his music on young black kids. Although he does not want to taint his rapper persona, Alfred takes on the "gangsta" role to redeem his cousin Earn who was humiliated and tricked by the club manager Chris. Alfred and Darius's actions do not match the "standard" expectations attached to their bodies and reveal them as individuals with unique complexities.

Conclusion

These three themes are only a few of the many that address representations of blackness in the series. *Atlanta*'s depiction of blackness is a relatable, yet surreal, alternative reality. The series picks up nuances of the black experience that, through the lens of PSA, black post-blackness, and troubling vision, troubles blackness for both its black and white audiences. The series does not claim to be a definitive portrayal of the black experience, nor does it pretend to know the answers for contesting larger anti-black constructs. Audience members are placed in the shoes of the characters, often through the soundtrack, to experience their Atlanta through their black bodies.

The surrealism of the series creates an eerie, alienating, yet relatable tone in which certain things (i.e. Craig's "white guy slam poetry" at the Juneteenth party) can happen in the day-to-day experiences of a black person in America even if *Atlanta* goes over the top at times. Nonetheless, these moments of surrealism occur through the series' "hyper-realism" that exists in the series'

[121] In "The Streisand Effect," Zan tells Alfred this as they talk in his car after Alfred tells him there is no money in rap, but he has to rap for money.

depiction of blackness from the perspectives of its characters. The key component of this perspective is that the characters are all a part of the city's black poor or working classes. "Hyper-realism" through the eyes of the series' characters create a new reality where the soundtrack and scenes project a reality that either does not exist (a black Justin Bieber) or cannot be seen clearly (Alfred's complexities through his internal struggle). This presents a "tale of two cities" in which *Atlanta*'s world is based on the other half of the city's identity as a "Black Mecca." In the next chapter, the "urban ethos" of *Atlanta* is explored as a possible critique by Donald Glover of Atlanta's status as a "Black Mecca.

CHAPTER 2: BLACK SPACES FOR A BLACK PLACE

"*Atlanta* is a Black space — a visual, virtual, fictional Black space that also unlocks truths about Atlanta as a locational Black space — and an altar to the everyday internal and external struggles and remnants of Black people in that space, beautifully written, funny and insightful. Donald Glover emerged as a masterful framer."

—(Hall, 2018)

Floyd Hall's review of *Atlanta* in *ArtsATL* claims that the series gives nuance to Atlanta's most "underserved and overlooked communities."[122] He argues that these communities are the "backbone of Atlanta's black identity" that are often left out in the "official narrative" of the city.[123] Hall's review also points to the duality of Atlanta's identity as a "tale of two cities."[124] W.E.B. DuBois explained how capitalism, greed, and materialism were the nemeses of black America, especially Atlanta's black community.[125] In the 1970s, Atlanta rose to be the crown jewel of the American south that rewarded its elite and punished its poor. By "framing" Atlanta as a black space for the everyday internal and external struggles of black people, Glover complicates the status of Atlanta as a "Black Mecca." *Atlanta* offers a critique of the city's failure to demystify the boosterism of the black upper and middle classes associated with the "Black Mecca" image, which excludes the black poor and working classes from partaking in the same privileges and resources.

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[122] Hall, "FX's 'Atlanta' Brings Nuanced Voice to the City's Black Spaces," 2018.

[123] Hall, "FX's 'Atlanta' Brings Nuanced Voice to the City's Black Spaces," 2018.

[124] Hall, "FX's 'Atlanta' Brings Nuanced Voice to the City's Black Spaces," 2018.

[125] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, (New York: Fawcett, 1961), 64.

This chapter examines how the soundtrack creates an "urban ethos" through the public and private spaces of *Atlanta*. How does the soundtrack inform the space the characters are in? How is this space a reflection or facet of fictional Atlanta as a place? "Black Spaces for a Black Place" aims to answer these two questions and explore the relationship of the black spaces present in *Atlanta* that collectively form Glover's metaphorical Atlanta. This metaphorical Atlanta, however, is a social commentary on the status of the real Atlanta as a "Black Mecca." Before describing the methodologies and analytical lens of this chapter, the following section provides a brief overview of recent scholarly discussions related to Atlanta's status as a "Black Mecca."

Atlanta and the Crisis of a "Black Mecca"

Kali-Ashet Amen, in her opening remarks at the "Still the Black Mecca" symposium,[126] claims that "the city's black cultural output is exported and celebrated the world over. But there is an important relationship between the commodification of black culture *and* the killing of black bodies *and* the erasure of black neighborhoods [pause] in [pause] this [pause] place."[127] Is the "Black Mecca" undone? Or is it a metaphor that only ever existed for the black bourgeoisie? Atlanta served as a reward for black upper and middle classes, but violently pushed black poor and working classes outside the bounds of black high culture, while they still contributed to black popular culture, especially hip-hop. Amen's opening remarks are similar to Maurice J. Hobson in *The Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta*. Hobson traces the history of the rise of Atlanta as both a "Black Mecca" and a "global black

[126] This symposium, which was a call for action and reflection of Atlanta's "Black Mecca" title, was a collaboration between Emory Univeristy, Georgia State University, and Clark-Atlanta University hosted at Georgia State University in 2016. See "Still the Black Mecca? Race, Social Inequality, and Urban Displacement in 21st-Century Atlanta," Atlanta, GA, November 2016, http://jamesweldonjohnson.emory.edu/home/special-programs/programs-2016/still-black-mecca.html.

[127] Emphasis mine. Adam Perry Newman, "Opening Remarks from Still the Black Mecca?," *Atlanta Studies*, November 8 2017, <https://www.atlantastudies.org/2017/02/16/opening-remarks-from-still-the-black-mecca/>.

city."[128] The main focus of both Hobson's text and the symposium is the treatment of the black working class and poor under the leadership of mayors Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.[129]

Jackson was a leading figure in boosting Atlanta's image as the "Black Mecca," especially with his creation of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs in 1974.[130] The opening of this institution tied black art and culture to the center of the city's governmental administration. It was in this era that the cultivation of black art and "indigenous Atlantan popular culture" would emerge and help lead, in turn, to the emergence of Dirty South hip-hop.[131] The development of this subgenre of hip-hop brought the voices of black Atlanta's poor and working classes to the world stage. Hobson writes that, "Dirty South rap music provided a new and different lens for exploring the interracial and class tensions that accompanied the rise of the black New South's most important political regime."[132] In other words, the dynamics of black southern life influenced the music and culture of hip-hop in a way that was specific to the American South—economic hardship, miseducation, and racial injustice specific to the south.[133]

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[128] Maurice J. Hobson, *The Legend of Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 203.

