

## ABSTRACT

### Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Visual Rhetorical practices of Black Feminist Clapback

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This thesis analyzes the discursive practices of US Vice President Kamala Harris, US Representative Maxine Waters, and US Representative Ilhan Omar. It posits Black femme style as a productive way to analyze the rhetorical performances of these political figures. Exploring a multiplicity of rhetorical performances, I identify rhetorical acts of racialized and sexualized violence directed toward these women by President Trump, while also outlining the “survival strategies” Black femme politicians have enunciated as a form of collective resistance. In so doing, I explain a Black femme style of political clapback as a rhetorical performance. The thesis examines tweets, memes and public debates. It also partially corrects the underrepresentation of Black women in the field of communication. Black femme politicians participate in a radical form of subject-making that counteracts narratives of Black political failure, spotlighting the resiliency of Black femme politicians in the era of MAGA politics.

Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired:  
Visual Rhetorical Practices of Black Feminist Clapback

by

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A Thesis

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## DEDICATION

**To all the Black Women everywhere  
To all the Black women who have been forgotten  
To all the Black Women who couldn't find their voice**

The words of Fannie Lou Hamer inspire this work because of Black Women I am capable

Carol Moseley Braun  
Shirley Chisholm  
Condoleezza Rice  
Stacy Abrahams  
Kamala Harris

Rep. Alma Adams (D-NC)  
Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA)  
Rep. Joyce Beatty (D-OH)  
Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester (D-DE)  
Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-NY)  
Rep. Val Demings (D-FL)  
Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH)  
Rep. Jahana Hayes (D-CT)  
Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)  
Rep. Robin L. Kelly (D-IL)  
Rep. Brenda Lawrence (D-MI)  
Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA)  
Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX)  
Rep. Lucy McBath (D-GA)  
Rep. Gwen Moore (D-WI)  
Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN)  
Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA)  
Rep. Terri Sewell (D-AL)  
Rep. Lauren Underwood (D-IL)  
Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA)  
Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ)  
Rep. Frederica Wilson (D-FL)

Jenean Hampton (R-KY), Lt. Governor

Tish James (D-NY), Attorney General  
Sandra Kennedy (D-AZ), Corp. Comm.  
Sheila Oliver (D-NJ), Lt. Governor  
Carolyn Stanford Taylor (D-WI), Sup. Pub. Instr.  
Julianna Stratton (D-IL), Lt. Governor

Janet Buckner (D-CO), House Speaker Pro Tem  
Karen Camper (D-TN), House Minority Leader  
Audrey Gibson (D-FL), Senate Minority Leader  
Adrienne Jones (D-MD), House Speaker  
Kimberly Lightford (D-IL), Senate Majority Leader  
Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes (D-NY), House Majority Leader  
Sheryl W. Stapleton (D-NM), House Majority Leader  
Andrea Stewart-Cousins (D-NY), Senate President Pro Tem/Majority Leader  
Emilia Sykes (D-OH), House Minority Leader

Muriel Bowser (D), Washington, DC, 2015-present  
Sharon Weston Broome (D),  
Vi Alexander Lyles (D)  
Keisha Lance Bottoms  
LaToya Cantrell (D)  
London Breed  
Lori Lightfoot

**Diamond, Sparkle, Omarosa, Mia and Stacey**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *Introduction of the Thesis*

The election of Donald Trump symbolized an era of political incoherency: the political decorum America once ostensibly prioritized was eradicated, creating a new forum of political engagement. Simultaneously, social media platforms were further elevated as political avenues, affording politicians public platforms outside of establishment media. Distorting the role politicians traditionally sought to portray themselves as embodying—servants of the public—the success of the politicians such as Trump confirmed the criticisms some had leveled for years. Edelman’s longstanding critique of the American political system—as one that functions to buttress existing hierarchies, occluded from view through the construction of the spectacle (1964, 1988)—was seemingly confirmed in the era of viral videos, memes, and sock puppet social media followers (Hall, et. al., 2016). President Trump’s reliance on social media platforms to communicate with his followers marked, though certainly did not initiate, the importance of social media engagement and politics (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). While President Trump’s victory against Hilary Clinton likely signified regressive populist reactions toward not only Secretary Clinton (sexism) but also President Barack Obama (anti-blackness), it was communicated through what Oates and Moe call the “oxygen of publicity” (2016). While political campaigns in previous elections made extensive use of social media, the changing ecosystem of social media mainstays Facebook and Twitter

(as well as a myriad of smaller networks) helped produce a discourse amplifying the “simple, impulsive, and uncivil” (Ott, 2016). Trump’s platform relied on discrediting and undoing previous policies and communicative norms implemented and embodied by Obama and much of the previous political establishment. Trump’s slogan functioned similarly.

Trump’s slogan, Make America Great Again, calls for the undoing of political contributions for not only Black folks but also Women and many other groups that occupy the margins of American democracy. This slogan, a callback to phrases used by both Presidents Clinton and Reagan (Margolin, 2016), has origins at least as old as the 1920s, where it was deployed as “America First” to publicly explaining the preferred ideology of “citizen[s] of the invisible empire, Knights of the Ku-Klux Klan” (Wade, 1987, p. 427). While President Trump was somewhat constrained by the communicative norms of the era to engage in mere dog-whistle allusions to the phrase’s racist origins, much reasonable analysis understands his dog-whistles as not so occasional bull horns reminiscent of stock characters from 1915’s *The Birth of a Nation* (Drouzas, 2020). As but one part of this set of rhetorical practices, and embodying this slogan without reference to it, President Trump has consistently and publicly attacked women and Black folks communicatively, seemingly establishing that America’s greatness can only be made again by tearing down any remnants of a Black presidency (Smith, 2018)—both legally and affectively.

The recent era has also seen an important elevation in the political representation of Black Women. While Black voting was down in 2016 as a percentage of the electorate nationally, several cities and regions with Black politicians on the ballot saw increased

participation and turnout (Ray and Whitlock, 2020). In the 2018 midterm elections, Black Women's participation increased sharply from the previous mid-term elections (Solomon and Maxwell, 2019) and a noteworthy cohort of Black Women were elected. Some prominent examples include Ayanna Presley's historic win in Massachusetts; Ilhan Omar in Minnesota; Maxine Waters' election as Financial chair of the DNC - making her the first woman, or Black woman for that matter, to serve the role; the election of nine Black woman judges in Alabama; and the local mayoral elections of Chicago's Lori Lightfoot and San Francisco's London Breed in 2018. Additionally, data on the participation of Black women as voters showed that 90% of Black women voted for Clinton (Perry, 2018). And lastly, of the 285 Black women incumbents nationwide, 280 were Democrats while only 5 were Republicans. (Perry, 2018). These few examples highlight the dedication of Black women to the Democratic party as both voters and elected officials. At the same time, they demonstrate the many radical forms of political participation in which Black women have engaged as a response to Trump's regressive politics. Moreover, while the increase in elected Black Women enhanced the actual governance of the country, they also afforded President Trump additional figures to target in his rhetorical outbursts.

Black Women across all public spectrums can fall prey to the attacks of Trump, including reporters Yamiche Alcindor (PBS), Jemele Hill (ESPN), Abby Philips (CNN), and Joy Reid (MSNBC). Conservative politicians, especially Trump, have regularly attacked these Black Women with a litany of names and insults, calling them "liars," "stupid," "aggressive," "nasty," and "racist" (Wright, 2020). But it's not just reporters who fall prey – these racialized, sexualized putdowns are also hurled at public servants -

namely Mia Love (former Utah Congresswoman), Maxine Waters (DNC Finance Chair, Congresswoman), Omarosa Manigault (former White House Assistant to the President and Director of Communications for the Office of Public Liaison), Michelle Obama (former First Lady), Ilhan Omar (Minnesota Rep.), Ayanna Pressley (Massachusetts's Rep.), and Frederica Wilson (Florida Rep.). Trump has been profligate with his attacks, using public platforms like press conferences, rallies, and Twitter to facilitate his rhetorical violence.

Trump's public lashings are part and parcel with his political strategy: prioritizing Black men as the Black demographic (Coaston, 2020) and delegitimizing Black women as voters. Political analyst Stewart J. Lewis argued that the "Black Gender Gap" remained a central asset in determining Black political participation for the 2020 election, with Black men and Black women ostensibly at odds about Trump. Stewart examines the election saying "How much support can Trump actually gain in 2020? It's not clear. But it's important to note African American men are far more likely than women to gravitate toward Trump. Past voting numbers bear this out. In 2016, Trump earned 11 percent support from African American men compared to just 4 percent from women. African American women seem to retain a deep underlying hostility toward Republicans generally, and white male Republicans like Trump especially. That may not change" (Coaston, 2020). With the majority of Black women on the opposite of the political spectrum, Trump refuses to serve their calls for action and instead antagonizes Black women who attempt to participate in political action with racially motivated tropes, such as "You know, why don't you people," he began before continuing, "why don't you act

in a little more positive? It's always trying to getcha" during his interview with Abby Phillip (Wright, 2020).

Trump does not just participate in rhetorical violence against Black women who align themselves with the Democratic party – he also attacks those within his own party who have supported him. This includes Mia Love, the former congresswoman from Utah who was a Trump loyalist until he mocked her for losing her bid for re-election during the 2018 mid-term elections. "Mia Love gave me no love and she lost. Too bad. Sorry about that Mia," Trump said on Nov. 7th of that year. He was referring to how Love distanced herself from the president after he made controversial statements in support of white supremacist violence in Charlottesville. And Love, a Haitian-American, also had issues with the president when he identified Haiti as one of the "shithole countries" (Wright, 2020). Another example includes Omeroasa Manigault, who commented on her experience of being forcefully removed from the White House by saying "The chief of staff of the United States, under the direction of the president of the United States, threatening me on damage to my reputation and things getting ugly for me, that's downright criminal" (Stefansky, 2018). Leaving the White House with a recording of the dismissal as proof her story is not exaggerated, Manigault was treated in an abrasive manner by the President. This begs two questions: what political decorum remains left of American democracy, and where do the performances of Black femme politicians fit within a Donald Trump America?

Understanding how the rhetorical violence that Trump inflicts on Black Women contours public perception is a productive way to explore the political demographic of voters and elected officials. A historical understanding—often a crucial aspect of



rhetorical analysis— of the political relationship between Black women and the DNC is also instructive for apprehending why Black women are called to action in times of political chaos. With the DNC's reliance on Black women voters and participation, the party instills images of strong Black women who are fighting for American democracy. Deploying these images as political propaganda, Black women politicians are then motivated by ideas of political progress and to rely on the DNC for the possibility of that progress. As a result, Black women are often on the frontlines of political battles. The publicness of these fights, which often unfurl on social media, means that Black women are often targets for Trump (and many others, for that matter) to discredit, terrorize and endanger.

While the 2016-2020 era can be noted for its surge in the political engagement of Black women, three Black women specifically offer ample evidence to interrogate the intersectional matrices of Black political participation. With significant media coverage regarding the role each woman played in the impeachment process of Donald Trump, each using their expertise and knowledge to serve the Democratic party when Black women were needed the most. Analyzing the political journeys of Chair of the DNC/Representative Maxine Waters, Vice-President Kamala Harris, and Representative Ilhan Omar generates an intersectional depiction of Black women's political experience through several different factors. With attention given to age, class, religion, and other intersectional matrices, these Black women share a significant relationship with Donald Trump through his constant attacks against each one of them. Analysis of these three very different political figures shows that Trump's hatred for Black women does not have a

limit: it is infinitely motivated by Blackness as such. Naturally, each one of these women have participated in a public exchange with Donald Trump via social media platforms.

Interrogating how social media becomes a stage to perform overarching acts of racialized and sexualized violence reveals a shift in political decorum in several ways. Not only does Trump abandon decorum in attacking these legislators, but in doing so these Black women have also rejected major components of respectability politics to constitute a new rhetorical performance of Black political “style,” refiguring the meaning of Black performance for the public. I argue that Black femme politicians in the Trump era have broken away from the traditionally understood decorum of public engagement (and all the hegemonic entanglements that come with such a view) and have created a form of Black femme politics. By participating in the rhetorical exchange of “political clapback” these politicians enact a politics “rooted in nurturing Black communities” (Wright, 2018), resistant against anti-blackness and gendered hierarchies (Wood, 2009) but also the simultaneous “hypervisibility and invisibility” (Story, 2016) that so often victimizes Black femmes. Intellectual support for this politics can be drawn from a long line of Black feminists—Audre Lorde’s (1984) work is obviously foundational, as is the poetry of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, and the performativity of Billie Holiday (Lewis, 2012). It is at once a politics grounded and derived from hegemonically subjugated identity positions, but that simultaneously resists those norms of “visual aesthetics through collective practice” (Ellison, 2019). It is identity. It is personal. It is political. It is praxis. It is embodied critique. These rhetorical performances display the impossible demands placed on Black women, whose identities have been fractured yet are continually driven by political hope and supported by the spiritual hope produced by

their communities. Only a Black feminist centered rhetorical confrontation will hold the world accountable for the political failures Black femme politicians have inevitably participated in a political clapback becomes the necessary response in a Donald Trump America where civility has been abandoned and misinformation is truth.

Black femme political actors - namely Waters, Omar, and Harris – enact a version of political clapback to counter Trump’s attacks and usher in a novel performance of Black political subjectivity which pushes against easy cooptation. Traditional ways Black women have been objectified and rendered into the service of false political narratives are upended in the circulation of social media images and practices of these legislators. This thesis analyzes the rhetorical mechanisms through which these women enact such changes. Exploring a multiplicity of rhetorical performances by Black femme politicians, each directly impacted by the rhetorical violence of Donald Trump, I identify acts of racialized and sexualized violence committed by the president throughout his term while also outlining the “survival strategies” that Black femme politicians have enunciated as a form of collective resistance. Black femme politicians participate in a radical form of subject-making that counteracts narratives of Black political failure, spotlighting the resiliency of Black femme politicians in the era of MAGA politics.

### *Literature Review of Black Feminism*

Melissa Harris-Perry’s *Sister Citizen* explores the failures of American democracy when it comes to representation of Black women in politics. Harris-Perry explains the struggle for recognition as the nexus for human identity and nation identity, when much of the most important work of politics occurs. African American women fully embody this struggle. By studying the lives of Black women, we gain important insight into how

citizens yearn for and work toward recognition. Recognition through social media for Black women presents challenges for notions of citizenship and agency. Understanding how representation through memes, gifs and tweets negatively affects Black women is important to move beyond the scope of simply accepting that Black women's images are present. Harris-Perry studies the layers of violence hidden in how images of Black women are disbursed in attempts to control access to agency. When Black women's images are controlled by others, they are often stripped of their agency. My project is informed partially by Harris-Perry's efforts to interrogate how Black women confront the reclaiming of their own images, and in so doing, reconstitute their own agency. By accounting for political experiences of Black women, Harris-Perry is essential to understanding how and what Black women stories are being told through the media today.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's (1989) groundbreaking theory of intersectionality provides an understanding for how identities dominate positions of power. She explains how these converging social identities interact with lines of oppression and formulate and inform our experiences. Crenshaw explains that no one single feature of an identity can fully account for the experiences of an individual, and thus emphasizes the importance of analyzing the myriad intersections contributing to identity. Crenshaw avows the importance of intersectionality for Black women, specifically through her experience in the legal system, using court cases about Black women in labor disputes. Crenshaw's work has been woven into almost every discipline as a vital tool of analytical engagement with identity. Crenshaw's work, though much maligned by bad faith right leaning actors and scholars, remains central to understanding the complex web of social forces that

often seek to reinforce dominant narratives. For the purposes of this project, intersectionality offers a perspective to better apprehend how dominant narratives attack in coordinated ways against those framed as outside the norm. Race, religion, gender, age, and immigration status are but a few of the notions considered here and intersectionality offers a set of tools that can productively examine the racialized and sexualized violence Black femme politicians experience.