[129] Maynard Jackson (1938-2003), elected as mayor of Atlanta in 1973, was the first African American to serve as mayor in a major southern city. He was followed by the mayorship of Andrew Young (b. 1932) in 1981. Young is known for being the trusted aide to Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement. For the full history of these two mayors in the rise of Atlanta as a "Black Mecca," see Hobson, *The Legend of Black Mecca*..

[130] This was the first institution in which the city government supported artists and art organizations. See Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca* (2017), 204.

[131] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*.203-204.

[132] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 205.

[133] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 220.

The subgenre of Dirty South rap is characterized by the "sound of live music, heavy funk, space-age, and blaxploitation themes."[134] Meanwhile, the genre's lyrical themes include southern dialect and slang (e.g.,words such as "crunk"). Darren E. Grem claims that Dirty South hip-hop revealed "the making and marketing of regional and racial identity in modern America" and the "readiness of some African Americans in the post-civil rights era not only [to] embrace their *southerness* but to sell it as well."[135] Dirty South hip-hop underlines the peculiarities of southern black life and the differences between New York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta.[136] Although the Dirty South scene did not hit the city until the 1980s, Atlanta gained prominence and became the central hub and scene of Dirty South hip-hop as the city's image as the "Black Mecca," the emergence of the Georgia Film, Music and Digital Entertainment Office, and tax incentives lured many artists, musicians, and writers from across the black world.[137] Atlanta's history as the "Black Mecca" chronicles the development of the city, which also complicates the representation of the city that was founded on neoliberal ideology, under Young's leadership, and the marginalization of its black citizens through the city's commercialization as the "Black Mecca."[138]

Atlanta's status as the "Black Mecca" was shaped by the black bourgeois spaces that flourished throughout the city. The presence of black political leaders, HBCUs, and black businesses shaped the city into a black haven purportedly open to all African Americans that

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[134] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 205.

[135] Emphasis mine. Darren E. Grem. "'The South Got Something to Say'": Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America," *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (2006): 56. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

[136] See Grem, Darren E., "'The South Got Something to Say,'" 55-73. https://muse.jhu.edu/ and Hobson, *The Legend of Black Mecca.*

[137] Hobson, *The Legend of Black Mecca*, 213-214.

[138] Hobson, *The Legend of Black Mecca*, 250.

migrate to the city. In contrast, *Atlanta* the television show is positioned as a metaphor constructed by the presence of underrepresented spaces of the black poor and working classes. This construction is emphasized through the soundtrack. *Atlanta*'s soundtrack plays a significant role in producing an "urban ethos" of the city of Atlanta as it exists both in the series and in real life for its audience members. In this chapter, I aim to show how the soundtrack in conjunction with the visuals offers a critique of Atlanta's "Black Mecca" image.

Conceptual Framework and Overview

Adam Krims claims that if urban spaces can shape our everyday social and economic behavior, then it is also possible for our musical behavior to be affected by the dynamics of urban space. Krims develops the concept of "urban ethos" to examine the links between musical representations and urban social structures. Urban ethos is "the scope of that range of urban representations and their possible modalities, in any given time span…The urban ethos is thus not a particular representation but rather a distribution of possibilities, always having discernable limits as well as common practice."[139] Krims's concept of "urban ethos" is related to the complex relationship between space and place. He notes that space and place are in a dialectical relation. In other words, place, or locality, is always defined in relation to the space that a place inhabits; space informs the construction and identity of a place; and both can change based on the actions of the actors. Space and place are thus mutually interdependent, and one cannot exist without the other.[140] Space is used here in the sense of Yi-Fu Tuan, who focuses on space as an experience. "Space" is abstract with no inherent meaning, while "place" is a space that has

[139] Krims, *Music and Urban Geography*, 7.

[140] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6. He writes that space and place "require each other for definition" (also on p. 6). See also John Agnew's article "Space and Place," in *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge* (2011), 6-7.

acquired meaning based on what they offer for the people they attract.[141] In other words, a space can become a place once people gain a sense of familiarity with it and give it value.[142] The space Krims describes, "urban space," refers to the city overall.

Urban anthropological and sociological texts focus on the constructions of urban space(s) in the city and the city as a collective representation of "urban spaces." In the introduction of the edited volume *Urban Space and Representation* (2000), Liam Kennedy and Maria Balshaw describe the city as "inseparable from its representations, but it is neither identical with nor reducible to them."[143] Similar to Krims's definition of "urban ethos," Kennedy and Balshaw acknowledge the range of possible representations of the city while also noting that the city is not limited to these representations because of the complex relationship between physical and mental space that these representations have to navigate.[144] In the context of urban spaces in the city, Kennedy and Balshaw claim that the "analysis of visual and textual representations of urban space is not simply a study of images of place or narratives of urban consciousness."[145] Rather, it responds to the "cultural work of representations of urban space."[146] Thus, for Kennedy and Balshaw, urban spaces are shaped by the metaphors and narratives in visual and textual representations that often describe the experiences of "urban living."

The urban spaces present in *Atlanta*, however, are sometimes counterpublics—spaces that

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[141] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 12.

[142] The following literature that focuses on the conceptualization of "space and place" also cites Tuan: John Agnew, "Space and Place," in *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge* ed. John Agnew and David N. Livingstone, p. 316-330 (SAGE Publications LTD, 2011) and Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," from *Space, Place, and Gender,* (1991).

[143] Balshaw, Maria, and Liam Kennedy. *Urban Space and Representation*, (London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2000), 3.

[144] Kennedy and Balshaw, *Urban Space and Representation*, 3.

[145] Kennedy and Balshaw, *Urban Space and Representation*, 4.

[146] Kennedy and Balshaw, *Urban Space and Representation*, 4.

are formed by marginalized groups as "alternative, oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[147] Black counterpublics, as described by Michael Dawson, were developed because black people were historically excluded from the dominant public sphere.[148] Dawson defines black counterpublics as "a set of institutions, communication networks and practices *which facilitate debate of causes and remedies* to the current combination of political setbacks and economic devastation facing major segments of the Black community, and which facilitate the creation of oppositional formations and sites."[149] Counterpublics, in Dawson's definition, operate against the dominant public sphere but still represent public spaces for black communities engaged in political struggle. In my analysis of *Atlanta*'s "urban spaces," I use a modified form of Dawson's "black counterpublics" that is not "multiclass" and encompasses certain spaces that are traditionally seen as private. *Atlanta*, in fact, presents "black economic counterpublics" that are the spaces of the black working and poor classes who are excluded from the dominant public spaces of both white and black elites.