I am interested in Black femme performances and how they can alter the political topography. Social location remains an essential contribution in the outcome of one's political experience. Brazile, Caraway, Daughtry, Moore, and Chambers' *For Colored Girls who have Considered Politics* offers an important set of perspectives which also informs this research. As my project considers how Black femme performances have shaped the political landscape, this work's autobiographical approach to both a historical and contemporary understanding of Black participation in politics offered a number of important insights. Performances as such inform us of countless political acts in which Black women have participated. This work tells the stories of five Black women who have been working with the DNC for several decades: Yolanda Caraway, Leah D. Daughtry, Donna Brazile, Minyon Moore, and Veronica Chambers. This retelling functions as an account of the difficulties that the political presents for Black women, while also explicating the benefits for the Black community of understanding the inner workings of the establishment political systems. Each woman plays a different role in politics and possesses related but distinct beliefs, demonstrating the varied experiences of Black women within politics. However, despite this variation in experience, many of the problems face Black women similarly. While exposing the

exploitation of their labor and the difficulties known to Black women who engage in politics encounter, the authors provide a historical framework and first-person account of the exploitive relationship between Black women and “political progress.” Additionally, my understanding of these perspectives will explain how their larger roles within their community as “political servants.” Perhaps more than anything, this work underscores the reality that mere representation in politics (at least for Black women) will never be sufficient to alter our structural conditions, but instead functions as a required floor from which one may continue on the endless mission of fighting America’s battles. That these battles often leave the Black women fighting them as collateral damage is an understanding not lost on these authors, nor myself.

Black Femme is a term introduced by Audre Lorde in her 1970’s poem “Eye-to-Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger.” As Lorde expressed it, a politics of Black femme seeks to “hold space for others despite the difficulty in identifying spaces that are truly for us” (Emerson, 2020). Lorde explained that her poetry functioned to enunciate our “unique subject positions, identify oppressive structures, and conceive of our own specific demands for change” (Priest, 2018, 473-4). For Lorde, her poetry functioned as a strategy for survival, but also as an act of revolution (Priest, 2018). Conceptually, I decline to specify a narrow definition of its power, preferring instead a more expansive demonstration of how I employ the term, and related concepts, in the next few paragraphs.

Femme moves away from the white centered aspects of both dominant narratives and the white feminism it is so frequently described beside. Black femme in my usage calls for a collective femmehood inclusive of the experiences of Black women. My use

of the term is an attempt to understand the constant shift in Black identity. As I detail in this thesis, Black women politicians possess an ability to move away from a politics fear-based politics. On my read, shifting from fear recenters acceptance and offers strategies within the community to present more resistant and authentic notion of self. As I argue, the rhetorics studied here display an alternate understanding of Black femme politicians specifically, but also combat stereotypical framing against Black women more generally. By understanding how Black women participate in a collaborative political project to service their communities, we can better apprehend the significance of femmehood to combat toxic forms of feminism steeped in white supremacist logic. As considered here, Harris, Omar, and Water's function as Black women who perform politics in a mode reminiscent of "Black Femme."

In this context, Black femme functions similarly to Cooper's notion of Race Women. Brittany Cooper explains "Race Women" "name[s] and help[s] to make visible multiple generations of Black women who dedicated their lives to the Black freedom struggle, not only by theorizing and implementing programs of racial uplift, but also by contesting the gendered politics of racial knowledge production and pushing back against limiting notions of Blackness and womanhood. In so doing, these women created a robust and enduring tradition of Black public intellectual work." Investigating democratic sacrifices that Black Women experienced for roles in leadership illustrates how the race woman was rhetorically constituted, calling out roles of masculinity and femininity as divisive tools that divide true community.

Race Women attempt to take power into their own hand by striving towards leadership and inclusion. As an example, they work towards improved rhetorical

representation and view this representation as a benefit of engaging in democracy that outweighs its negative repercussions. Circulating images and presences of Black Women in leadership roles displays how Black Women continue to be resilient against the violence formed in opposition to them. Applying Black femme/Race woman as an analytic tool to political performance is a productive approach to better understanding a truly intersectional praxis. This effort is both capable and offers a fertile approach to study of how sexualized violence operates via the rhetorical performances of Donald Trump.

Black femmes disrupt the static notion of femme. As Kaila Adia Story explains, “Black femme identity has been defined and embodied by many as an identity with Black feminist roots and revolutionary potentials, Black femmes were still rendered hypervisible and invisible through racist and heteronormative politics” (Story, 2017). Specifically, I apply a Black political heuristic to the theory of “Femme” drawn partially from Piepipzna-Samaranisha (2012). In *Femme Shark Manifesto!* (2012), Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, self-declared shark and femme of color, contends: “femmes are their own radical entities. Autonomous entities who not only embody varied racial and gendered identities, but femmes ‘hold it down, calm your tears, organize the rally, visit you in jail, get childcare hooked up, [and] loan you twenty dollars’ (287). As Story continues,

To Piepzna- Samarasinha (like Madhubuti before her had argued), embodying, performing, and living a femme of color identity is so much more than just adopting an appealing aesthetic or having a penchant for lipstick and heels. Rather, Piepzna-Samarasinha posits her femme of color identity as a resistant identity, made up of ‘revolutionaries dedicated to taking the system the hell down so we can be free (2017).



Not only does Piepzna-Samarasinha articulate the many ways in which a femme of color identity can manifest within an individual, she also contends that to be a femme of color means to be powerful, exceptional, and multifaceted in one's work and life. Adapting a Black femme identity is performed as a constant act of becoming resilient to dominant structures.

Black women politicians face obstacles based on their performances on various mediums, stereotypes have a negative effect on how the audience perceives them sometimes they become invincible or they are powerless enforcing the narrative they are never enough. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins examines several different aspects of stereotypes and tropes that Black women experience because of racialized and sexualized violence, offering invaluable insight to our discussion's objective. Collins offers historical properties essential to understanding how the identities of Black women have been formulated by and in civil society, and how Black women are viewed within the political sphere. Her examination of myths and stereotypes of the jezebel, sapphire, and the mammy demonstrate how those historical myths influence not only the rhetorical construction of the idea of Black middle-class women, but also the very women who inhabit those spaces. By understanding how Black women are motivated by this image as the monolithic formula for success, Collins offers us a unique vantage by which we can better observe linkages between the effort to construct notions of Black women, and the actual effect on how many Black women often understand themselves. Though it is beyond the scope of contemporary rhetorical analysis to suggest that particular sites of discourse create particular effects in the world (Campbell, 1970) the considerable rhetorical influence behind this motivation of political advocacy and the

distinct way Black women are structurally positioned to view themselves is difficult to overestimate. At worst, these identities are crafted (for example, Reagan's invocation and use of the "welfare queen" trope) to "reinscribe racial domination in the popular and political discourse" (Nadasen, 2007). But even at their best, the identities of Black women are often rhetorically constituted through mythical narratives of progress which articulate images of Black women as advocates for possibilities of new futures through determination, dedication, and hard work—the bootstraps narrative that has long helped frame "potential." Collins calls into question how that "potential" distorts the image of Black women through the system of neoliberalism that is fueled by its ability to consume the images of Black women and exploit for the ends of sustaining the neoliberal order.

Image-making for the purposes of exploiting Black women is both possible and effective due to the limits that have been placed on the public performances of Black women. Consider the rhetorical tool of "style" utilized by Black women in Shanara Reid-Brinkley's "Mammies and Matriarchs: Feminine Style and Signifyin(g) in Carol Moseley Braun's 2003-2004 Campaign for the Presidency." Here, Reid-Brinkley follows the political life of Carol Moseley Braun, breaking down how her political engagement as a Black woman was filled with racialized and sexualized obstacles. Reid-Brinkley's exploration of the rhetorical use of "style" for Black femme politicians provides important evidence and insightful guidance to better consider how the "politics of respectability" contribute to the policed performances of Black women. Black femme politicians become the target of hyper-specific demands for what representation and professionalism looks like. When Black women attempt to perform outside of these acceptable forms of representation, their performances are hypercriticized and often

ultimately lead to their political demise. Understanding Mosley Braun's political experiences will contribute to a larger effort of disavowing the dominant narrative which establishes monolithic experiences for Black femme politicians. Moreover, Reid-Brinkley's work also accounts for a necessary narrative of feminist rhetoric and especially how feminine bodies are politically evaluated based off their utilization of rhetorical tools like style. Accounting for how style contributes to audience perceptions, Reid-Brinkley posits this dynamic as a normalized set of operations. Within this exchange of political engagement, it becomes clear that violating the constructed expectations of audience—even where those expectations have been crafted by others, likely produces backlash from audiences. Reid-Brinkley's work here is notable not simple for the paucity of work by Black women within the field of communication, but because she is one of a small few who have sought to better understand the political framing of Mosley Braun. Moreover, the similarities between Waters, Harris and Omar to break away from the established "style" leaves this work as instructive in my analysis.

Understanding that the experiences of Black femme politicians are not monolithic requires the intentional inclusion of experiences of Black women who have also participated within the Republican party. Fore fronting Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd's *Framing Condi(licious)* offers invaluable insight. More specifically, this work provides a unique political position which focuses on Condoleezza Rice to diversify the narrative of political experience for Black women. Alexander-Floyd examines the rhetorical relationship between Rice and whiteness, examining how her image was forwarded during the Bush's administration in an ostensible effort of inclusion and diversity. These efforts coincided with rhetorical performances by George Bush, exemplified by his use of

a nickname for Rice, in which he called her “Condie” in public to portray closeness. Rhetorical acts like Bush’s have been forwarded by White politicians throughout history, attempting to bridge the divide in representation. And with her singular image, Rice became a commodity of tokenization for the Republican party: through her presence, the world, it was thought, could be persuaded there is space for Black women under a Republican presidency. Alexander-Floyd’s work, then offers a crucial exploration of how the perception of closeness can be rhetorically constituted, utilized by those in power, and even weaponized to persuade Black communities of wider possibilities for political progress. Alexander-Floyd’s work well-evidences the understanding that Black women cannot be homogenized, and each experience is particular to their identities—especially in a Donald Trump America, where the perception of proximity to the president can clarify the distinct treatment Black women receive during Trump’s presidency.

Linda B. Thompson’s *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the new African American middle class* examines Black women in a variety of public spaces and how they are represented by the public. In general, *Beyond the Black Lady* interrogates the central role that black middle-class women play in constituting the African-American sexual landscape by examining portrayals of sexuality in the post-civil rights era. Considering autobiography, fiction, drama and film, as well as certain critical moments in the U.S. popular culture, Thompson intersectionality analyzes Black women’s experiences to explain how they face both impossible and disempowering demands (Petocz, 2011). By considering how Black women like Anita Hill and Condeleezza Rice were rhetorical positioned by the mainstream media, Thompson offers a model to better apprehend the depth of the media’s power. Of particular note is Thompson’s consideration of the

rhetorical power of the media beyond mere representation that is instructive of how Black women today are implicated by the circulation of memes.

Though this thesis is a qualitative project, there has been a few quantitative works that were helpful in its theorization. Monica C. Schneider & Angela L.'s examines the stereotypes of public service attributed to Black politicians to further explore how Black people are rhetorically enticed by the concept of political engagement. To expose the nature of political advocacy during the Civil Rights movement, how Black people become politicians, and what attributes contribute to their experiences as Black politicians, several interviews and studies are offered. Focusing on gender, race, and class, the study follows Black people during the Civil Rights movement, examines what motivated their engagements, and amplifies the results they hoped to achieve as a result of their service. As a result, we are left with a quantifiable piece of research regarding the creation of the "Black politician" as an identity category distinct from other policy makers. In other words, the study reveals that Black politicians are not simply politicians - they are always inevitably influenced by can constituted to audiences through their Blackness. Two things become increasingly clear: that Black femme performances can inspire political action and participation within Black communities, and Black femme performances have the power to shift how objectification attempts to define subjectivity for Black women.

Elizabeth R. Cole and Abigail J. Stewart analyze the motivation between Black women and White women in terms of political advocacy and offer quantitative results revealing Black women scored higher on political participation, generativity, power discontent, and politicization than White women (2003). Factor analysis of personality

and political attitude variables yielded three factors, labeled Political Identity, Power Discontent, and Social Responsibility. During the time of the study three movements were taking place which helped motivate the participants and inevitably influenced the results: Women's Rights, war protests, and the Black Power movement. While this research focused on an earlier age, it helps establish a baseline of consideration for how Black women are framed with the collective imaginary.

Similarly, Charly Carter & Carol Lautier provide a critical insight to Black femme political participation in 2016. Noted as "The Year of the Black Woman," civil engagement of Black women on all levels increased visibility, as did participation of Black women in the polls. A prime example they cite is the election of Alabama Governor Doug Jones, a major upset which relied on a major turnout from Black women. Not only did Alabama elect Jones, but the state also elected nine Black women as judges. Noting the increase in advocacy of Black women within the DNC—such as Stacey Abrams—Carter and Lautier question the economic position of these women, pointing out they are often the richest in their families. Their work exposes the numbers of Black women in the political arena as they compare to the population to quantitatively prove there is a disproportionate form of racialized and sexualized violence that contributes to Black women who attempt political engagement. Exploring how polling laws disproportionately affect Black women, who are often the heads of households and forced to move because of economic circumstances, Carter and Lautier examine how Black women—despite these disproportionate numbers—still attempt to find their seat at the table in hopes of beating the odds.

Moreover, Perry simultaneously provides useful demographics and a compelling quantitative study regarding Black women's political participation from 2016-2018, incorporating the race, age, and class of their constituents. Perry concludes that Black women are primarily elected by Black constituents, demonstrating the inherent difficulty, and limiting structure of anti-blackness underlying American democracy. Additionally, examining how many Black women experience increased enrollment at the level of higher education is another important factor to consider when addressing how such a political participation has increased. The Brooke Heights project makes the claim that images of Black women politicians like Ayanna Pressley, Stacey Abrams, and others serve as motivational factors for increased Black participation in local elections and positions of elected officials. Overall, this study is essential to my work because it provides me with the statistics necessary to grasp the sociopolitical factors that motivate Black women to participate in political discourse.

Collectively, these scholars, spanning a number of fields, form the foundation for my examination of important rhetorical artifacts of Black femme style. However, given my position as a Black woman in a predominantly white discipline, I would be remiss without discussing a final important contribution from the literature. Extending Lorde's conception of rage, Brittney Cooper's "Eloquent rage" operates as an inherent strategy for Black Women to engage in examining new social formats. Cooper's work continues the advocacy of Lorde when it comes to rage as a political tool. However, Cooper specifies how eloquent rage is specific in performance when it comes to how it is deployed. Examining fashion, sass and other congruent forms of popular social mediums, Cooper explains, "Eloquent rage isn't always loud, but it is always effective." Further

explaining, “Here’s the thing: My anger and rage haven’t always been ‘focused with precision.’ The process, of both becoming a feminist and becoming okay with rage as a potential feminist superpower, has been messy as hell. We need to embrace our messiness more. We need to embrace the ways we are in process more.” Eloquent in its precision to strike and arise when most needed. Eloquent rage as a methodological practice explains how Black Women can engage in political clapbacks as resistance to the political dismay they endure. Cooper’s use of homegirl intervention offers a refreshing approach to explain how Black Women have called out democracy and its flaws. My thesis stands as an exemplar of a homegirl intervention with the field of communication and its lack of diversity when it comes to Black Women. My work is significant not simply because I am a Black woman but because this is work that seeks to deconstruct the academic binaries that constitute experience and evidence. For Black women politicians, the violence they experience cannot solely be found in quantitative studies. Cooper’s work incorporates the refusal of assimilation to the academy, promoting the possibilities for Black Women to create work outside of the bounds of the regulations of the academy. A homegirl intervention requires us to ‘keep it real,’ this project calls out the racialized and sexualized violence the American political project perpetuates against Black Women.