This modified form of Dawson's "black counterpublics" combines Michael Warner's definition of the counterpublics as "formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion."[150] This variation of Dawson's "black counterpublics" offers a lens to look at the political dimensions of spaces in *Atlanta* beyond the geographical sense. The socioeconomic conditions of the black working class and poor in Atlanta were created, in part, by the city's pursuit of global respect

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[147] Joshua F. Inwood, "Constructing African American Urban Space in Atlanta, Georgia," *Geographical Review* 101, no. 2 (2011): 148.

[148] Emphasis mine. Michael C. Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics," *Public Culture* 7 no. 1 (January 1994): 197.

[149] Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic," 197.

[150] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2002), 63.

and economic success.[151] These conditions led the black working class and poor to challenge or push back against the politics of respectability through Atlanta's popular culture in visual art, dance, and music (mainly hip-hop). Thus, I argue that the "private" spaces in *Atlanta* represent examples of "black economic counterpublics." The use of the term private indicates the effects of Atlanta's pursuit of the "Black Mecca" image on the black poor and working class rather than the exclusion of black and white elites from these spaces. However, to avoid confusion, "personal" will be the term to identify these private spaces in the series that represent the conditions and experiences of the characters.

I read *Atlanta*'s "black economic counterpublics" as a critique of the "Black Mecca" image of Atlanta. I approach these spaces from three perspectives: social interactions (or social space), visuals, and the soundtrack. The social interactions between characters involve interactions with their environment (the physical space) and the social "norms" assigned to individuals as a role that maintains a particular social structure. Any changes in social relations can cause a reconstruction of social space, but not the physical space. For instance, in "Juneteenth," Earn, Van, and Monique slip in and out of the black vernacular, which causes a slight change in the social space, but this slippage is influenced by the physical space that causes the three to switch back and forth between "proper" English and the black vernacular. The perception of the visuals in *Atlanta* are manipulated for its audience members who depend on the camera angles to show what the space looks like, who is there, and where the space is located in the city of Atlanta. The series often opens with aerial views of the city of Atlanta, along with an opening song prior to focusing on a specific character, which shapes how the audience will perceive Atlanta and the character's experience that follows. *Atlanta*'s soundtrack represents how the visuals are perceived and how the social space is constructed. In other words, the

[151] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 205.

soundtrack provides a sense of Atlanta's *exclusionary* public spaces, while simultaneously providing a sense of the people that are generally excluded from these public spaces.

The black economic counterpublics are the urban spaces that are the primary make-up of the city of Atlanta in the series. These spaces are relative to the exclusionary public spaces in *Atlanta*. Donald Glover uses the soundtrack as one of several means to represent the actions and experiences of the characters in these spaces. Thus, this chapter is divided into three sections: (1) "The City," (2) "The Public," and (3) "The Personal." The City examines the combination of cinematography and soundtrack in the opening scenes and title credits to interrogate the construction of dominant public spheres and black economic counterpublics that they exclude. The remaining two sections "zoom in" on "the city" and examine the use of the soundtrack in specific scenes to define the personal and public spaces of Atlanta. "The Public" and "The Personal" contain the spaces in *Atlanta* that constitute the "urban ethos" of the city of Atlanta in the series. The representations of the spaces in "The Public" influence the audience's perception of "The Personal" and vice versa. In these sections I show the relation between the public and the personal, as well as the critique of the "Black Mecca" image they engender, by exploring the social interactions (space), visuals, and soundtrack of *Atlanta*.

Atlanta: The City

Representations of Atlanta during the opening credits of *Atlanta* often occur through a drone-camming of the city accompanied by an opening song that highlights themes from the episode's plot. This camera angle often shifts to specific characters in the following scene with the music playing diegetically through headphones, cell phones, and so on. Glover's shift from an aerial view of the city to a zoom-in on the characters helps to construct a very intricate visual

representation of what Atlanta *feels* like for that particular character (and perhaps provides an autobiographical note by Glover himself). This section explores these "flyover credits" from two episodes, "Big Bang" (Season 1, Episode 1) and "Alligator Man" (Season 2, Episode 2).

Atlanta's pilot episode, "Big Bang," opens with a bang as Alfred confronts a man for breaking his car's side mirror. Earn attempts to deescalate the situation, but both men draw their weapons and Alfred shoots the man. After this cold opening scene, the series shifts to aerial views of the city of Atlanta as OJ Da Juiceman's "No Hook" blasts in the background as if someone were playing it from their car. "No Hook" has all of the prototypical timbres and rhythmic aspects of trap music—rhythmic snares, double-time hi-hats, 808 kick drums, prominent hi-hat rolls—emphasizing Atlanta's busy and noisy soundscape as an "urban" city. "No Hook" also contains one of the primary themes of trap music, "trap life"[152]:

> Back at it, craftmatic, all I know is mathematics.
> On the stove cooking chicken, right wrist just did gymnastics.
> Acrobatic with the work like Houdini, do the magic.
> Migos bring me kilos so I bust them squares up out the plastic.

In the lines "Back at it, craftmatic, all I know is mathematics/On the stove, cooking chicken, right wrist, just did gymnastics," OJ is back at his "craft," making drug deals (chicken is slang for a kilogram of cocaine), and his mind is focused on counting money. The show's title image appears and the sound of "No Hook" is muffled, now playing through Earn's headphones as he lies in bed. "No Hook's" shift from nondiegetic to diegetic sound is coupled with a representational shift between the opening credits and second scene. Glover uses the song to represent both the city of Atlanta as a whole and a specific type of Atlanta, "Earn's Atlanta." It is also possible that "Earn's Atlanta" is the Atlanta we see in the opening credits and is confirmed once we know and see the song playing from his headphones. The camera angle zooming in on

[152] The term "trap" was first used in the music of Outkast and Goodie Mob and refers to the place where drug deals are made.

Earn's face also denotes that the Atlanta in this episode is "Earn's Atlanta." Although one of "No Hook's" primary themes is to make money, there is another layer based on the series' switch from aerial views of the city to a character's perspective. In the previous section "Atlanta and the Crisis of a 'Black Mecca,'" I discussed the attraction of music writers, artists, and other musicians from across the country to the city of Atlanta due to the establishment of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs by former Mayor Maynard Jackson and Jackson's "technique of going to other cities such as Washington, D.C., Chicago, Detroit, New York, or Los Angeles, and recruiting black talent by telling them to come to Atlanta."[153] Thus, "Earn's Atlanta" is most likely an allusion to the attraction of the city based on its promises of thriving in the music industry. In this case, Earn is the "music mogul" seeking to oversee his cousin Alfred and carve a space for himself in the black music industry Atlanta promotes as a "Black Mecca."