### *Methodology*

Centralizing, documenting, and examining the Trump administration’s speech acts against Black women should be a priority in the field of communication both as a corrective to for the field, and as a mode of better apprehending enunciations of anti-blackness and the response to such enunciations. I am focused on analyzing online



political engagement between Trump and Omar, Waters, and Harris to provide an intersectional approach to Black women's experiences within the political sphere during the Trump Era. I am specifically interested in how their performances engage in political clapback. Reviewing their performances in this light requires an understanding of the rhetorical demands placed upon the process of creating Black Women's identities, as they perform within the political as a form of dedication, service, and motivation to Black communities. I analyze social media posts from 2016-present made in explicit online engagements with Trump on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Analyzing how Trump era politics called for political participation via social media – and in doing so, called for a shift in the forms and styles of decorum that Black women traditionally participate in – calls for an examination of Black femme performances with respect to political advocacy. I am particularly focused on how the social media posts of these women push against decorum and elements of political style. I also focus on how these women resist co-option into mainstream narratives of representation through an analysis that goes beyond the dominant white American understanding of how Black women experience politics—emphasizing how they are historically and uniquely able to resist objectification. I am especially interested in archiving these interruptive modes of resistance through the rhetorical strategies outlined above, and by analyzing these posts in relation to the unique styles of political performance in which these figures engage.

In continuation of the Black feminist traditions, whereby one takes the elements and themes of Black women's cultures and traditions and infuses them with new meaning (Hill-Collins), I employ the term “political clap-back” to discuss the nature of these exchanges. The first usage of the phrase “political clap back” appears, ironically, in a

2015 Washington Post article where Philip Bump praises Donald Trump for his ability to engage in the “clap back” (Bump, 2015). I use a slightly different meaning of the phrase to consider how Black Women might engage in the rhetorical play with the insurrectionist fomenter-in-chief. For me, a political clap-back in the Black femme style describes Black women’s collective ability to recognize the imperfections of Western democracy – namely, its failures of communities of color. Through recognizing those failures, Black Women confront the specters of those mishaps, all while utilizing facts and policies that their white counterparts attempt to obfuscate. To participate in a “political clap-back in the Black femme style,” subjects must participate in the following steps.

### *Black Feminist Strategies*

Rhetors must embody Black feminist strategies as a method of resistance, as “Black Feminist thought rearticulates a consciousness that already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness gives African American women another tool of resistance to all forms of their subordination” (Hill's-Collins). In rearticulating this consciousness, we are effectively participating in what Audre Lorde calls “survival strategies,” strategies passed down from one generation to the next as tools of resistance. Lorde explains “Survival is a poetic intervention into the simplistic conclusion of the political narrative: we were never meant to survive. The ‘we’ that was never meant to survive is a challenge to the gospel of individualism” (1984). Through the utilization of these strategies, Black women show the intergenerational, collective resistance that Black Feminism necessitates – an intervention within the very systems which seek to destroy us.

### *Black Feminist Thought*

Rhetors must be willing to use their lived experience and prior knowledge to discuss the possible implications for the future of Black life. Confronting the current knowledge-validation process is a crucial aspect of a successful clap-back. Hill-Collins explains “two political criteria influence the knowledge-validation process. First, knowledge claims must be evaluated by a community of experts whose members represent the standpoints of the groups from which they originate. Second, each community of experts must maintain its credibility as defined by the larger group in which it is situated and from which it draws its basic, taken-for-granted knowledge” (Hills-Collins). With dominant knowledge-validation suppressing Black feminist thought on Black Feminist issues – including abortion, healthcare, criminal justice reform, poverty, education, immigration, and other social issues – marginalized groups provide unique, invaluable insight to render such knowledge-validation challengeable.

### *Black Feminist Resistance*

Rhetors must be willing to speak truth to power, regardless of the consequences, in hopes of combating white supremacy through a radical vision of democracy which provides the genuine results of “equality and justice for all.” To do so means understanding that speaking out against the flaws of democracy inevitably provides a cathartic moment of relief for all Black Women, both for the ones speaking and the ones listening. As a collective call for action, Black Feminist resistance conjures fear in the white psyche. This psychic space of white supremacy aims to subjugate Black Women as inhumane objects, unable to resist the assumedly invincible powers of White Supremacy. Black Feminist resistance is thus understood as a process of speaking within a deeper

understanding, which both identifies words-as-resistance and ultimately makes white people uncomfortable (Cooper). By engaging in Black feminist resistance, subjects must first acknowledge the ever-present danger of the truth for Black women who dare to tell it, and in doing so, dare to challenge myriad interlocking systems of oppression. In the words of Kamala Harris, “I’m Speaking” must be the Black energy feminists are willing to deploy.

### *Importance of the Medium*

In the field of communication studies, much work has been done on the study of digital networks and the importance of visual culture. Heidi Huntington (2013) and Leslie Hahner (2013) were among the first to explicitly suggest the study of memes from a visual rhetorical perspective. While focused on the memes of social movements, Huntington (2016) also demonstrated the value in a visual study of memetic arguments in her Kjeldsonian (2000) analysis of the Occupy Wallstreet era Pepper Spray Cop meme. Eric Jenkins suggested a modal analysis of the circulation of memes (2014). Woods and Hahner illustrate the importance of studying memes in their analysis of Memes and the 2016 election (2018). Catherine Chaput argues for the importance of considering circulation of digital rhetoric in her analysis of Trumponomics (2017), while Varda and Hahner (2020) demonstrate how the digital circulation of memes can shape the social and form support for racial neoliberalism in their analysis of Black Panther paratexts.

Relatedly, Kristi Cole (2015) frames the importance of studying online harassment of feminists through memes and tweets. Nortio et. al. (2020) argues well the importance of studying social media in the construction of culture through their analysis

of anti-immigrant discourse. Finally, Williams et. al. (2017) posited the significance of analyzing the online rhetorical enunciations of political leaders through their analysis of the rhetorical practices of the mayor of Boston following the Boston Marathon bombing. My thesis seeks to expand the work of these scholars by including an explicit focus on Black femme and considering carefully the importance of the study of Black culture on Twitter and other social media sites.

While mainstream social media sites are obviously an important area of study, this prospectus also investigates the importance of Black Twitter as a place/space for critical investigation. Black Twitter is more than a phrase or a mythical realm on the internet but rather exists as a community where “everyday black people to serve as gatekeepers for the news and information needs of a plurality of black American experiences—with coverage, perspective and consideration not found elsewhere” (Clark 2018). Black Twitter exist as criticism to larger media structures that misrepresent, undercover, exploit and manipulate Black stories. Black users of Twitter often have their content repurposed, mocked, or reappropriated without their knowledge and permission to fuel cycles of larger mainstream (read: white) news stories (Clark 2018). Through media coverage of Black Twitter, many have been able to mobilize and organize due to national attention to specific issues. Twitter has provided Black communities an opportunity to reimagine democracy and affirm joy (Lu and Steele, 2019). By utilizing networks for specific movements, Twitter affords Black feminist subgroups an avenue to inform, inspire and recruit with trending hashtags like #sayhername #blackgirlmagic #notmypresident (Clark). Black women have found ways to benefit from the communities they are building online, resisting anti-democratic events (Lu & Steele,

2019). Black Twitter can also mobilize against anti-black actions, particularly political action. As Catherine Steele (2018) rightly notes, Black “Internet users’ mastery of social networking and other online platforms continues to challenge oppressive systems.”

Despite the possibility of resistance social media might afford, digital communication remains a political land mine, where Black women politicians are forced to move with caution. One wrong move can jeopardize decades of hard work, with fake news, memes, and alt-right subgroups. For Black women politicians, this means their experience is riddled with rhetorical violence from Twitter users, including former President Donald Trump, who until recently, was able to weaponize Twitter more effectively and with greater reach than any David Duke speech was ever able. This thesis analyzes those moments and offers a homegirl intervention into the constituting conventions of democracy. Considering viral hashtags like #reclaimingmytime, #notmypresident, #sayhername, #blacklivesmatter, this thesis seeks to better apprehend the resistant possibilities Black woman politicians possess via their digital rhetoric. Through the creation and circulation of memes, blogs, other public content, Black Twitter has been able to educate masses on current events in political events benefited the relationship between Black women politicians and the community. I argue the Black Twitter functions to support Black women politicians, and through the circulation of these rhetorics, help reimagine and strengthen the Black community.

More specifically, examining how digital rhetoric’s that craft Representative Ilhan Omar as a target of Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, sexist & Anti-Black violence. In so doing, these rhetoric’s demonstrate the near impossibility of her acceptance by mainstream American political system. Similarly, Maxine Waters has been digitally and

virally transformed into “Auntie Maxine” by Black Twitter users is necessary to understand the imaginative relationship Black Twitter facilitate between the public and Black Feminist actors. Finally, along with the relationship that Black Twitter has developed with Kamala Harris as a “#Copmala” or “#joeandthehoe is imperative to understanding why she represents a larger narrative for Black Women everywhere regarding stereotypes of the figure Hill-Collins identifies as the jezebel, an American tradition of painting Black women as sexually available and promiscuous. By interrogating several viral moments these politicians participate in we can get a holistic view to how Black femme politicians were represented during the Trump administration, including social media is interval to Black experiences.

### *Layout of this Thesis*

In Chapter Two, I consider the interaction between President Trump and Representative Ilhan Omar. Set against the backdrop of the President’s ban on travel from seven predominantly Muslim countries, this chapters considers the rhetorical tactics of Representative Omar’s verbal sparring with President Trump. Representative Omar’s experience as a Somali born immigrant, first Muslim woman to serve in Congress, and first representative to sport a hijab, has been well publicized. In fit-and-starts throughout 2019 and early 2020, she was a recipient of numerous attacks from President Trump and much of right-wing media. As a Black, Muslim, immigrant woman, Ilhan experiences a particular form of violence, being depicted as “un-American” in attempts to criminalize her political views. Rep. Omar’s Tweets have been surveilled and manipulated by the former President of the United States as well as other politicians even within her own party. I highlight the double standard of respectability politics imposed on Rep. Omar,

providing examples of Omar's tweet's while interrogating the backlash she received in response. Though notions of intersectionality pervade this thesis, this chapter most explicit deploys the concept better understanding how Black femme politicians experience democratic sacrifice.

In Chapter Three I analyze several exchanges between President Trump and Representative Maxine Waters, as well as considers the importance and meaning of several viral Waters memes. Serving in her 31<sup>st</sup> year as Representative for the South-Central Los Angeles and several coastal communities of Los Angeles, Maxine Waters has been consistent in her work towards the outcome of social justice activism. Waters utilizes a style of rhetoric that is unapologetically Black and femme to connect with her audience, showing why it is crucial to account for how race and gender make this work important to examine in the context of the politics and its representation of Black women. Still, reconceptualizing how we understand politics has not created the change many have hoped for, as facts and statements against the President have not been enough to end the endless cycle of harassment that Trump orchestrates against Black women politicians. This chapter considers the clapback "reclaiming my time," as a resistant anthem eventually appropriated by numerous women in the House.

In Chapter Four, I consider the argumentative exchange between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence. Vice President Harris serves as the first for a litany of things, First Asian-American Woman senator, First African American Woman Attorney general of California, First Woman Vice-President, First Black Vice-President. This chapter investigates the Vice-presidential debate along with the internet's reaction's pre- and post- through viral memes and tweets surrounding the debate. Examining how Kamala's



use of eloquent rage as a form of resistance is a productive way to understanding how specific performances and precision are important to the application of rage. Memes depicting Harris' facial expressions display how Black women can't even simply *just be*. Illustrating how Black Women's literal images become commodified, this chapter attempts to better explain the importance of phonetic disruption Harris orchestrated when she interrupted Mike Pence's interruption of her.

In Chapter Five I synthesize the work of the previous chapters and suggest some conclusion regarding the rhetorical practices of Black femme politicians and their performances of political clapback. While interrogating the field of communication and the positions of the writer and significances of this thesis contributing the rhetorical understanding of political clapback in the Black femme style. I will consider the life threats each one of the Black femme politicians has received and why these threats are significant to America's collective imaginary. In addition, I make note of my position in the field of communication as a Black Queer Woman in a predominately white field, and how my social location relays my writing. For Black women, an embodied politics is a necessary approach to transcending the dominant narrative in the fields of communication. Finally concluding with an update of the political status of Ilhan Omar, Maxine Water and Kamala Harris along with recent conclusions to initial clapback's.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Twitter Terrorist

When people ask me who my biggest opponent is, I don't give a name—I tell them the truth—it's Islamophobia, Racism, Patriarchy, Xenophobia and Misogyny.

– Rep. Ilhan Omar

### *Introduction*

Representative Ilhan Omar's journey as congressperson is a prime example of the American Dream, an immigrant Somali-born Muslim woman who defies barriers by becoming the first Muslim woman and first to wear her hijab in congress. Omar's very existence as a member of the US House of Representatives functions to increase the racial diversity of the still very demographically white political body. Despite the most recent Congress's increase in racial diversity, it remains predominantly white, with just under three quarters (74%) of the voting members consisting of non-Hispanic white Americans (Schaeffer, 2021). Representative Omar also stands as a representational symbol for Black women in politics, though her journey has not been without criticism from both liberal and conservative politicians. This is to be expected though, as a Black, Muslim, Immigrant, woman, Ilhan had long experienced a tailored form of violence.

Representative Omar is no stranger to political attacks. As the campaign manager for a Minneapolis city council election in 2014, she was assaulted by five people during an incredibly heated primary caucus event, resulting in a bloodied lip and a concussion (Zurowski, 2016a). In 2016, she won a bruising primary for a seat in the Minnesota state

legislature, followed by a walk over victory against a Republican in the general election. Her celebration was short lived, however, when false right wing newspaper reports began claiming she was guilty of immigration fraud and bigamy (Zorowski, 2016b).

Capitalizing on her notoriety, strategic electioneering, and incredibly strong get out the vote operation, she won the 2018 DFL primary by more than 20,000 over her next closest competitor in an election of 135,000 votes (Ray and Galiota, 2018). Easily winning the heavily Democratic leaning district, she replaced 6-term incumbent Keith Ellison who had retired from the House to become the Minnesota Attorney General (Golshan, 2018).

Elected shortly after President Trump's travel ban on several Muslim majority countries was ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court, Representative Omar came to office amidst a surge in openly Islamophobic public discourse. In this chapter, I examine a number of discourses and mediated representations that depict the hostility directed toward Representative Omar. I explore political discourse and media accounts to understand how tropes of Islamophobia, racialized and sexualized violence intersect as an attempt to depict Omar negatively. In so doing, describe three themes that have circulated online; each theme represents an attempt to misrepresent Omar's political, social, and cultural ties. By examining a number of representative discourses, I explore the how these theme align with respective social implications.

I will be exploring how Ilhan Omar declared "Anti-Semitic, Homophobic and Un-American"; each theme represents how the politics of misrepresentation operate against Black Women politicians as an attempt to destroy their political credibility. I intend to expose how social media has created a forum where Black Women Politicians are left with few choices other than to abandon the previous strategy of the dissemblance and

embody a politics, unlike previous strategies that blamed Black Women for the public perception of them, instead, I examine how Omar participates in the Black feminist tradition of “political clap-back,” by refusing to accept the current political, social and economic conditions Black people are a part of she engages in political activity while responding to the act of anti-blackness committed against her she performs the clap back.

Many media outlets have suggested that Omar is not qualified for her position as a congressperson. The rationale offered is Omar’s age, race, religion, or “radical beliefs.” In this chapter, I ask the questions “do memes support Islamophobia by circulating misinformation?” and “Has Twitter created a hostile forum where Black women politicians are subject to public harassment?” This chapter interrogates how the public’s use of memes contributes to instances of Islamophobic violence against Ilhan Omar. Omar’s Twitter presence has been a focus of the Trump administration; with the public taking tweets from Omar and exchanges between her and other politicians, the public has forwarded a narrative of a radical, anti-Semitic, homophobic Muslim woman who is un-American for her beliefs and comments regarding Israel and Palestine. Manipulations of tweets and media clips have all become a part of a collective approach to characterize Omar’s efforts to critique white supremacist logics and policies as a threat to America’s patriotism. Not only will I explore how Twitter has been weaponized as a forum of misinformation, but I also examine how Black women like Omar have spoken out on Twitter and utilized the platform for their benefit.

For Omar’s supporters, Twitter has been the medium where Omar’s dedication to community building has been positively reflected with her highly publicized coalition of four women of color congresspersons known as “the Squad.” Consisting of Reps. Ilhan

Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, the “Squad” are rhetorically connected by their progressive political views, the shared election cycle in which they were first elected, and almost certainly most obviously, their identity as women of color. Though each woman was elected in 2018 as first term congresspersons, Omar is the only one who wears a hijab or was born outside of the United States. As a result, she has received a unique form of violence that continually posits her citizenship as questionable.

President Trump’s tweets, racist as they are on their own, also frequently initiates a series of algorithmic copycat tweets that amplifying the original Trumpian message. For instance, Trump’s suggestion that Rep. Omar and the rest of “the Squad” not only don’t belong in America, but that they should return to their (presumed elsewhere) home (“Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came” (Trump, July 14, 2019), triggered a series of tweets from followers suggesting the same. Despite a surplus of racist and sexist tweets to accompany these Islamophobic and xenophobic logics, Omar has continued to affirm her own ideals and enhance her own reputation amongst many similar thinking audiences. The source of this resistant success, I argue, lies in the communities Representative Omar are able to build upon and the affect connection many of her audiences find in her responses.

By utilizing Black feminist traditions, Omar has combated the criticism she has encountered, showing that Black feminist survival strategies are essential for Black women politicians on Twitter. I consider how Black women, operationalized here through Omar’s responses, have utilized feminist tools of communication to counter the public's attacks. I delve into the political strategies that Black women participate in to

fight to secure citizenship within American democracy. By reviewing these communication strategies, I seek to provide critical insight into how Omar has navigated racialized and sexualized violence through the circulation of memes that rely on intersectional stereotypes about Representative Omar's identity. An intersectional Black feminist analysis is a productive way to offer insight necessary to understand how Omar's Twitter experience sheds former decorum of political engagement. By abandoning the politics of respectability, Black women have employed new survival strategies to fight white supremacy within the political system; these strategies have evolved to allow Black women to adapt to their present threat. As part of my contribution to the field of communications, I employ the term "political clap in the Black femme style" (written in the Black feminist tradition of Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill-Collins, Melissa Harris-Perry, and Brittney Cooper) to understand how Black women politicians embody a performance of rage as a survival strategy to navigate anti-black sentiment orchestrated through media such as Twitter, memes and media coverage. I will examine how Ilhan Omar has participated in a political clap back, as all actions towards survival within an anti-democratic world are political for Black Women. Through the application of Black feminist traditions, I apply feminist pedagogy as a methodological approach to which is essential to understand how Black Women have used practices to usher in a new performance of Black Femme politics. I conclude by considering how, despite the violence Omar experience's on Twitter, she frequently negotiates a productive clap back.

### *Memes, Information, and Communication*

The 2016 election is known as the meme election. Candidate Trump's campaign successfully participated in the propagation of a meme culture as a way to boost his

profile amongst alt-right, alt-right adjacent, and establishment conservative supporters. While President Trump was the obvious winner of this social media evolution, his campaign's success owes in small part to the efforts of shitposters, American trolls, and Russian troll farms (Chen, 2015; Hall Jamieson, 2018; Woods and Hahner, 2019). Collectively, these actors helped marshal digital content to expand their political agenda and weaponize the power of memes. To grasp the radicalization of the American electorate, scholars must engage at the forefront of politics. Today, a vital aspect of that forefront is the rhetoric of memes.

Memes, as fashioned in digital enclaves, are images that highlight the values of the group, their identities, and the negotiated processes of participation (Hahner and Woods, 2019). Memes are part of an overarching shift in public culture that requires scholarly consideration. The Alt-right, a collection of overlapping groups including Men's Rights activists, explicit white supremacists, libertarians, the so-called Intellectual Dark Web, Christian nationalists, right wing anarchists, has capitalized on memes as a mode of public address (Hahner and Woods, 2019). With Donald Trump's campaign team amplifying digital forums such as Reddit and 4chan to track and circulate memes, Trump, trolls, and Russian cut-outs found ways to weaponize memes against Omar with his continued engagement of mis- and dis-information, as well as good old fashioned raced and sexed appeals to ignorance and *ad hominem*s. Combined with the algorithmic amplification inherent in the circulation of modern visual practices and the spread of memes, these users helped create narratives about Omar's social, political, and religious beliefs. As researchers have demonstrated, much of these attacks were premised in explicitly racist and hateful disinformation, as roughly 67% of tweets mentioning Ilhan

Omar came from accounts that posted hate speech (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). By circulating memes with numerous social implications, Omar's is rhetorically vilified by the public. For example, of more than 90,000 tweets that referenced the candidate or contained links to Omar's Twitter profile between September 30 and November 4, half contained overtly Islamophobic/xenophobic language or related hate speech (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). I examine the circulation of a few representative tweets and memes that align themselves with the pattern of hate Omar receives. By exploring the themes of un-American, homophobia, and anti-Semitism, I consider how anti-Blackness necessitates lubricates the machinery of these interactions. In other words, I analyze how this discourse about Omar continues the long project of Islamophobia, undergirded by ideologies inherent to antiblackness.

As alt-right groups grow, and their discourses continue to circulate, the variation of memes and tweets about Omar continue a narrative of misinformation. With the internet providing comfort, alt-right members rev each other up, valuing each comment as fact. As Pintak, et. al explain in their analysis of internet comments of Rashid Tlaib, this collective functions as "a systematic digital version of "gaslighting," the process by which individuals or groups "build alternative realities" in ways that cause a person to question their understanding of the world around them and reality itself" (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). In so doing, alternative realities about Omar's citizenship, marriage, religion, belief, and more have swept the internet at insidious rates.

To understand how alt-right groups are capable of maintaining alternative realities through misinformation, we must understand how dogmatic logic produces an echo chamber of thought feeding into the loop of the rhetoric deployed by the alt-right. There



are three particular feedback loops that can be identified to describe the circulation of rhetoric regarding Omar's online experience what has been labeled "Information Disorder": "(1) disinformation, which is false and created with the intent to cause harm; (2) misinformation, which is false but not created with malicious intent; and (3) malinformation, which is reality-based but intentionally twisted to inflict injury" (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha, p.18). Through the distribution of misinformation, the alt-right is able to fuel a narrative that rhetorically otherizes Rep. Omar. Given the infrequency with which much of America has encountered actual Black, hijab-wearing Muslim women, such figures can have audiences' understandings of them largely shaped through representational narratives. These women can be stereotyped as simultaneously hypersexualized and chaste, overly passive, but also too aggressive. In short, Rep. Omar functions as a near perfect figure of white fearmongering where her difference can be leveraged to strike fear into an already intolerable public.

Many of the accounts that attack Omar were from accounts known as "uncoordinated authentic" accounts, held by individuals who are neither hiding their identities nor operating automated accounts (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). The fact that so many accounts posted just a single Islamophobic, xenophobic, or anti-Palestine tweet seems to indicate that a sizable pro-portion of accounts that participated in the hate-filled dialogue were *reactive*, acting out of genuine anger, disgust, or hate and responding to something they read in their Twitter feed, rather than engaging in a concerted campaign against the candidates or Muslims in general (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). With little to no evidence, these interactions demonstrate how easy it is to persuade audiences not only of the lies regarding Rep. Omar, but to then participate in the mass

trolling of Rep. Omar. Twitter and Facebook provides a platform where anti-black violence is a normative standard Black women politicians must navigate. Rhetoricians in the field of communications must begin exploring the political power of Twitter as a rhetorical landmine to exposing the embodied violence that Americans participate in online to actively cause psychic harm to Black women.

### *Second Class Citizen*

As a naturalized citizen, Omar's struggle to be viewed as a citizen remains' a constant obstacle while including the otherization she experiences because of her citizenship, complicates how she is depicted in the public sphere.

When this occupant of the White House chooses to attack me, we know - we know - that that attack isn't for Ilhan, that attack is the continuation of the attacks that he has leveled against women, against people of color, against immigrants, against refugees and certainly against Muslims (Omar)

As a Black Muslim woman serving in congress, many believe she is the ideal representation of the possibilities of citizenship in a democratic country like the United States that is ostensibly premised on equality and justice. Taking recognition seriously means understand that groups are as important as individual for specifying the correct relationship between the state and its citizens. As Harris-Perry explains, "Citizenship is more than an individual exchange of freedoms for rights; it is also membership in a body politic, a nation, and a community. To be deemed fair, a system must offer its citizens equal opportunities for public recognition, and groups cannot systematically suffer from misrecognition in the form of stereotypes and stigma." As the American way to display progress, depicting Omar's success as a congressperson without exposing the inherent racialized and sexualized violence Omar experienced through misrecognition remains critical to explaining why the distortion of Omar's image as an attempt to unjustly

represent her to larger audiences by the alt-right is anti-democratic in so far as it never allows space for a legitimate creation of citizenship.

Through the alt-right's information disorder processes, misrepresentation becomes inevitable, and the images of Black Women become spectacles for a larger audience to consume and interpolate meaning without considering the value of the Black Women's agency. To return to Harris-Perry, "the problem for marginal and stigmatized group members should be obvious. These citizens face fundamental and continuing threats to their opportunity for accurate recognition" (Harris-Perry). Equality demands that all are recognized in the public sphere equally despite the demand democracy calls for in recognition second class citizens like Omar will never be viewed justly. Due to the inevitable failure of recognition politics to question the structural questions for why violence exists, it fails to understand the role Black Women occupy in politics. By exploring the misrepresentation of Omar, we must interrogate the stereotypes and myths associated with her performances. Only by engaging in a Black feminist pedagogy will we be able to conclude the failure of the politics of recognition when it comes to truly embodied politics.

### *Stereotypes and Myths*

Omar's experience is shaped by racialized and sexualized violence which propagates stereotypes and myths to cloud the public's imagination by treating Black Women as mystical beings void of human characteristics. Viewed from a social cognition perspective, stereotypes not only impact how information is encoded and interpreted about members of a categorized group (such as women or people of color) but also how behavior, both of the perceiver and stereotyped individual, is influenced. These mental

representations or images are difficult to alter and can occur without conscious intent or awareness (Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994). Conjuring the image of a loud, outspoken and emasculating Black Muslim woman invokes fear in the white psyche. Disruptions of the dominant narrative of actions taken against Black women, like those Omar participates in on Twitter, are essential to understanding how Omar has successfully moved away from a politics of concern for white approval. Instead, she has centered herself and her community. Societal expectations generally discourage displays of anger and often appropriately assertive behavior by underrepresented minorities (Grier & Cobbs, 1968). Though Omar's refusal to conform to popular beliefs and political expectations, her white counterparts have labeled her "angry." She's referred to by the media as overly opinionated and inexperienced (Rao 2). Another Senator was quoted as stating, "Washington is very complicated, and we need to make absolutely sure that we send a person who has enough experience in the policy process, in the political process, in the coalition-building process that is required to do the work in that environment" (qtd in Rao 3). This quote insinuates that Omar does not have enough experience in any of those fields to be successful in this role (Schlei). Twitter users have criticized the congressperson for her continued use of the platform to respond to negative tweets, by responding to the violence directed at her, she opens up the opportunity for the public to reaffirm their suspicions about Black Women.

### *Anti-Semitism*

As announced on CNN, Omar remarks,

I am told every day that I am anti-American if I am not pro-Israel. I find that to be problematic and I am not alone. I just happen to be willing to speak up on it and open House Democrats to attacks. (Omar, CNN 2019)

The original tweet was posted during the 2012 Gaza war between Israel and Hamas, Omar tweeted, “Israel has hypnotized the world, may Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel. 4chan users then retweeted the image using Pepe the frog to signal to the right a call to “terrorize the terrorist.” Woods and Hahner interrogate how the representation of Pepe functions, explaining, “ultimately, Pepe is a unique icon in that he is an elastic figure that nevertheless becomes over coded with a particularized set of ideas via his persistent deployments by the Alt-right.”



Figure 2.1 Inhan Omar Tweet from November 2012

Given that the Alt-right is best understood as an assemblage wherein discourses are articulated to create and stabilize the identity of the whole, it is crucial to grasp how Pepe and these discourses move (Hahner & Woods). With the circulation of symbols like PEPE, Omar's image is easily used as a marker for white supremacists on 4chan and Reddit channels. This tweet was followed by an escalation of tweets and memes to follow, vilifying her once again for her political views. Omar is depicted as a "Jew-hating" Muslim extremist. This language, simultaneously framing Omar as anti-Semitic while also using the word "Jew" illustrates the difficulty in deciphering much hate speech today. While many folks of the Jewish religion or ethnicity would suggest the word is appropriate in non-anti-Semitic contexts, the alt-right traffics in advanced linguistics double meaning. Which is to say, in many alt-right contexts, the word "Jew" functions as a dog whistle slur even while many of the Jewish faith would insist such usages are not only appropriate, but preferred (Kay, 2017). Even today, there remains free podcasts advertised on Amazon titled "Stop Ilhan Omar Before the Cancer Spreads!" This particular podcast description includes the phraseology "Jew-hating, Israel-hating agenda," and links to the Alex Jones network (Stop..., no date). Omar's political support for the Palestinian people are a main topic of controversy, especially when it comes to the alt-right's online narrative of Omar. At least a quarter of the tweets in Omar's network criticized her stance on Israel. Forty percent of the pro-Israel tweets also contained overtly Islamophobic/xenophobic language (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). For an extensive collection of these tweets see the Appendix.