Atlanta's audience, however, receives another set of "Atlantas" in the series' second season, "Robbin' Season." The first episode of the season, "Alligator Man," begins with a similar approach to the pilot episode by beginning with a scene prior to the opening credits—a robbery at Mrs. Winners. The opening credits begin with a drone-camming of Atlanta that shows an impoverished area with damaged roads and boarded homes—drastically different from the pilot episode of the first season that shows downtown Atlanta and a thriving city—as the hook of Jay Critch and Rich the Kid's "Did It Again" plays in the background. This is one of the few instances in the series where the soundtrack changes songs in the opening scenes. "Did It Again" represents both the opening scene and the overall theme of *Atlanta*'s second season:

> Came up on some bands
> Balmain the sweater, Truey the pants,
> He did it again.
> Damn, I did it again, damn that boy shitted again,
> Jugging again, that boy jugging again.

[153] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 210.

"Jugging" is another way of saying "stealing." The title of the second season refers to a specific period in Atlanta, right before the holidays, where theft and robberies increase.[154] The next "robbin'" that occurs is when an unknown character steals Earn's belongings after telling him he (Earn) is getting "evicted." As this occurs, "The Game Belongs to Me" plays in the background. The song's hook has the same theme as "No Hook" (i.e., making and flaunting one's money), thus circling the audience back into "Earn's Atlanta" from the first season to the metaphorical "Atlantas" of the second. "Robbin season," however, becomes a metaphor of the tension the characters feel as they transition from their old lives to where they are heading throughout the season. This metaphor not only confronts Atlanta's "Black Mecca" image, it also challenges policed hegemonic notions of blackness—especially those related to the politics of respectability (e.g. "code-switching" between the black vernacular and "standard" English in front of black and white elites). The characters encounter new dominant public spaces that seek to force them to act and fit in social worlds they seek to make it in (e.g. Earn's choice to manage Alfred to make it big in the music industry as a means to make it out of the black working class). More importantly, Glover's manipulation of the background music from non-diegetic to diegetic prepares viewers for representations of Atlanta and reflects how the actions of Earn and the other characters are influenced by the city and how they may change the spaces around them within the city. Yet, there are moments in the series where the music is diegetic throughout an entire scene or episode. These moments depict an "idea" or representation of what Atlanta is relative to the spaces, especially black spaces, that influence how the city fashions itself. *Atlanta*, however, gives us a "taste" of the city through Atlanta's nightlife in clubs.

"The Club" (Season 1, Episode 8) features a representation of the city through the

[154] Later in the episode, Darius and Earn see the investigators at the crime scene. Darius tells Earn it's "Robbin' season. Christmas approaches and everyone's gotta eat." "Or be eaten," Earn retorts.

musical selections played by the DJ at an Atlanta nightclub. This episode does not open with a "flyover" view of the city and instead begins immediately in the setting of the episode. "The Club" presents an aggravated Paper Boi as an NBA star named Marcus Miles is in the same club hogging the drinks, limelight, and women. As if things could not get any worse for the two cousins, the club promoter Chris is avoiding Earn, who attempts to chase him down throughout the night for their payment for the event. "We In Da City" by Young Dro is the first song featured after the opening theme and the DJ's introductions of Marcus Miles and Paper Boi. Darius is also seen dancing and rapping along to the hook as it plays. As Earn attempts to track down the club promoter, Steve G. Lover (Donald Glover's brother) and Gonage's "Spray" is played next and followed by Crime Mob's "Knuck If You Buck."

For many viewers, *Atlanta* correctly depicts everything about club life in Atlanta except for one scene: "Knuck If You Buck" comes on and none of the clubgoers dance or sing along. Instead, everyone remains calm and continues talking as they would through any other song. Rasha Ali writes, "'Altanta kept everything super real on Tuesday night's episode up until Crime Mob's 'Knuck If You Buck' was heard playing in the club. The 2004 classic instigates fights at Harvard, gets the party going and it makes people dance—none of which happened on 'Atlanta' tonight, and the viewers were disappointed."[155] Twitter users express their disappointment with the series for not staying "true to its roots" and the "unrealistic" energy in the club when the song comes on.[156] Michael Arceneaux writes "WHY WERE PEOPLE NOT JUMPING AROUND WHEN "KNUCK IF YOU BUCK" WAS PLAYING? What kind of blacks in the club don't lose

[155] Rasha Ali, "'Atlanta': Everything About 'The Club' Episode Was Real, Except When 'Knuck if You Buck' Came On," *The Wrap.* October 18, 2016. < https://www.thewrap.com/atlanta-everything-about-the-club-episode-was-real-except-when-knuck-if-you-buck-came-on/>.

[156] Rasha Ali, "'Atlanta.'"

their mind to that Crime Mob classic?"[157] This brings back the question of *whose* Atlanta is being represented, not only in the series but in this particular scene. Donald Glover's decision to not have anyone "lose their mind" to the song is possibly a subtle challenge to the expectations of blackness by black people. Twitter users expected to see their experiences of listening to "Knuck If You Buck" and "getting hype" on the screen but were shown the complete opposite.[158] In other words, Glover's decision to do the exact opposite forces his black audience members to reflect on their own policing of blackness. These reactions reveal that policed blackness is not evoked solely by non-black people and that black people can easily participate in setting the guidelines or criteria of blackness. As a result, *Atlanta*'s black audience sees blackness in a space where Crime Mob's classic is just another song on the DJ's playlist as the characters continue to drink and socialize together.

This alternative scene and overall episode features musical selections that are all representative of the Atlanta-based genre of trap music. That is, they each have a playful and repetitive hook, like "Paper Boi," that sticks with listeners after they hear it. Trap music is also typified by the use of double or triple-time sub-divided hi-hats, heavy kick drums and layered synthesizers, and most notably, its use of a distorted TR-808 Bass that creates a distinctive timbre for the genre. The lyrical themes in this genre include, but are not limited to, the observations of hardship in the "trap," street life, poverty, violence, and harsh experiences that the artists face in their urban city surroundings. Justin Adam Burton claims that bass is an important instrumental aspect of trap music since the genre pulls from car-oriented and club

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[157] Emphasis in original. Michael Arceneaux, "*Atlanta* Recap: I Hate the Club," *Vulture*. October 18, 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/10/atlanta-recap-season-1-episode-8.html>.

[158] Many of the twitter users deemed *Atlanta*'s background characters as props or "fake" due to the series "unrealistic" depiction of what happens when black people hear "Knuck If You Buck." See Rasha Ali, "'Atlanta.'"

music influences such as Miami Bass.[159] "Big Bang" and "Alligator Man" reflects the car-oriented influence with respect to its cinematography by focusing and moving the camera angles along the roads of the city. Focusing on views of the city and the loudness of the two songs evokes a feeling of hearing them blasting through car speakers. The cinematography influences the audience's perception and interpretation of Atlanta prior to zooming in on the specific public/personal spaces that make up the city. "The Club," on the other hand, is the only full episode that features the club as one of the most recurring spaces of the city throughout the series. Although the characters dislike the environment, it is a means of escape from the realities they experience in their personal spaces or the public spaces of the black and white elite.

In his book *Posthuman Rap*, Justin Burton explores how "sonic blackness" works and how trap artists "match current expectations about blackness in order to resonate posthumanly, in ways that don't match the dominant idea about what it is to be human."[160] He describes his use of the term, following the works of Nina Eidsheim and Loren Kajikawa, as "what we hear as sonic blackness changes from time to time and place to place, and it will include a multiplicity of possibilities at any given moment, but it boils down to 'the perceived presence of the black body in a voice.'"[161] This sonic blackness Burton explores is similar to the sonic and visual presentations of blackness in *Atlanta*. Each case study of "the city" shows a particular "Atlanta" with the presence of a black body either before or after hearing the music in the soundtrack. "Big Bang" and "Alligator Man" both have scenes without music prior to the opening song and

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[159] Justin Adams Burton, *Posthuman Rap* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 83.

[160] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 73. "Sonic blackness" is a term originally coined by Nina Eidsheim, who defines it as "*not* the unmediated sound of essential otherness or the sound of a distinct phenotype. It is not a single phenomenon, but might be a combination of interchangeable self-reproducing modes: a perceptual phantom projected by the listener; a vocal timbre to match current ideas about the sound of blackness" (664). See Nina Sun Eidsheim. "Marian Anderson and "Sonic Blackness" in American Opera." *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 641-671.

[161] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 72.

feature aerial views of the city, which leads audience members to automatically map the bodies of the characters in these scenes within the contexts of the city. However, the scenes that follow focus on characters, in this case Earn, who force us to think about blackness through the personal experience of that character (e.g., "Earn's Atlanta"). "The Club," on the other hand, features the simultaneous presence of black bodies and the soundtrack at the beginning of the episode. Most of the songs in this episode feature hooks or verses about the city of Atlanta. Although the experiences reflected by these songs are not exclusive to the city of Atlanta, it is important to note that these artists are from the city of Atlanta and their music offers insight into their own experiences in the city. By using Atlanta based artists, these three episodes represent two "Atlantas" that are consistent with the experiences of *Atlanta*'s characters: street life and night life. "We In Da City" is the primary song played in the club that focuses on nightlife, specifically going to clubs, in Atlanta. "Knuck If You Buck" and "Spray" are two different representations of "street" life in the series. "Knuck If You Buck" has a specific focus on violence in Atlanta's urban areas (these areas are seen more in the second season), while "Spray" focuses on alcohol and drug use (mainly marijuana). Thus, the voice of the artists in each song represent the experiences of the black bodies in the club describing different "Atlantas."

Atlanta: The Public

The use of "public space" here does not refer to spaces owned by the state and generally accessible to all. Instead, it refers to the existing networks that the characters in the show attempt to navigate that they would likely never have access to without the proper funds or connections. Simply put, the "public spaces" in *Atlanta* are the spaces primarily owned or occupied by black and white elites, where the main characters are often exposed to vast amounts of wealth and

privilege. This section analyzes scenes from two episodes: “Sportin Waves” (Season 2, Episode 2) and “Money Bag Shawty” (Season 2, Episode 3). These two episodes are the only instances in the series that feature predominantly white actors and spaces. “Sportin Waves” uses hip-hop in such a way that underscores the construction of a specific white space in contrast to the black bodies (e.g. Alfred and Earn) that move through it. On the other hand, “Money Bag Shawty” shows how perceivable black sounds, or in this case genres, are accepted in spaces where physical blackness is refused.

In the previous chapter, I explored how “Sportin’s Waves” challenges notions of “authenticity” and “code-switching.” Here, I examine “Sportin’s Waves” as a lens into a discussion of public space in *Atlanta*. As a streaming service company with very little diversity, Not Spotify is a space that represents how black people are often forced to “code-switch” (mainly through respectability politics and speaking “proper” English) in predominantly white environments. The scene I focus on here is Alfred’s live performance. The initial reason for Alfred’s invitation is that it was for the company’s music “outreach” program. Outreach programs are generally a good faith effort to build bridges across class and racial lines. Not Spotify’s music outreach program, however, is not a good faith effort to build Paper Boi’s economic and social capital by helping him gain access to networks not formally available to him. There are several instances that lead up to Paper Boi’s frustration at his live performance that most likely prompt his unexpected exit. Earlier in the episode, Peter Savage, head of the musical outreach program at Not Spotify, clearly shows that he has little to no understanding of Alfred’s music or the genre he participates in. His office nickname “35 Savage” (a play on rapper 21 Savage’s moniker) given by his millennial staff is supposed to be a device to relate to hip-hop artists, but based on Alfred’s expression, it’s unsuccessful.

When Peter offers Alfred and Earn refreshments, he mentions that "*everything* in the fridge is all organic, gluten-free" but the facial expressions of Earn and especially Alfred show a mixture of disgust and discomfort at the offer. After describing how the program works, Peter asks for Alfred's music samples and Earn takes out a CD. Peter, shocked, tells the two that the company's entire building has a new "state-of-the-art system" that is all wireless and fully integrated into the platform. Although most recent mixtape releases occur through free streaming sites such as SoundCloud (e.g. Chance the Rapper), this scene implies that some up-and-coming rappers still rely on CDs to spread their music in hopes of making a deal. However, Alfred appears to reach his tipping point when one of the company's black workers dances on the table to an inaudible rap song (most likely "Yoohoo" by Clark County) as his white co-workers stare blankly at him. Earn walks up to Alfred and says, "This place has a vibe." Alfred sarcastically replies "Yeah…a vibe," referring to their meeting with Peter Savage. These scenes highlight the overall tension that can exist between the black working class and poor and black and white elites when the former enter spaces that have historically been reserved for the latter.