Omar's political views have been sharply criticized by both the right and the left, especially over the issue of Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people. Twitter users

have gone as far as accusing Omar of the October 27 massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, which left eleven dead and another seven wounded. The attack prompted a torrent of attacks on Omar, with some claiming her 2012 tweet was actually posted by her on the day of the massacre or somehow inspired the shooter (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). Former New York state assemblyman, and founder of Americans Against Antisemitism, Dov Hikind's tweet is representative:



Figure 2.2 Dov Hikind tweet from April 2019

Hikind's tweet is the responsible, establishment version of the alt-right tweets against Omar. Suffice it to say, those are much less diplomatic in language usage. But even Hikind's frames Omar's reasonable, if forceful, critique of Israeli abuses of Palestinian, as inherently antisemitic. In so doing, tweets like this not only breed resentment against

the Representative Omar, but unreasonably level any criticism of the Israeli government to acts of antisemitism. Admittedly, Omar’s flippancy has contributed to some of these attacks. Consider, for example her inappropriate response to an earlier Glenn Greenwald tweet:



Figure 2.3 Ilhan Omar Tweet from October 2019

Backlash for the tweet was drastic and bipartisan, with Republicans and Democrats condemning the Tweet as anti-Semitic. A popular reference to a hip-hop song “its all about the Benjamins,” struck a nerve in many with no acknowledgement of the cultural reference or the compassion for the immediate issue of an apology where Omar stated:



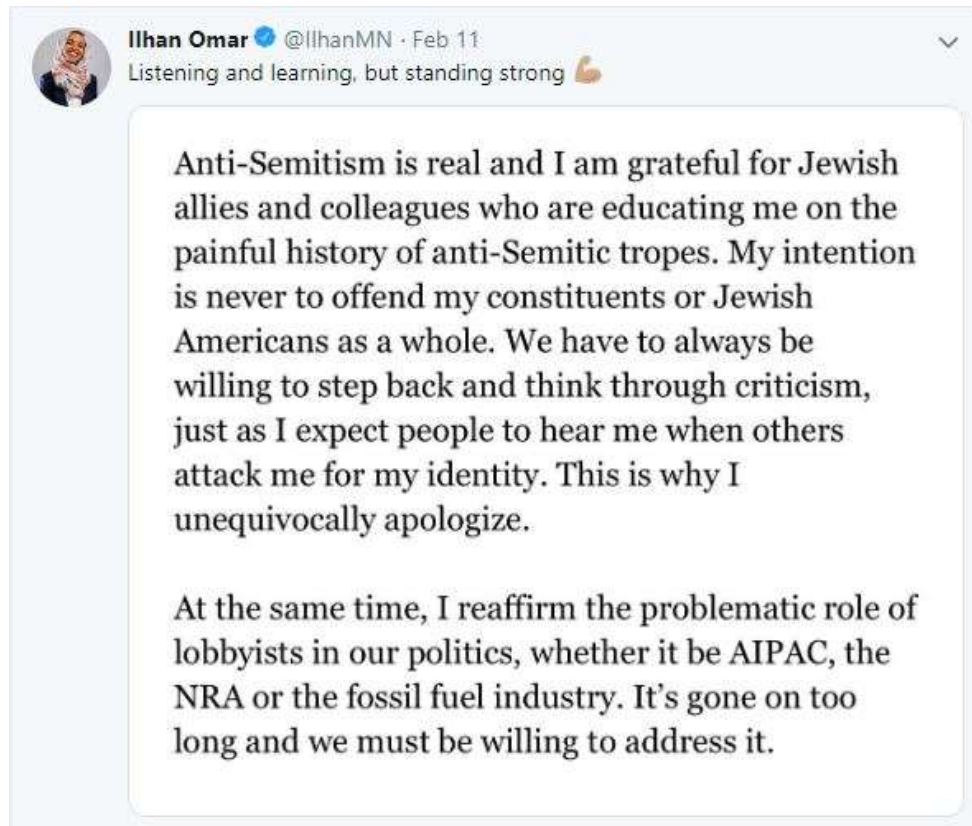


Figure 2.4 Ilhan Omar Tweet from February 11<sup>th</sup>

Instead of accepting her apology, the Steven Hunegs, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council responded, “To resort to age-old stereotypes about Jews using money to buy influence is terrible, particularly in the year 2019 we should all know better, “While the AIPAC issued a statement saying, “We will not be deterred in any way by ill-informed and illegitimate attacks on this important work.” Followed by Jennifer Carnahan, the chair of the Republican Party of Minnesota, who said that Omar’s tweets showed that she has “deep-seated anti-Semitic views” (Murphy 19). Democrats and Republicans went on to suggest Omar be removed from the foreign affairs committee for these comments. Despite her apologies, Black women are not allowed to admit to possible mistakes or even to actually commit them. Perfection is not simply an

expectation, it is a demand for Black women who participate in the public sphere. Anti-Omar tweets and memes that label her anti-semitic are all a part of the misinformation the alt-right participates in to delegitimize the progress of Black femme politicians. Omar's tweets are overanalyzed and can be integrated into any fantasy the alt-right has propagated, she has become an ideograph for anti-semitic propaganda.

### *Homophobia*

In a tweet, Omar stated, "They got to him, he is compromised!" with reference to Graham's then-newfound political alliance with Trump.



Figure 2.5 Ilhan Omar Tweet from January 2019

Omar was questioning, like many Americans have, how Trump had gained such an important ally as Graham, who originally was vocal about how "if we nominate Trump, we will get destroyed ... and we will deserve it." He even referred to Trump on national television as "a race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot" (Yglesias). Omar's "audacity" to question the potential of this newfound friendship became interrogated by the alt-right's theory that Graham is gay; because of white undertones of homophobia,

Omar becomes responsible for the conspiracy attached to Graham his whiteness shields Graham from questioning. Moreover, this exchange represents a near textbook example of projection. Few on the left would ever care about Graham's affinity orientation. Historically, that has been a more right leaning point of contention. Instead, the accusations against Omar shift from the vague "compromised" (which likely included something illegal or financial) to a "we on the right actually do care about affinity orientation, but we also hate Omar, so we will accuse her of homophobia."



Figure 2.6 Twitter Correspondence of Omar and Daou from January 2019

In December 2016, Graham revealed that his campaign email account had been hacked by the Russian government. Sarah Kendzior, a scholar of authoritarianism in Central Asia who has refashioned herself as a domestic political commentator in the

Trump era, has long used this as the basis for pushing the theory that Graham is somehow blackmailed by the Russians into loyalty to Trump (Yglesias). Rather than focus on the possibility that someone was coercing Graham to support Trump. Omar's tweets became centered in the discussion. By pouncing on Omar, the right becomes repetitive in their deployment of misinformation. Omar is an open advocate for gay rights and had never before been accused of homophobia. Particularly important in this exchange is not simply Omar's denial of the accusation of homophobia, but with the nature of the clap back. Instead of simply suggesting she was misunderstood, Omar took the opportunity to leverage the controversy and attention generated in this moment to advocate on behalf of members a community. In so doing, she embodied her own political survival strategy (the actual denial of homophobia), affirmed the existence of community members ("being LGBTQ+ isn't something we should be ashamed of) and reiterating more specifically the truth to power she spoke in the original tweet (that Graham is unconscionably loyal to Trump after previous harshly criticizing him). In short, this particular exchange displays well what a political clap back in a Black femme style might look like.

### *Un-American*

"No one that wears a #Hijab should be running for office in America. The #Quran #Islam and our #Constitution are Not compatible in any way" (Pintak, et. al.). For Ilhan Omar, comments like these serve as more than an example of hate, but they are a true explanation of the skewed narrative the right has depicted of Muslims using Omar's role as a locus for Islamophobic rhetoric.

I do not expect every time there is a white supremacist who attacks or there is a white man who kills in a school or in a movie theater or in a mosque or in a synagogue, I don't expect my white community members to respond on whether they love that person or not. And so I think it is beyond time ... to ask Muslims to condemn terrorists. We are

no longer going to allow the dignification of such a ridiculous, ridiculous statement. (Omar)

For the right, Omar is rhetorically constructed as un-American because Americanness has long been constructed as a particular kind of whiteness (Baldwin, 1984; Ignatiev, 1995; Lipsitz, 1998; Hahner 2017). The right uses Omar's hijab as a marker to justify their violence, their tweets and memes go further and are coded with Islamophobic sentiment that goes as far as the conspiracy's involving the sharia law. While the Islamic concept of sharia refers to a moral code that governs personal and community life, it is distorted by this online community with an oft-repeated trope, suggesting that Muslims will impose "sharia law" in the US, ushering in a dystopian future in which churches are shuttered, and women are subjected to forced genital mutilation (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha). Showing that the public engages in both prejudice and hostility toward Muslims that manifests as a distorted simplification of Islam and the Muslim world and as an irrational hatred, alarmism, dread, and fear of the faith and its followers. Most formulations of the term emphasize fear as a key component that leads people to make blanket judgments of Islam and Muslims as a dangerous other" (Elman 146). Figures like the one of many. In total, 67% of tweets tagging Omar originated from accounts that had authored or retweeted at least one tweet containing Islamophobic/xenophobic terms or hate speech. Another way to look at that is only 33% of tweets that mentioned Ilhan Omar were from people who did not post hate speech (Pintak, Albright, Bowe, Pasha).

Similarly, Omar was subjected to immigrant-based notions of un-Americanness. Terms like "invader" are common words Trump uses to describe immigrants. This white

supremacist logic controls the image of who is American and who is not allowing the alt-right to become the gatekeeper of patriotism.



Figure 2.7 Tweet from Patrick Debbie

Returning to Pintak *et. al.*, we see hundreds of tweets tagging Representative Omar “that included some variation on the word ‘invasion,’ including #stoptheinvasion.” As @Sydney371, an account that has since been suspended, posted

@IlhanMN Bringing incest to the West, along with FGM, beating wives and hiding the scars under a niqab or burka, girls wearing a hijab so as not to excite the men, marrying children. Doesn’t sound like a culture that can co-exist with Western values.

Many believe Omar is a “Trojan horse” waiting to attack America, which is why all of her tweets and comments are so easily criminalized. Omar’s intentions are always ill-willed because she does not fit into the far right’s version of America. As long as tweets



and memes like these circulate, she will always be rhetorically constituted as unAmerican. But Representative Omar knows how to respond like a Black femme.

Following another set of anti-Omar tweets, President Trump began including her in his rally speeches as a way to invigorate his crowds. Transposing the Clinton based “Lock her up,” crowd chants into Omar based “send her back” crowd chants, the president started using the figure of Omar and the squad as a fixture of his rambling racist speeches. In several instances, Representative Omar responded in exemplar’s of political clap back in Black femme style.



Figure 2.8 Ilhan Omar Tweet from September 2020

Here, Representative Omar not only spoke truth to power, but did so by noting her solidarity with her Democratic House community, while also reaffirming her own place within America. In so doing, she not only rhetorically constituted herself as American, but affirmed her a connection with multiple communities simultaneously. Moreover, she affirmed her connection to refugees, while also engaging in her own ad hominin attack on Trump that he runs the country like an 8 year old. While this last line might seem like a throwaway “you’re a child,” she employed it while offer personal knowledge of her experiences fleeing civil war—an additional component of the Black femme clapback.

### *The Squad and Sisterhood*

As the 2018 midterm election came to a close, the world had no choice but to acknowledge the truly historical image of four women of color—Reps. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts—being elected to Congress. The internet flooded with memes and gifs about their unprecedented victories. With images of the Squad in full circulation, the alt-right did not see their victories as a moment of progress. Instead, 4chan and Reddit boards lit up with misinformation about the Representatives attempting to shift the narrative of a celebration to a rally of fear of the other. For the first time in history, America had Muslim congresswomen with Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar's election. They became the first, while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez became the youngest person elected to Congress, and Ayanna Pressley became the first Black woman to serve as a Representative for Massachusetts. With their individual successes, they are able to make white audiences nervous, together, they attract an irrational fear from those same



white audiences. Following their collective wins in the midterms, Ocasio-Cortez, tagging the 3 other members of the squad, shared an Instagram picture that quickly went viral.



Figure 2.9 AOC Instagram Post

When the “squad” emerged in a photo from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Twitter account, the internet spiraled out of control with endless possibilities of what this sisterhood was capable of accomplishing. For many, when we envision progress in

America, an image of the melting pot American self-proclaimed comes to mind, fulfilling this image with accurate representation presents a difficulty that racialized and sexualized violence obfuscate. With the media deeming the “squad” radical, their actions became magnified by the Trump Administration with Trump himself directly tweeting the reps with racist and sexist tweets. Through their shared experiences, the Squad provides important contributions to not only the Democratic party, but the communities they serve. While the object of this particular clap back might seem absent, it is not difficult to imagine President Trump’s then 18-month verbal battle with the squad as the object of this photos’ derision. Displaying the unifying force of their connected sisterhood, this Black femme clapback functions as a renunciation of Trump and an embrace of the joy of sisterhood.

Pictured with smiles on their faces, the image conveys the message that neither Trump verbal attacks, nor the right’s online amplification of those attacks, was powerful enough to defeat these sisters at the ballot box. Moreover, their combined efforts embrace the moniker of the “Squad,” rather than run from it. Finally, illustrating the resistant joy of Black faces online (Lu and Steel, 2019), this particular clapback demonstrates not only that the squad won’t be defeated by the right’s attacks on them, but that they will continue to represent for their communities with a joy of service and pride in their accomplishments on behalf of others.

### *Conclusion*

Black women in the field of communications are highly under-recognized. The study of Rep. Omar’s experience online can provide a unique contribution to the field because of the timeliness of her career. As Pintak et. al. explains, “American Muslims

have traditionally avoided electoral politics, with few running for office and voter turnout lower than that of the general public. However, the Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric of the 2016 presidential campaign summed up by Donald Trump's sweeping declaration that "Islam hates us" energized an unprecedented number of Muslims to seek office in the 2018 midterm elections." As the mainstream media's coverage of Islamophobic sentiment energized Muslim candidates to participate in politics, Black women in the field of communication continue to find themselves energized to contribute necessary intersectional works to diversify the field's lack of diverse theories. Victoria Pruin DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski in *Communicating Gender Diversity* argue that "it is important to make room for diverse feminist theories" in the study of communication. The authors note that there are multiple "feminine styles," with white, middle-class, straight femininity being but one version. Despite these acknowledgments, the field still remains stagnant regarding Black feminist styles and how they benefit the rhetoric of intersectional political performances like Omar's. Marsha Houston wrote specifically about feminist communication theory, articulating that it "has not yet adequately accounted for the different worldviews, different life- changes, and differential treatment of women from nondominant U.S. social groups" (Chavez, K. R., & Griffin, C. L). As this chapter makes clear, alternate styles are possible and can be realized through, at least, visual efforts at political clapbacks. The cases analyzed in this chapter display not only the struggles and forces set upon Rep. Omar, but display the joy and service to community that can embody efforts to clap back.

The rhetorical construction of mediated representations affects not only our understandings of self, but our understandings of how politicians should look and behave.

As Falk explains, “language affects how we perceive and think about the world and that the mass media help create our society. Together these ideas suggest that women candidates should be concerned about how the media portray them and that we as a society should be interested as well.” For Black femme politicians, politics is at least partially about performing an embodied vision essential to the foundation of Black feminism.

A Black feminist analysis of these rhetorical performances can provide the insight necessary to inform their interactions in the public sphere, investigating how political discourse, media representations, and public opinion have become tools of the alt-right to invalidate the legitimacy of Black Femme politicians. By combining Black Feminist theorists such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Brittney Cooper, I have created an intersectional approach to pedagogy in the field of communications. By providing a diverse perspective capable of speaking across the discipline and its lack of inclusive research, my work is significant to the of communication. And as a Black Woman I contribute a unique perspective. Omar's continued dedication to her politics despite the digital spread of Trumps' threats and the associated amplification of the alt-right demonstrates a Black femme style of political clapback; she uses her knowledge of policies to serve on the communities and serve on the committees (foreign affairs) responsible for impeaching Trump. At the same time, her performances on social media to clap back against misinformation is testimony against the racialized and sexualized violence specific to her intersections. Omar's political presence is more than mere representation; she is a Black Femme politician who speaks with a commitment to her community and the destruction of white supremacy.

## CHAPTER THREE

### How Auntie Maxine Plans to Save Democracy

I don't honor him. I don't respect him, and I don't want to be involved with him.