As Paper Boi's track begins to play, the office workers in Not Spotify remain. Unable to get the attention and participation of his audience, Alfred walks out on his live performance as the instrumentals continue to play. When Alfred makes his awkward exit from the stage, he sees a doe-eyed white guy in the front row eating a banana, and, through his facial expression, shows that he is uninterested in appeasing his audience who he believes will never understand him. This scene is the only instance where the soundtrack is not used to identify the space. Instead, the music emphasizes the cultural disconnect between Alfred and Not Spotify's staff.

Alfred, who barely begins his live performance, is unable to translate the energy he has left to create the space he needs for his performance and to the white workers of Not Spotify.

The reappearance of "Paper Boi" adds another layer to this visual disconnect between the two. The lyrics of "Paper Boi" reflect Alfred's desire to get money, but the space that would supposedly grant him this opportunity seems to be denied to him due to differences in class and race. The theme of code-switching throughout this episode shows that in a sense, depending on where you are and who you are with, you are performing an identity. In this case, blackness is being performed whether the audience or the characters consider each performance to be "authentic" or not (e.g., the black Not Spotify worker dancing for his silent white co-workers to Atlanta trap music). Alfred and Earn's disapproval of the black worker dancing in front of his co-workers can be read as their distaste for the politics of respectability. Alfred, however, makes his disapproval of it known to Earn when he tells him that he (Earn) is always on some "house slave shit." In other words, to Alfred, Earn can sometimes appear to be an "Uncle Tom," or a black person who uses the politics of respectability to move up the social ladder by making white people feel comfortable. "Juneteenth," shows Earn slipping in and out of the black vernacular, but perhaps, for Alfred, Earn cannot relate to him as much as he thinks. Yet Alfred constantly breaks this mold throughout the episode through his facial expressions, language, and clothes. Alfred's performance, or lack thereof, in this space refers back to his internal struggle with keeping his Paper Boi persona "clean." What does an artist owe to their audience members? In the case of Paper Boi, it appears the "advice" of the reporter from "Nobody Beats the Biebs" seems to haunt him. Thus, Alfred is robbed of his "authenticity" by the predominantly white company that sees him as a particular type of black man that is a stereotypical representation of rap (mainly the "trap" style). No matter what performance of blackness Alfred puts on—the "respectable" black man or the stereotypical rapper—he can never truly be his "authentic self" in spaces that were structured historically to exclude him.

On other occasions, the series shows moments when blackness is seen as a threat and these black bodies are "politely" pushed out of these spaces. When a check arrives at Van's house, Earn decides to test a theory in which the "stunters get stunted on"[162] and takes Van on an adventure to "buy the town" in "Money Bag Shawty." Earn and Van decide to go to a fancy dine-in movie theater as their first step to "stunting on the stunters." Prior to entering, Van points out how this space would likely exclude her and Earn because of their race and she is eventually proven right. The greeter immediately turns the two away after Earn tries to pay with a hundred-dollar bill. As Earn and the greeter go back and forth about the theater's "new policies" concerning acceptable forms of payment, smooth jazz is heard in the background. With the changing camera angles, viewers can see that Earn and Van are the only black people in the theater. For the first time in the series, black characters are shown with enough money that affords them access to spaces they would not otherwise have gone to as a result of their racial and economic background. As Earn and Van leave, they turn around to see an older white man who is allowed in after paying the greeter with a hundred-dollar bill . When Earn calls her out for this, without turning around, the man lifts his shirt to show his gun, which prompts Earn and Van to leave quickly.

The use of smooth jazz music (currently not listed on the soundtrack) heard in the background of the dine-in movie theater functions differently than how it is used to define the caricatures of the black bourgeoisie in "Juneteenth." This leads to the question of whether jazz, and specifically smooth jazz, is "black enough" to represent the black poor and working classes. Jazz, historically marked as a "black" genre, represents an "acceptable" form of blackness in the context of the dine-in movie theater. However, the presence of Earn and Van's black bodies

[162] In popular culture, "stunting" is trying to show off or get attention by performing an elaborate act. Sometimes "stunters" are being someone that they are not. Earn and Van in this episode switch to the role of the stunters to test it out.

result in a kind of passive-aggressive racism, which prompts their exclusion from the theater.[163] Nonetheless, smooth jazz, in the context of this high-class dine-in theater, is conjoined with the visuals of whiteness and elitism, and as such, helps to express the visual alienation of Earn and Van in this space.

These two episodes are only a few examples of the dominant public spaces that the characters interact with throughout the series. Not Spotify, however, is the only example in the series where a public space is not defined by the soundtrack. Instead, the soundtrack is applied to the identities of the characters as they navigate through this space. The fancy dine-in movie theater, on the other hand, is explicitly defined by the soundtrack. Both scenes feature spaces dominated by the presence of whiteness, something that has not occurred before in the series. The overrepresentation of whiteness and the roles of the white characters that inhabit these spaces help to define them in a way that pushes out the black working class and poor. The music is either directly attached or detached from the space that helps to construct and define the exclusionary nature of these public spaces.

Atlanta: The Private

The personal spaces in *Atlanta*, which I treat as "black economic counterpublics," are often in the homes or neighborhoods of characters, visually depicting their present living conditions as members of the black working class and poor. The "urban music genres" that play in the background represent these spaces and reflect Atlanta's historical connection with the "Atlanta sound." The creation of the "Atlanta sound" arose in conjunction with the city's budding image as a "Black Mecca," which began during the soul music era and took off with the

[163] Damon J. Phillips discusses the acceptance of jazz in "high art culture" in his text *Shaping Jazz: Cities, Labels, and the Global Emergence of an Art Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

emergence of Dirty South rap.[164] In this section I provide an analysis of the genres used in specific scenes from the episodes "Alligator Man" (Season 2, Episode 1) and "North of the Border" (Season 2, Episode 9). Both episodes present a counter-narrative to Atlanta's image as a "Black Mecca." These two episodes also ground the music industry in a reality (very from different than the series *Empire*) where the rags-to-riches narrative is simply a myth in *Atlanta*.[165]

In "Alligator Man," five songs play in the background of the same setting and transition between being diegetic or nondiegetic sounds to metadiegetic sounds. Alfred sends Earn to deal with his father Willie to deescalate an argument over fifty dollars between Willie and his girlfriend Yvonne. This argument eventually pulls in the police, the neighbors, and Willie's pet alligator. Most of this episode occurs at Willie's house and the five songs heard are played from an unseen radio in the house. "I'll Be Good" by René & Angela is the first song heard when Earn, along with Darius, arrives at Willie's house. This transitions to "No Limit" by Breakwater when the police arrive at Willie's house after receiving phone calls about a domestic disturbance in the neighborhood. "Burning Up" by Donnell Pitman begins when Willie shuts the door on the police and Earn tries to convince Willie to go out and talk to the police. After Yvonne gives Willie back the money she stole from him, "Love Ballad" by L.T.D. plays and continues as Willie talks to Earn about family being a business—a comment that refers to Earn's current role as Alfred's manager. The fifth and final song played from Willie's house is "Hey! Love" by The

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[164] In his chapter "The Sound of the Fury: The Olympic City through the Prism of Black Atlanta's Expressive Culture," Maurice J. Hobson discusses the role of the music industry in the "city's rise with the creation of the Atlanta 'sound'" (203) by exploring the musical genres of funk, soul, and hip-hop. See chapter in Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*.