-Waters

Maxine Waters has been representing the district of Southern California since the late 1970s. Elected first to the California Assembly in 1976; Rep. Waters was initially elected to Congress in 1990. Since 1995, she served as a representative and “served as Ranking Member or Chairwoman of every Subcommittee” under the jurisdiction of the Financial Services Committee. During her time in office, she played a key role in the passage of numerous bipartisan pieces of legislation, as well as engaged in "rarely used parliamentary maneuvers" (Financial Services Committee, 2018) to force Republican majorities to hold hearings on Financial Choice Act. She has been a tireless advocate for women's and labor rights, helped push California to divest from South Africa, and was pivotal in helping to prevent a second set of riots in Los Angeles following the second criminal trial of the four-policeman accused of beating Rodney King (Financial Services Committee, 2018; Smith, 1992).

Despite this, before the 2016 election, Rep. Waters was better known nationally via far-right circles where her quotes were often used as part of fundraising appeals for GOP candidates (White, 2018). Since she refused to attend the 45th President's inauguration, however, her "acerbic comments about President Trump" have brought new-found fame with millennials and helped her achieve "icon-level status" (Wire, 2017).

For Waters, the age of social media spread her words at a pace only made possible by the internet, instilling the image of Waters quotes in several formats from gifs, memes, hashtags, and more with Waters embraces the platform using it as a new weapon to fight white supremacy.

Like the older folks use to say, "not new to this, true to this" is how I would best describe congressperson Maxine Waters since storming the White House uninvited during the Bush administration. When members of the Los Angeles Community had been slain, and Bush failed to acknowledge the leaders of the community, she made her voice heard. As the first Congress member to call for Trump's impeachment, Waters is full of what she describes as audacity.

Refusing to be deterred by the obstacles of racialized and sexualized violence, she remains audacious for speaking the truth. By keeping it real, Waters has won the heart of millennials across the internet with several viral moments leading to the creation of several hashtags, positing Waters as a millennial icon. I will be examining viral moments where Maxine Water performs political clap back in the Black femme style. I will review how these moments lead to the production of memes and hashtags that start larger conversations within the Black Community by exploring Waters' viral moments as she combats harassment. While Waters combats harassment, she simultaneously engages in a Black femme styled political clap-back, gaining notoriety for speaking facts and displays that clap back in the vein of Black feminist traditions of knowledge production. Waters' expertise and knowledge of policies and procedures provide her an explorative opportunity for effective advocacy. I display these understandings while analyzing the 2017 Russian investigation committee hearing, the 2017 Bill O'Reilly interaction, and

how Waters became the #Queenofshade. An intersectional account of these events can productively encapsulate the true power of the clapback Waters participates in throughout the Trump Administration.

With hundreds of media appearances by Waters, her presence is not about representation; she transcends imagery and gives meaning to her actions, her words morphing into symbols and ideographs. As McGee explains, “An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing a collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable” (McGee 15). Media generated Waters' ideographic performance taking her words to give meaning to the historical question of racialized and sexualized violence. Her words, I explain, address a deeper question of how democracy continues to fail Black people.

Waters utilization of slogans and common references signals the prevalence of the situation to the audience looking to activate the consciousness of millennials. Waters does what she can to stay “hip.” Building intergenerational gaps is part of why Waters is so relevant. In her latest interview with rapper Megan Thee Stallion, Waters wrote a letter of encouragement to Megan, in praise of her an op-ed "titled “Why I Speak Up for Black Women.” Published in the New York Times, Waters talked about a variety of topics from education, community, and music. When it came to the conversation of music Waters told Megan, “But then they told me to look at, what was it, WAP? And I did, don't worry, don't worry...and here's what I said, now that's audacity. That is audacity.” Waters noted

that men in music have been singing provocative lyrics forever, so what's wrong with a woman doing the same while speaking directly to other women? (Perkins). For Waters, this is one of many instances where millennials have shown respect and praise for her contributions, with Megan explaining, “To be supported by another Black woman who sends the same message, I feel like, 'You know what, I am doing the right thing and I'm gonna keep doing it could cause Maxine Waters said I can,'" she said as the two laughed (Aderoju). Waters ability to connect to the millennials in such an efficient fashion can be explained through a review of social media; she has become an iconic figure to the digital realm with hashtags, gifs, memes, and more, Auntie Maxine's words and face populate both the alt-right and left forums depending on the audience Waters words take a different meaning.

### *Reclaiming My Time*

In January of 2017, representative Maxine Waters delivered a roughly 30-second press conference following a classified hearing with then Director of the FBI, James Comey. In the exceptional assembly before the media, Representative Waters was short with questioners, explained the classified nature of the hearing rendered her unable to offer any details publicly, but that she determined “all I can tell you is the FBI Director has no credibility” (Thomas, 2017). Though Waters had been speaking toward other elected officials and with the media similarly for years prior, the untroubled abruptness of this exchange marked the larger culture’s awareness of Rep. Waters as “Auntie Maxine” (Capehart, 2019). Three months later, during a hearing of the House Financial Services Committee, Waters delivered what would become both a rallying cry of the political left and the most meme-d slogan of an already meme-able Congress member, by interrupting



Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin with the now famous “reclaiming my time” (Emba, 2017).

While numerous incidents of her direct clap backs toward the President brought her to the nation's attention, it was her exchange with Secretary Mnuchin that marked her most famously. In a pointed exchange with Sec. Mnuchin, she insisted he respect her allotted time and not filibuster her questions away with the now viral “reclaiming my time” (Emba, 2017). While the moment's virality drew attention to Rep. Waters, her declaration resonated more deeply with numerous young people, women, and people of color. As Washington Post columnist Christine Emba explained, “for many women and people of color, the phrase ‘reclaiming my time’ felt particularly poignant, with the idea of reclamation specifically speaking to both the present and the past. Society has been wasting not only their Time but also their voices, agency, and potential — for years” (2017). What Waters enunciated in that moment, and what has been felt by those given life by her outbursts is an affective resonance that has the potential to inspire hope in a political system that has failed them for so long.

Waters’ use of the term “reclaiming my time” is standard procedure on the House floor. Waters was referring to a rule of conduct within a particular context, but the internet didn’t know that, nor would it have cared (MacLennan). Waters still received no answer to her question. Despite her goal's immediate failure, the social media took it out of the context of Congress, where Waters was largely ignored, and placed it into the larger context of the world. Waters political agenda no was longer the determining factor of the cross-examination. Instead, the grasp of a Black woman on social media was unleashed and her now viral phrase enunciated a set of particular knowledges for a much

wider audience. However, Waters brought this knowledge to the larger digital public sphere, where it was deployed in a performance only a Black woman could achieve. Her attitude and style, honed by years of being unbothered, generated an affective response.

Affect can be understood as a non-conscious bodily intensity that cannot be named but only be felt (*Kluitenberg*). Waters' words were common yet effective in her delivery. There is something in her voice that implies she is reclaiming more than this moment. Moreover, the initial usage was to interrupt the Secretary while he was (perhaps sarcastically) praising her leadership on behalf of the state of California. In the original moment, Waters demonstrates her drive to reach her chosen goals won't be delayed, even by voices seeking to praise her. In its initial usage, Representative Waters was already geared up for a fight with Secretary Mnuchin. Water's had requested, in writing, answers to several inquiries regarding President Trump's finances in reference to potential Russia influence in the 2016 election. Mnuchin had ignored that letter for two months, and was clearly beginning to stonewall Waters on even answering why the oversight inquiry letters had been ignored (Cawthorn, 2017). In the moment, Waters was quite visibly enacting what Cooper might call eloquent rage (2018). Waters demand wasn't premised as insolence or sass, but was a demand for doing business (Reid, 2018, interview of Cooper). What was conveyed through virality to larger audiences, however, affords a moment of rupture to consider notions of time, energy, and democratic progress. The complexities of time and what reclamation looks like for Black people in America brings to spotlight the political sentiment of Waters performance.

Waters became a Black household name after her video and meme went viral. Black people took pride in the congresswoman's inability to be silenced, rejoicing in her

ability to stand so strong (WUSA9, 2017). Her strength admired, causing "reclaiming my time," a phrase that instantly took up new meaning as a snap-back to anyone wasting your time, energy, or nerve with exhausting nonsense. In addition to unleashing a flood of supportive tweets, it also inspired singer/actor Mykal Kilgore to post a "Reclaiming My Time" gospel remix. The 90-second song loops Waters' voice into a rousing choir, with Kilgore explaining, "Our beloved 'Auntie' Maxine Waters laid this sermon down so good that I had to sing about it. Whenever anybody tries to distract me or block me (even with praise or platitudes), I'm going to have to let them know that I'm #ReclaimingMyTime!!!!!!"(Kaufman, 2017)

“Reclaiming my time functions to encourage and offer joy against the oppressions of the world, but it also displays the embodied performance of a Black femme clap back. “Reclaiming our time,” within this understanding, can encourage Black political subjects—at whatever stage in their environment— to believe that maybe things can get better for Black people through a forward-future looking insisting on doing business. Where Waters suggests, “We should have hope because we've earned it. We've worked for it! It's ours” (Thomas, 2017), she further contextualizes the demand to “reclaim her time as she resists the intransigence of the existing social order. Further, reclaiming my time functions as a performative model of a Black femme styled clapback. Even ignoring the virally received meaning of Waters demand, the initial usage models embodied Black femme through its demand for resistance to intransigence.

“I do not expect every time there is a white supremacist who attacks or there is a white man who kills in a school or in a movie theater or in a mosque or in a synagogue, I don't expect my white community members to respond on whether they love that person or not. And so I think it is

beyond time ... to ask Muslims to condemn terrorists. We are no longer going to allow the dignification of such a ridiculous, ridiculous statement.”-Omar

### *“Auntie Maxine”*

To be called an aunt in the Black community is a badge of honor. “Auntie Maxine” is a name given to Waters by the millennials as a term of support and endearment to vocalize how much her fight for democracy resonated with the community. To progressive supporters, Waters is “Auntie Maxine,” a matriarchal rebel who inspires resistance to tyranny. Millennial fans have taught the grandmother terms like “woke” and “throwing shade.” Her soundbites go viral, become memes, and end up on T-shirts (Carrol 18”).

When someone tries to explain  
your area of expertise to you



Figure 3.1 Auntie Maxime Meme 1

Despite the affirmation behind the sentiment, it relies on a stereotypical notion of service that Black women are indebted to perform for the public even at the expense of their own images. When examining the process of how Waters becomes Auntie Maxine, it is productive to consider the historical imagery that deploys this stereotype in such a debilitating manner. Reviewing memes, gifs, and hashtags is essential to understanding how social media operates as a vehicle to drive stereotypical notions of the role of Black Women in democracy. The democratic party has a reputation for the reliance on the image of Black women to forward the party's mission. For many, that reliance necessitates the actual figure of a Black woman for their trust. In the minds of many, Waters is that figure. Even president managed to evidence this claim in a backhanded compliment-way. Trump explained "The face of the Democrats is now Maxine Waters who, together with Nancy Pelosi, have established a fine leadership team," the president wrote on Twitter on Tuesday morning. "They should always stay together and lead the Democrats, who want Open Borders and Unlimited Crime, well into the future....and pick Crooked Hillary for Pres" (Nelson, 2018). By becoming Auntie Maxine, Waters takes on a role that has been undervalued, exploring how media has rhetorically informed this image requires a view of current media forums. As a leading face for the Democratic party, the viral Auntie Maxine memes also made her a target of scores of hateful memes.



Figure 3.2 Auntie Maxime Meme 2

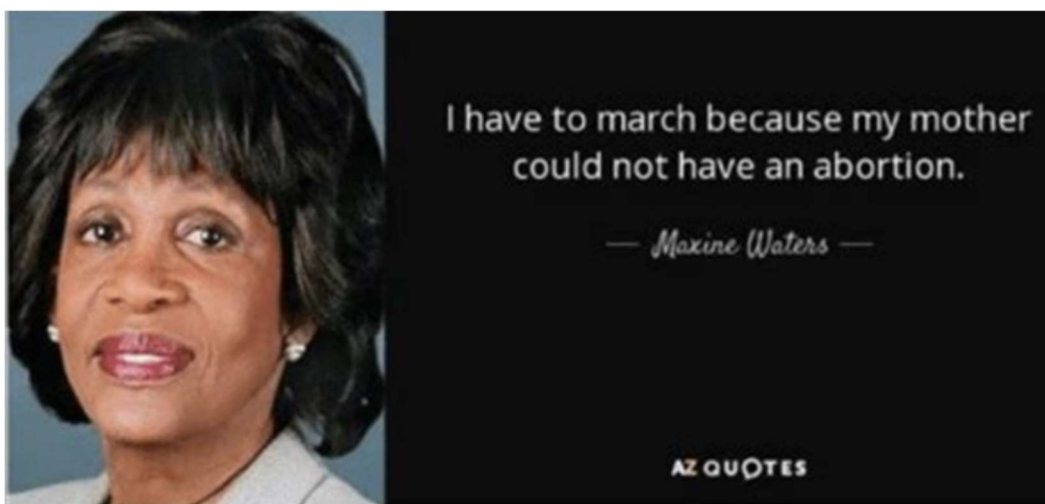


Figure 3.3 Auntie Maxime Meme 3





Figure 3.4 Auntie Maxime Meme 4



Figure 3.5 Auntie Maxime Meme 5

Collectively, these memes represent a reasonable sample of some of the tamer anti-Waters memes (Following Woods and Hahner's (2019) explanation of algorithmic boost, I am not including the sites where these memes were located, but a google search for "Waters memes" would return all of these on the first page of results). Collectively, they insult Representative Waters appearance and intelligence, two of the most central ways in which women, and Black women especially, are harassed. While the respect afforded the designation of "Auntie" is likely appreciated, the derision and appropriated labor of Waters image demonstrates the double-edged nature of being the face of the Democratic party, at least if that face is one of a Black woman.

Since the first opportunity for significant numbers of former slaves to offer un-slaved labor—during the Civil War—Black women have been tasked as Aunties and Mammies, offering their free labor. As the paucity of doctors or nurses available for newly freed slaves became apparent, black "aunties" and "grannies" ministered to the sick" (Freedom..., 1990, 33). Today not only are conditions similarly replicated materially, but through rhetorical constructions and images as well. Stereotypes and ridicule accompany the identity of Black Women inside and out of political spaces. Considering a feminine rhetorical style through an understanding of race enables us to understand how the Waters as "Auntie Maxine" image was created. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. As Water reclaimed time, Black America claimed her as a long-lost auntie to those who felt empowered by the moment. In so doing, she refused to yield to intransigence as doing so would propel the historical stereotypes that accompany Black Women. Collins well articulates the problems of cultural formations:



From mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemima's on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression" (p.5).

Figuring Congresswoman Waters into the role of "Auntie Maxine," captivating the audience to a figure from the past that continues to haunt, posits Waters as only for the world and never for herself. Auntie Maxine's image is reduced to sell the narrative of Progress to which the Democratic Party needs Black voters to buy-in. Viewers are encouraged to think "our Auntie won't steer us in the wrong direction, we know she will take care of us." Not only might "Auntie Maxine" present a dangerous image for Black politicians, but it risks harming Black women materially. Water's Auntie role is a part of appropriated kinship that attempts to take the image of Black familial relations and deploy them to serve the larger picture of the Black women's image as a selfless worker with little of self to lose and only something to give. Maxine is forced into the role of "Auntie" for the whole black community.

Forced kinship allows for a false narrative of care and responsibility to be placed on Waters as she inherits more than the job of a policymaker. Instead of a mere legislator, she's our Aunt, and what our mother can't do, our Tetas can and will selflessly. When mothers are unable to fill a role, our Aunt's in the Black Community meet that expectation. For Waters, these stereotypes increase her visibility but also move her image further from its original form. Waters is no longer in control of her relationship to her community; it is now a forced occupation as one of the hardest and undervalued in the Black society. As Harden (2018) explains, "For many in the Black community, motherhood extends far beyond the nuclear family and biological ties. Black "aunts" are

often the backbone of their community, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities. However, there's no specific call for appreciation for these women.”