[165] *Empire* is a musical drama series created by Lee Daniels and Danny Strong that debuted in 2015 on Fox. The series is set in New York and centers on a fictional hip-hop music and entertainment company (Empire Entertainment) and the drama among the family and founders of the industry as they fight for control over the company.

Delfonics as Willie's alligator walks out of the house and Willie makes his escape on foot.

The musical genres of these songs reflect the "urbanness" of Willie's home and neighborhood. At least in the United States, "urban music" is typically used to imply the genres of hip-hop, r&b, soul, and so on.[166] Artists, however, may crossover with other genres like Breakwater in "No Limit." The "urbanness" of Willie's home should not be confused with the current "urbanness" of Atlanta hip-hop. Instead, Willie's home represents an earlier conception of "urbanness" in Atlanta when black cultural arts and the music industry were on the rise; namely, the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the songs are either soul or funk, which rose in popularity in Atlanta among the black poor and working class during the music industry boom in the 1970s.[167] During this industry boom, Maynard Jackson often traveled to other cities with large black populations, such as D.C., Chicago, and New York, to recruit black talent to Atlanta.[168] Before Dirty South rap (which heavily critiqued the commercialization of the city), the genres of soul and funk were the primary vehicles through which Atlanta's black working class and poor expressed their life experiences and critiques of the city's black governmental officials.[169]

The "Atlanta sound" of Dirty South rap is rooted in many black musical genres, but "tap[s] into the soul of soul music" in a way that gives the music a distinct sound ("a bouncy feel") when performed by artists such as Outkast and Goodie Mob.[170] The songs that appear in

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[166] See "Urban music," in *Dictionary of Media and Communications* by Marcel Danesi, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 296.

[167] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 203.

[168] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 210.

[169] Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 203-204.

[170] While describing Atlanta's hip-hop sound, Maurice Hobson includes quotes from interviews with OutKast's member Dre. Dre claims that "OutKast blended the feel of blues, the togetherness of funk, the conviction of gospel, the energy of rock, and the improvisation of jazz. Our music is different [pause] you listen to East Coast music it's got a kind of rhythm, you listen to West Coast music, it's got its own kind of rhythm. You listen to southern music,

"Alligator Man" primarily contain themes of love, but they also contain the "bouncy feel," or "soul" that exists in Atlanta's (and other southern hubs of the genre) Dirty South Rap. Although the episode juxtaposes several narratives (and a parody of the concept of "Florida Man"), Willie's home becomes the primary focus of the episode as the "vibe" that Darius describes as "intense" feels "more and more like jail" after the arrival of the cops. This analogy alludes to the theme of "keeping up appearances" or performing false identities (e.g. Earn and Van pretending to be in the black elite in "Juneteenth") in the entire series. The "intense-to-jail" feeling Darius describes alludes to the feeling of danger that lurks throughout the second season of the series. This danger can be interpreted as the trauma that follows when the promises of Atlanta as a "Black Mecca" are unfulfilled and some of the city's black residents become a part of the working class or poor. Atlanta's black working class and poor end up bound to a "cycle of failure" in which they are faced with the challenge of avoiding integration into the environment they live in to seek out the "full benefits" (e.g. fame, success, and so on) that Atlanta as a "Black Mecca" advertises to blacks throughout the US. In other words, Atlanta's black working class and poor often find themselves back where they initially began on their journey to a better life. Alfred's struggles as Paper Boi, for example, reflects this situation. Atlanta's music industry was (and possibly still is) one of many tools used to push the city's "Black Mecca" image. Alfred, with the help of Earn as his manager, works diligently to not only enter Atlanta's music industry scene but to succeed in transitioning from his current lifestyle. Unfortunately, due to the shooting incident in the first season, Alfred can be read as a character that feels stuck in the same place as he constantly tries to detach the "thug" persona from Paper Boi, but he also has to re-attach the persona to his moniker to be an "authentic" representation of himself (according to his fans and

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its got kind of like a bouncy feel to it. It's soul. That's what it is. It's soulful music with more instrumentation." See Hobson, *The Legend of the Black Mecca*, 223.

those who criticize him) to gain the success he seeks.

In "North of the Border," Earn informs Alfred of a cross-state trip to do a live performance at a Pajama Jam concert in Statesboro. While Earn is trying to get Alfred enthused about the possibility of getting more money with a college fan base, the hook and first verse from "Wat U Mean" (Aye, Aye, Aye) by Dae Dae is playing in the background through Darius's headphones until they leave Alfred's house. Only the song's first verse and hook are heard in this scene. The lyrics of the first verse, which are heard in between Alfred and Earn's conversation, are heard as follows:

> Racks in me like a piñata.
> Fuck you blue Balenciagas.
> Robin Jens with the Foamposites.
> Hit the club, now my black bottles.
> Bloods with me woo, woo, woo!
> No set trippin,'they know I'm crippin' fool.
> Jesus piece a 10k gold.

Once they move to the kitchen, the hook of the song is heard very quietly as the song continues to play through Darius's headphones when he joins in the conversation:

> Ay, ay, ay, ay,
> Ay, ay, ay, ay!
> Hey, hey, hey, hey!
> Ay, ay, ay, ay
> Got a family to feed, got a family to feed.
> They dependin' on me, they dependin' on me.
> If you don't believe in me,
> I'm like fuck you, I'm like fuck you
> Fuck you!

Dae Dae (Marquavis Goolsby) is from Atlanta and "Wat U Mean" is his debut single. This song includes one of the many lyrical themes in trap music that center on poverty and street life (e.g. the difficulties of escaping the lifestyle). Although these lyrics read as a glorification of the trap life, Dae Dae discusses the song as a reflection of his life prior to gaining his current fan base

and fame in Atlanta's trap music scene.[171] Thus, the first verse and the hook should be read as the level of fame Alfred is trying to achieve. Throughout this season, however, we see that Alfred does gain a little success and fame as "Paper Boi," but not enough money to stop selling drugs. He is stuck in an awkward place between having a normal life and fame, often accompanied by minor humiliations (e.g. getting robbed by his plug, having a white woman singing an acoustic cover of "Paper Boi" and immediately becoming an instant internet sensation). This scene is a culmination of Alfred's frustrations built up over the course of both seasons in his internal struggles with the rags-to-riches narrative. Earn tells Alfred that the performance *might* get him 60,000 dollars, but Alfred's facial expression shows he is tired of the empty promises and willing to take any means to escape this cycle of empty promises.

The musical selections and their connections to the black poor and working class (which is not limited to the city of Atlanta) underline the black economic counterpublic in Atlanta. These personal spaces reflect the internal dynamics of how *Atlanta*'s individual characters live in and attempt to fight against the trap or "cycle of failure." Both episodes focus on a specific aspect of blackness—familial ties. Rather than present a dramatic family feud (*Empire*), a family that is capable of maintaining generational wealth (*The Cosby Show*, *Black-ish*), or complete black success (*Insecure*), *Atlanta robs* its viewers of the expectations of what a television series about black families (and black people more generally) should be about by segueing from charades to tragedy. Glover lingers on each moment just long enough for viewers to begin thinking about the topic, as they are mundane, the events of each episode simply happens to them because they are a part of their everyday life. This is their Atlanta.

[171] "Dae Dae – Wat U Mean (Aye, Aye, Aye)," *Genius* April 26, 2016, <https://genius.com/Dae-dae-wat-u-mean-aye-aye-aye-lyrics>.

Conclusion

Glover's *Atlanta* includes a spatial experience of black life in America, each scene focusing on a character's Atlanta. The overall representation of the city, however, appears to be from Earn's perspective, but this changes throughout the course of the series. At times it is "Alfred's Atlanta," where his rapper life in the city often robs him of his authenticity and his dignity. The interactions between Earn and Willie show two "Atlantas" colliding, where Willie's advice to Earn is to prevent Earn's Atlanta from becoming Willie's Atlanta. The spaces they move through are influenced by the actions of the characters in which the context, cultural references, and language they exchange with each other are, at times, black. How these spaces are conceived and interpreted depend on the perception of the character and their experiences with that space.

The calm energy in the club during "Knuck If You Buck" symbolizes Alfred, Darius, and Earn's distaste for the place. The white spaces of Not Spotify and the dine-in movie theater show the simultaneous hostility towards physical blackness and the acceptance of sonic blackness. Lastly, the homes of Alfred and Willie demonstrate the lingering distress of the city's working class and poor who desire the benefits of what a "Black Mecca" has to offer but are stuck in an awkward position that costs them familial relationships. Overall, these case studies point to a counter-narrative to the city's image and status as a "Black Mecca" through the spatial conditions and experiences of the series' characters. *Atlanta*'s presentation of the spatial experiences of blackness should prompt a wider examination of the city's relationship to its current black spaces in real life. This can broaden the discourse on the spatial experience of Atlanta from a black and musical perspective, which can be added to the history of the city and intertwined with debates on its status as a "Black Mecca."

EPILOGUE

"It was important to me that it represented a vibe of Atlanta that was true, something you couldn't get from everywhere."

—Glover 2016

Although it is impossible to reflect on the full spectrum of blackness in a single television series (or even a fraction of them), *Atlanta* succeeds in depicting a broad spectrum of the black experience *from a black perspective*. Rather than parade blackness around, *Atlanta* places viewers in the perspective of the characters to "make them feel black."[172] One of the ways *Atlanta* does this is through its extensive use of the soundtrack that features exclusively black artists. Through Donald Glover's exploration and troubling of blackness, the social issues addressed in the series often depict realistic situations in the everyday lives of black people, sometimes flipping these concepts (e.g. politics of respectability, racism, classism, etc.) on their head. The cinematography of *Atlanta* is deliberate, but with a laid-back pace, perhaps with the intention of letting scenes play as long as they need to because of the significance of those everyday situations that often go unnoticed by both black and white people in the real world (e.g., mental health).

Atlanta's legend as a "Black Mecca" is often synonymous with blackness through the success of the black bourgeoisie. The city in *Atlanta*, however, is synonymous with the collision

[172] For full quote see, Wilstein, Matt. 2016. "'Atlanta' Star Donald Glover Wants to 'Make People Feel Black'." *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company. September 6. https://www.thedailybeast.com/atlanta-star-donald-glover-wants-to-make-people-feel-black.

of poverty, the state, and mental illness with blackness. *Atlanta* presents a city where, even with an abundance of wealth, poverty is inescapable. It shows ordinary black people navigating a shared reality with individual hardships. This thesis examines the relationship between the series' soundtrack and visuals as a means to discuss how Glover "troubles blackness." It attempts to take a step forward in pushing current scholarship on representations of blackness by examining how black cultural productions, especially television series made after the 1990s, challenge monolithic understandings of blackness through music.

Read through the analytical lens of black post-blackness, the post-soul aesthetic, and troubling vision, *Atlanta* "troubles blackness" by juxtaposing stereotypical and counter-stereotypical traits associated with blackness. This juxtaposition occurs through the interactions between stereotypical and counter-stereotypical characters that challenges monolithic understandings of blackness and shows the mobility of blackness. Alfred and Earn, in particular, are the primary characters in which these traits are "performed" (as seen in "Juneteenth" and "Sportin' Waves") or authentically expressed as they navigate through the spaces that make up the city of Atlanta. Secondly, blackness (and whiteness) is sometimes removed sonically or physically from the character(s) meant to address "performative" blackness (e.g. black Bieber). Lastly, the main characters slip in and out of their own blackness depending on their environment and the people around them. Thus, a new reality is created in the world of *Atlanta* in which the "Black Mecca" may not be the safe haven it professes itself to be after all. Each "version" of Atlanta we see in the series shows the characters' goal to obtain the benefits the city has to offer as a "Black Mecca," but the constant development of the city (e.g. Not Spotify's upgraded high tech system) seems to push them further away from the advantages given to black and white elites. Beyond the explorations of blackness in *Atlanta*, this thesis sought to expand

current literature in the burgeoning musicological studies of television soundtracks. The popularity of the series leads to questions related to the audience's perception and reaction to *Atlanta*. Using these same themes and case studies, this thesis can be expanded to include the audience reception of *Atlanta* and possibly determine whether Glover is successful in his critique of the "Black Mecca" and monolithic blackness.

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