Black "Aunt's, Auntie's, Ant's, and Tete's are but a few of the names we use to refer to our Aunt figure in the Black community. Black aunts can be passed down through communal kinship in roles that untraditional in a sense that they are self-making and self-preserved. Aunts can be anyone who you feel a sense of care and responsibility from. Aunts are selfless images that do not get to be viewed as sexual beings, but rather are objects of production that can produce an assortment of benefits for the communities and families that they serve (Harden, 2018). Roles of the Black Aunt are one that requires constant work and sacrificing of yourself for the larger picture. Tete's pick up where mothers are incapable of often providing childcare and meal advice and assistance (Harden, 2018) Blurring the lines between mentorship and motherhood, Black Aunts play an irreplaceable and necessary role in the development of Black children.

### *#BlackWomenatwork*

In March of 2017, Waters spoke on the House floor and proceeded to question the patriotism of Trump's supporters. “[African-Americans] fight against this president, and we point out how dangerous he is for this society and this country, we're fighting for the democracy,” Waters said. “We're saying to those who say they're patriotic, but they've turned a blind eye to the destruction that he's about to cause this country, ‘You're not nearly as patriotic as we are.’” Bill O'Reilly, then a Fox News correspondent, replied by saying “I didn't hear a word [Waters] said. I was looking at the James Brown wig. If we have a picture of James, it's the same wig” (Keefe, 2017). Unbothered by the blatant disrespect of O'Reilly, Waters responded by saying “I am a strong black woman and I

cannot be intimidated. I'm not going anywhere" (Waters, 2017). In response, Twitter users generated and spread virally the hashtag #BlackWomenatWork. The resulting conversations attached to the hashtag lead to a larger discussion of how Black Women in the workplace have been subjected to a form of racialized and sexualized harassment.

Waters doesn't stop clapping back at O'Reilly and friends after she discovers O'Reilly has been accused of sexual harassment. Following the recent departure of another Fox anchor's ousting, Waters took the opportunity to speak truth to power again, taking on Fox's culture of harassment. "Fox has "treated women very badly," Waters said, adding that she supported a criminal investigation of the matter. "This really is a sexual harassment enterprise," Waters said. "It shouldn't be, in America, that you can sexually harass women and then buy your way out of it because you're rich. If they continue to do this, in the way that they have done, they need to go to jail. You know, the president is over there, talking today about Susan Rice going to jail. They need to go to jail. Bill O'Reilly needs to go to jail" (Cummings, 2017). Waters' critique of Fox' culture wasn't simply an attack on a political opponent, though, as racialized and gendered harassment may be combined in unique ways for African American women. Specifically, the cultural and historical contexts of slavery and sexualized stereotypes of African American women result in sexual harassment that is perceived as racially motivated (Collins, 1998, 2000; Murrell, 1996; Winston, 1991).

Simultaneously victimized on basis of both their sex and race, and harassed both sexually and for the agenda's they choose to advance, Black women often are unable to separate their race from gender when considering their harassment. This racialized gender harassment refers to behaviors and comments that serve to insult and degrade women as a

group without the goal of gaining sexual cooperation (Buchanan and Ormerod, 2002). Unfair expectations, devalued experiences, and an on-going list of microaggressions are but a few of the concern's Black women laborers experience on a day-to-day basis. Where the pay gap for all women reflects sexist inequity in the labor market, it is particularly acute for Black Women, who earn on average 61 cents to the white male dollar (Frye, 2019). Extending our current understandings are critical to apprehend the formation of the identity of the Black woman. Expanding our notion of “feminine style” allows for clearer view of harassment in both the workplace and beyond. As DeFrancisco and Palczewski (2013), argue that "it is important to make room for diverse feminist theories" in the study of communication. Adding race and class concerns to traditional notions of feminine style allows us to better understand how structural antagonisms hinder these identities from fulfilling the political agendas that these Black women set forth.

Where workplace harassment is an ever-present concern for all, it is especially pronounced for simultaneously raced and gendered bodies (Buchanan and Ormerod, 2002). Imagine you have decided to dedicate your work as a politician to better the world for marginalized communities, and a company official is Tweeting about you and has called you "Crazy," "Stupid," or “worse.” In corporate settings, many would report to human resources. In the case of Waters, the source of these efforts is the public. When Black women politicians attempt to make such reports and express dismay from the harassing behaviors, they can be harassed more in response to showing an emotional response to the harassment. As workers, emotions for women are not supposed to be displayed unless it is a part of your job. Politics is a field where becoming “too

emotional” remains a concern for all women, even today (Milligan, 2019). Much as Black workers experience a specific form of exploitation that reproduces violence, Black women politicians experience gendered and racialized political harassment.

The process in which Black women politicians experience forms of harassment is entrenched in gendered and racial implications that are both overt and implicit.

Harassments such as this have resulted in life threats, slander, and additional microaggressions. Workers have rights and should be protected when in the workplace. Black workers, and the work they contribute to politics is not valued in the dominant narrative in equitable ways (Bacon, 2019). Similarly, notions of Waters framing her as the savior of American democracy rely on and constitute a new notion of “mammification,” in which “the legacy of Black women's work in domestic service weaves itself into the very fabric of professional Black women's jobs” (Collins, 2002, 65). The amplification of Waters’ profile also makes her a target of seemingly unending stream of humiliating memes from those supporting President Trump. Especially given the disproportionate employment of Black women in government jobs (Laird, 2017), framing Waters as the savior of democracy both underappreciates her labor, and contributes to an on-going project of undervaluing Black Women’s labor more generally.

Moreover, within the government sector, their work can resemble that of “modern mammies,” where the care for the destitute and weak is presumed as their best-suited employment and social role. Black women professionals are expected to fix systems affected by structurally created crises due to underfunding, infrastructure deterioration, and demoralized staff. As Barbara Omolade (1994) points out, “New mammies, especially those educated after the civil rights movement era, have a hard time pointing to

the source of their alienation and depression or identifying with a base and constituency within the Black community. Black professional women are often in high-visibility positions which require them to serve white superiors while quieting the natives” (p. 55). For Black Women politicians, working to save American democracy is more than a job; it is a lifelong dedication that the worker cannot do without embodying their politics, which renders their Blackness inevitably attached to their political subjectivity. When Black women politicians speak in the political arena, the first voice that the audience hears is the voice of Blackness; the second is that of their "woman." Even when they do not specifically speak on "Black issues," they are viewed through their ability to produce a Black image that works as a figure that can be maximized to produce the demands of the company.

### *Do They Really Want Civility? #Queenofshade*

Waters breaks the mold when it comes to confronting injustices. Her tactics are direct and pointed toward the recipients of the message. While Waters’ social media following grew, the mainstream media’s rapport with Waters clap backs continued to gain her new titles. One that stands out is “Queen of shade.” Her shade was unrivaled for some time, disrupting the notion of civility found in Black femme politicians performances. Waters’ confrontations with Trump and those who try to maintain the oppressions of the status quo brings her into further proximity to millennials as she points out the blatant racialized and sexualized violence the administration attempts to hide. By shading the FBI and their lack of credibility through the Russian Probe (“all I can tell you is the FBI Director has no credibility”), she rhetorically leverages her political knowledge to draw attention to the lack of transparency during the proceedings with the public left

with little information regarding the inference in the 2016 election. Her viral “reclaiming my time” moment with Sec. Mnuchin wasn’t designed for virality. it was a pointed demand the machinery of corruption be brought to heel. Her shade is productive because it demands accountability while leaving room for the audience to determine what should be accounted for.

Waters rhetorical performances bring a refreshing approach to the political through the integration of social media. Her openness and perceived authenticity inspires the public to create a fandom for her every action. By remaining open to new ideas and concepts, Waters explains “I am having the time of my life with the millennials,” They’re even teaching me a new language! ‘threw shade,’ but Waters admits she didn’t know what that phrase meant—so she asked her grandchildren. “I am having a great time and I feel a connection has been made,” the representative says about her sudden popularity (Rudolph). That “throwing shade” was new to Waters demonstrates an authenticity to Waters’ stylistic approach. Rather than attempting to generate media attention, her shade emerged before understood there was even a phrase for it. Stylistic performances like this display the power of Black femme style to meet the realities of the world, where even when Black women have little to say, audiences interpolates a deeper meaning to their bodies. Waters dismissive demeanor toward nonsense, even in situations absent a specific substantive argument, offers audiences the opportunity to fill in the blanks. In this way, we can understand the style as reminiscent of that embodied by Senator Carol Mosley Braun.

Waters, like Moseley Braun before her, is virally framed as Auntie Maxine both for her no-nonsense demeanor, but also for her labor. Like the rhetorical style of Carol

Moseley Braun, Waters is known for her historical triumphs. Braun, as the First Black Women to be elected to Senate and Water's as the first Black woman Financial Committee chair. Braun shares a similar feminine style of engagement that spoke across platforms to Black communities through a double voice. Feminine style, originally coined by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, has come to be understood as conveying an equivalent relationship with an audience, encouraging audience participation, and the traditionally feminine values of care, nurturance, and affective relationships (Dow and Tonn, 1993). Given the recognizability of feminine style as a rhetorical strategy for politicians, the “double voice” of feminine style can function as a strategy of misdirection to create a cover for African American signification. As Gates argues, "Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g)" (Reid-Brinkley). Waters' use of her social media platform, as well as its circulation of content through both Black Twitter and the overlapping political left Twitter, is an important mode by which her communicative performance allows for signifying to occur.

Waters is able to achieve the millennial audience's attention through both her meaning and demeanor. Waters praises her interactions and approval of the millennial generation as part of what makes her such an enticing figure to drive the van of democracy (Craven, 2020). Despite her millennial approval Waters image, her shiny pressed hair and dress suits, cater to the picture already painted of the “Black Politician.” Moseley-Braun’s engagements with George W. Bush resemble the nature of Water's engagement with Trump, though absent the power of social media. When Moseley-Braun campaigned, she depicting President Bush as a violent political leader that held America "hostage," contrasting herself as the calm, cooperative, and durable feminine alternative.



Waters does her best to depict herself as a direct, rational subject, merely doing her job for the American people. Waters, like Moseley-Braun, centers their labor toward political solutions. As such, it becomes easy for Black women to be framed as “Auntie's and Overachievers,” forced to clean up the constant failure that is presented for Black people through the political.

### *Black Lady Overachiever*

A final view of Waters as “Black Lady Overachiever,” is inspired by Water’s strident exhortations and President Trump’s efforts to recode her as the face of the democratic party. In June of 2018, Waters, always ready to defend her words, exhorted her audiences to stridently engage members of the Trump administration.

Let’s make sure we show up wherever we have to show up. And if you see anybody from that Cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd. And you push back on them. And you tell them they’re not welcome anymore, anywhere. We’ve got to get the children connected to their parents “We don’t know what damage has been done to these children. All that we know is they’re in cages. They’re in prisons. They’re in jails. I don’t care what they call it, that’s where they are and Mr. President, we will see you every day, every hour of the day, everywhere that we are to let you know you cannot get away with this.

Waters call demands accountability for the actual individuals responsible for upholding the structures of white supremacy. Such bold demands stir extreme uncomfortability in the psyche of whiteness. Many saw Waters call as a threat. President Trump took this as an opportunity to paint Waters as a violent antagonist saying “Congresswoman Maxine Waters, an extraordinarily low IQ person, has become, together with Nancy Pelosi, the Face of the Democrat Party. She has just called for harm to supporters, of which there are many, of the Make America Great Again movement. Be careful what you wish for Max!” Along with Trump’s public interpretation of the events,

and the media frenzy to follow, Waters had another viral moment where she became rhetorically constructed as accountable for the Democratic Party as whole. Trump professing Waters as the face of the Democrat Party invites the larger public to understand Waters as the face of the party. Trump surely hypothesized that the racism and sexism inherent in this approach offered him a high-quality foil for his attacks. But this framing also constituted Waters in the image of the Black Lady Overachiever.



Figure 3.6 Auntie Maxime Meme 6

Within these constraints, Waters' image might work to unite the possibility of progress as the vehicle of democratic freedom. In this way, she could be understood as performing something akin to what Patricia Hill Collins calls that the "Black Lady Overachiever." The Black Lady Overachiever, Reid-Brinkley explains, is a new controlling image applied to middle-class professional Black women. The Black Lady Overachiever is, first and foremost, a "black lady." The black lady is middle-class,

straight, and either bound by heterosexual marriage or is single and asexual. The building of social performance of black femininity within the black middle class that could provide a course for the resistance of dominant narratives constraining black women produced a strategy that required a close reiteration of white, middle-class, heterosexual, American femininity (Reid-Brinkley). While Waters doesn't fit the actual stereotype of the middle-class aspect of the Black Lady Overachiever, she represents a Black 1% version of the image, and the virality of memes about her, especially given her boots straps narrative rise from childhood poverty, functions to constitute a vision with which many academics can relate. The drive to do everything, especially in the era of ever-tightening budgets, and ever-expanding responsibilities, makes academic laborers particularly susceptible to this portrayal. Combining this drive to work through the torment with the gendered racism of American society writ large renders Black women especially vulnerable to what William Smith first called "racial battle fatigue" (Smith, Hung and Franklin, 2011). Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) defined racial battle fatigue as "the result of constant physiological, psychological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal and racially hostile or unsupportive environments" (p. 555). Water's plans to defy the odds of American democracy and do what hasn't been done despite overwhelming evidence to contrary results in a tiring process and hard image to maintain in the face of public critiques and dismay. Representations such as these are woven into the fabric of American Democracy. Notions such as these, digitally lubricated by memetic reminders of Waters' importance offered pre-2018 midterm election audiences the opportunity to understand and rely upon the

image and figure of Waters as a savior, capable of doing everything, while also throwing shade at her opponents.



Figure 3.7 Auntie Maxime Meme 7

Presumed notions of intergenerational traditions of politics condition us to believe that the arena of American democracy provides an equal ground of engagement, creating the foundations of what “Makes America Great.” Greatness in America can be found in how promising our political system can be for those who are willing to put their hope in politics. For Black women politicians, however, the intersections of gender and race determine and facilitate how the political will respond to their bodies as well as their ideas. Maxine Waters is an exceptional example of how the political can be viewed through a spiritual exchange; she evokes her emotions and true feelings holding back nothing. As Waters explains, “My spirit tells me I cannot be silent” (WTHR.com, 2017). With an ever-roaming spirit to strive towards social justice, Waters exposes the flaws of

the 2016 election along with the inherent conflict of the President and his response to Black women in the political. In so doing, she illustrates well the Black femme clapback style—speaking truth to power, unbothered, on behalf of her community. Simultaneously however, the political labor of Black women politicians as workers who inevitably toil in Sisyphus-like conditions often offers little but Black political exhaustion through the process of "Racial Battle Fatigue."

Regardless of the constructed image of Waters, or those other brave Black and Brown woman politicians, the reality of their labor is one that most assuredly is informed by constant battle fatigue. That is important for them personally. The image of those politicians, however, helps construct our own understandings of larger cultural markers. Waters' labor cannot be compensated and democracy will always be indebted to her efforts. However, the construction of the happy soldier just doing her job, unbothered by the tolls of her efforts, help construct a societal narrative that propels an affirmation of the Black lady overachiever. In so doing, this image models for audiences a dangerous ideal of overwork and self-sacrifice that might encourage audiences to seek the same overworked lifestyle, risking burnout and the feeling of never being enough (Allan, 2015).

### *Conclusion*

Although my concerns of the rhetorical construction of Waters' labor has contributed to democracy, she suggests she will stop when she's tired. Her words simplify the process for what it looks like for Black Women to stop working. If only there was a world where normal people could simply tell people they can't accept additional work when they are tired. As such, Waters enactment of Black femme

clapback displays the upsides for democracy, but the downsides for audiences who might model her practices. Waters contributions to democracy are boundless. As the longest-serving Congress member she demonstrates true patriotism to her country. By leading impeachment trials and hearings, Waters not only talks the talk, she walks the walk. As an embodied example of Black femme style, her rhetorical denunciations offer fiery hope for millions, and often function as a resistant stand against white supremacy. But, as is so often the case with mediated representations of exception individuals as stand ins for entire classes of people, there are obvious associated risks with the rhetorically constructed model they affirm.

Through her intergenerational pull, Waters builds a relationship of care and appreciation with millennials that keeps the relationship reciprocal. The congresswoman's sudden popularity has led to interview after interview in the likes of Teen Vogue, Jet, Elle, Essence, Cosmopolitan and millennial-focused news sites such as Mic and BuzzFeed, with headlines like, "Maxine Waters Is Back and She's Not Here to Play" (Wire). Moreover, Waters power is in many ways related to her reliance on the power of Black women as a collective. She explains “Black women, because we have evolved with strength and voting power and economic power, this is a special moment in the history of black women. And I think we’re going to be very key in helping to set this country right and to make sure that this president does not remain president” (Waters). Even here, as Waters urges the impeachment of President Trump, she grounded her approach upon a foundation of Black feminist pedagogy. Based on collective resistance, and operating on behalf of her community, Waters remains resilient in the fight against white supremacy. By using her experience and knowledge as the longest member of congress, she attempts

to educate the public on procedures and processes, while doing so in a style that hits with millennials, at least partially owing to her stylized clap backs. Her displays of authenticity affective connections with her audiences and illustrate well a Black femmes style as possible for politicians. Waters iconography doesn't happen because she allows for democracy to happen, she speaks it into existence through her constant interrogations of one of America's biggest failures. Demonstrated through "Reclaiming my time," overachievement, and unbothered approach, Water's displays the power of the Black femme style. While its embrace as a model for audiences, as well as the personal risks it entails for those who embody it remain high, a Black femme style of assertive and strident resistance might be a necessity to save American democracy.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Swatting the Fly of White Supremacy

Here you have now this remarkable, brilliant, prepared African American woman, South Asian woman, ready to fulfill the dreams and aspirations of Shirley Chisholm and myself and so many women of color...This is exciting and is finally a breakthrough that so many of us have been waiting for. And it didn't come easy.  
-Lee

And it is within our power, and if we use our vote and we use our voice, we will win. And we will not let anyone subvert our democracy.  
-Harris

Kamala Harris's "Chucks and Pearls" let you know where she is from and where she is going. With her traditional West coast kicks and AKA necklace to match, Harris has loosened up since her days as a prosecutor and attempted to display to the public who she is and what she's capable of achieving. Like all the Black femme politicians in this thesis, she is the first of many. Harris was the first African American and first woman elected district attorney of San Francisco (2004–2011) and attorney general of California (2011–2016). On November 3, 2020, she became the first woman and the first African American and Asian American elected vice president of the United States. With Harris's expansive legal resume, she is a legal expert and utilizes her knowledge of the law to elevate her roles throughout the system. Her expertise as an attorney was helpful throughout the Trump Administration, as Harris served on several committees that assisted in the first impeachment of President Trump and the Supreme Court nominee hearing of Brett Kavanaugh. Her cross-examination skills brought her into the national spotlight, and social media virality followed with Trump ridiculing her questioning of



Kavanaugh, including calling her “nasty” (Noor, 2020). Moments like this show how courageous the Vice-President is as she looks a white supremacist alleged rapist in the eyes and makes him accountable for his actions. Creating a viral moment that illustrates how Black women can performatively enact their agency, Harris demonstrates well the affective power of their clapback. For Kamala, her cross-examination of Kavanaugh functioned as a long overdue clapback against the patriarchal efforts of the Senate as they allowed Anita Hill’s testimony to be trampled by Thomas decades earlier. Harris was there to create a different time and moment where women’s voices could be heard in the courtroom. Though much of her career and legacy has been a reflection of this, I will examine moments throughout the Trump Administration where Kamala Harris has participated in political clapback.

Argumentation as a field has long struggled to better incorporate issues of gender and race into study of a discipline that traces its roots to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (West, 2012). In "Special Issues-Argumentation and Feminism, an Introduction," Catherine Palczewski (1996) addresses argumentation's altogether lack of inclusion, explaining that "gender *always* influences *all* aspects of argument—form, function, reception, and presentation. For example, if feminists propose alternative forms of proof in an argument that influences the ability to produce and practice argument in a world constrained by patriarchy” (Palczewski, 162; italics in original). Similarly, as a subset/side-discipline of rhetorical theory, the study of argumentation suffers from similar problems of rhetoric’s whiteness (Houdek, 2018). Communication’s disciplinary practices partially explain the concerns of underrepresentation in the field, as citational practices, employment of graduate students, and leadership positions since at least 1990 have all massively

overrepresented white scholar and overly centered masculine whiteness (Chakravartty, et. al., 2018). In the field of argumentation studies, one need look no further than the field's largest stand-alone conference, the Alta Argumentation conference, to understand the field is dominated by white scholars, and largely cisgender white men (Varda, 2021).

Scholarly inquires that center the experiences of Black women, especially those that seek to understand the multiple modes of existence possible for Black women, would improve the epistemic weakness in the field wrought by an over emphasis on whiteness and cisgender men. This chapter seeks to serve as a partial corrective to these disciplinary weakness by better understanding Black women's experiences, centering discourses targeting Black women, and analyzing Black women's performance from a Black feminist perspective. By positing the lived experiences of Black Women as evidence, we can better understand how "the personal is political" (Yamahatta-Taylor). This view of Harris's participation in the Vice-Presidential debate can be coupled with the argumentation theory of "argument-as-war," which consistently appears both in theoretical writings and in argumentative texts. For example, Robert C. Rowland describes the function of argument as occurring when "an arguer tests his or her claims against a competing claim...When I am forced to answer your arguments against my position, I may discover that I am wrong or be forced to modify my beliefs (Hinderer, Kahane; Trapp and Schuetz; Wenzel)

The Vice-Presidential debate serves as a prime rhetorical artifact, through which we must examine how argument-as-war encapsulates the back-and-forth question-and-answer style of argumentation, wherein both candidates fight for the position of Vice-President with their words. When one considers how both Harris and Pence precisely

wielded facts and phrases to persuade the public, argument-as-war is a perfect theory to understand the object of this discussion as it applies to the Trump administration. In this chapter, I explore mainstream media coverage, social media, and how politicians' oppressive ideologies and practices reinforce stereotypes and tropes of Black women to continue a dominant and distorting narrative of Black women. I highlight moments where Kamala Harris experienced racialized and sexualized violence, while also examining the instances in which Harris participated in Black feminist traditions. Specifically, I contextualize the raced and gendered attacks on Kamala Harris by offer a few representative anecdotes from her career. I then consider three sets of memetic arguments—“Joe and the Hoe,” Copmala, and Momala I conclude by arguing that a collective mobilization of Black feminist theory can productively explain the import of the Vice-Presidential debate. By centering the experiences of Black women to frame and articulate this chapter, I seek to more clearly apprehend how we might alter problematic understandings dominant narratives within the field of political argumentation.

A Black feminist analysis of the 2020 Vice-Presidential debate is necessary to depict Harris's performance accurately. Understand Black feminism as "the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions all women of color face" (Yamahatta-Taylor), and in an effort to guide “political action and liberation,” I consider alternate frameworks by which to adjudicate the debate. Black feminism offers a model to establish that framework and consider how Black women’s experiences are not viewed monolithically. Instead, I seek to more clearly articulate the importance of incorporating intersectional approaches to the study of argumentation. For, because of intersectionality, we can come to terms with the fact that "these problems of exclusion

cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure” (Crenshaw). Proof that a one-size-fits-all approach is not applicable when it comes to the layered identities of Black women inevitably calls for a reevaluation of Black feminist thought within argumentation writ large.

### *Can't Turn a Hoe into a President*

As my grandmother would say “They done called that woman everything but a child of god.” Kamala Harris has been referred to in the media as “Ho, Hoe, Slut, Bitch, feminazi, Tramp, Cunt, Escort, Prostitute, Mistress, old flatback, and even a Mattress to name a few of the ever-growing list of names that circulates the internet as an attempt to strip the vice-president of her credibility (A Cunt Who Cunts Cunts, 2020; Beschizza, 2020; Heese, 2020; Music News, 2020; Palmer, 2020; WDTV News Staff, 2020). Slut shaming campaigns designed by the far right, as well as establishment media relay the message that Harris slept her way to the top. These accusations aren’t new as her body and personal life have been subject to hyper focus by the media since she began her campaign for San Francisco District Attorney against her former boss Terrence Hallinan. In this first campaign, Harris’ sexuality was foregrounded when Hallinan’s campaign targeted Harris as a part of the city’s problem with “corrupt political figures” (Siders, 2019). Hallinan used Harris’s mid 1990’s relationship with San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown as a prime example. Mailers quoted a voter saying “I don’t care if Willie Brown is Kamala Harris’ ex-boyfriend. What bothers me is that Kamala accepted two appointments from Willie Brown to high-paying, part-time state boards — including one she had no training for — while being paid \$100,000 a year as a full-time county employee” (Siders, 2019). Hallinan’s campaign depicted Harris as aligned with

corruption – but not because she, herself, was corrupt but because she used her sexuality in a corrupt way. During the campaign, the public did not spare criticism of Harris’s past relationship with Brown. It eventually became the focus of the media narrative against Harris.

In a run-off debate against Hallinan, the audience confronted her with the question: “if elected district attorney would she operate independently from Brown’s political machine?” Harris answered the question by centering on Hallinan’s campaign’s corruption, even suggesting she would be willing to investigate Hallinan himself for corruption. Harris won by a close margin of 51%-49%.

Harris’s relationship with Brown has since resurfaced numerous times as an example of how Harris rose to the top of California politics. Terrible human being and deceased right wing blowhard Rush Limbaugh was front and center amplifying and propagating the Harris conspiracies. Limbaugh’s 15 million weekly listeners heard him explain how Harris had “brazenly slept her way” into politics (Palmer, 2020). While Limbaugh’s framing of the relationship would shock most reasonable listeners, Limbaugh’s accounts were not an anomaly in the partisan right media sphere. Limbaugh referenced two accounts in his salacious retelling of Harris’ story. The hyperpartisan right leaning and somewhat unreliable (Media Bias Chart, no date) American Spectator described Harris as a “public escort and mattress” (Fischer, 2020). The other article Limbaugh mentioned was about NBA photographer Bill Baptist, who was sacked for sharing a “Joe and the Hoe” meme (considered more in depth below). “Some people read this story ‘mattress’ (and wonder), didn’t he mean ‘mistress,’” Limbaugh said. “No. I think they meant ‘mattress’ here. “I have yet to see — and it may yet happen, since I now

have amplified them — I have yet to see any reaction to either of these stories anywhere in the drive-by media. “We have something new that’s been thrust, 'ahem,' into American politics, and that’s the question of using sex to get ahead. I just find this really, really curious” (Palmer, 2020)

Fact checking site Snopes confirmed Brown was married when he dated Harris – but he had been separated from his wife for more than 10 years. Meanwhile, Limbaugh repeatedly referred to Biden and Harris' professional relationship as an "affair" during his segment. Limbaugh’s stated hopes of mainstream media attention are precisely how the media becomes a tool for white supremacist ideologies to circulate and become weaponized against Black femme politicians like Harris. As Varda and Hahner (2020) explained, alt-right notions of white supremacist logics get circulated from alt-right, to far right, to mainstream establishment conservative voices, and then get filtered back again, all the while amplifying the white supremacist ideologies underpinning each algorithmic move. In these ways, Limbaugh’s efforts are a well-established mode of undermining Black women. Moreover, while these specific efforts were centered on Harris, the way in which Harris was depicted relied upon racialized and gendered stereotypes, which help rhetorically constitute our understanding of Black women more generally.

Other voices in the conservative media engage in similar activities, but they also focus on questioning Harris’ Blackness. Limbaugh’s refusal to accept Harris’ achievements, and more importantly (due to his reach as one of the most trusted voices in conservative talk radio) his ability to influence large audiences, is grounded in racialized and sexualized violence. Limbaugh not only questions Harris sexual history but he also questions her Blackness. “Can somebody explain to me how Kamala Harris is an African

American? Her father's Jamaican and her mother is Indian. How does that equal African American?” (Palmer, 2020). Comments like these, repeated across the internet and mainstream media, help drive racialized and sexualized violence. Questioning the “Blackness” of a candidate like Harris is quite reminiscent of the not so small cottage industry of articles devoted in 2007 and 2008 to the topic of Obama’s Blackness. While the valiance of the racial questioning is similar—its only ever applied to Black politicians, it functions as a trap, and there is no answer that doesn’t make the candidate look worse—as a Black woman, Harris was subjected to both racialized and sexualized attacks. In short, while these discussion purport to be about Kamala Harris, comments like this lead into the larger conversation of middle-class Black women and sexuality.

“Joe and the Hoe”

Following then candidate Biden’s announcement of Kamala Harris as his Vice-Presidential running mate, a number of “hoe” centered memes appeared and circulated heavily in right leaning digital ecosystems. The primary meme, “Joe and the Hoe,” appeared within hours of Biden’s announcement of Harris, and by the weekend, were available for purchase on stickers, yard signs, and T-shirts.



Figure 4.1 Joe and the Hoe Graphic



Figure 4.2 Joe and the Hoe Shirt

Designed to match the campaign colors, this meme traffics not only in the act of calling Vice President Harris a “Hoe,” but reinforcing the stereotypes and myths of the promiscuous Black woman. While the meme’s impact is directed at Harris, its racialized and sexualized context persists whether Black women are standing at a bus stop with our children, on our way to church dressed in our Sunday best, studying at the library for a class, sitting in a business suit testifying before congressional committee, or standing in a hotel lobby. Age, dress, appearance, and even economic status have much less to do with our image than do race and gender (Thompson). Circulation of this meme caused a stir on Amazon with the removal of t-shirts with the meme on it referring to presidential candidate Joe Biden and his running mate U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris as “Joe and the Hoe”



appeared on the website. Amazon told Newsweek in a statement on Tuesday that the T-shirts—that were listed by third-party sellers—would be taken down: "All sellers must follow our selling guidelines and those who do not will be subject to action including potential removal of their account. The products in question have been removed" (Newsweek).

Harris's story isn't new to Black women politicians. Condoleezza Rice's sexuality was forefronted in discussions of her for years. To fully understand the image of the Black lady it is necessary to return to Condoleezza Rice, who part in fashion her persona by making her sheltered southern Black middle-class childhood a central facet of her person mythology (Thompson). There is something mythical about Black women's sexuality in addition to how the intersections they occupy help shape its translation to larger audiences. For Rice, and those conservative voices motivated to elevate her place within their political orbit, this meant engaging in respectability politics. Rice and other black ladies present themselves as a challenge to the dominant representation of Black womanhood in the public imagination, where one-dimensional images of them as promiscuous, seductive and sexually irresponsible circulate (Thompson). Controlling images dominate the performances of Black femme politicians down to every last detail—especially their physical appearance. Harris' often wears a tailored suit, styles herself with a conservative hairstyle, appears with minimal makeup, and sports a few well-chosen accessories such as her 20 pearl AKA jewelry (Thompson).

Despite active efforts to negotiate the politics of respectability, Harris remains subject to the stereotypical forces framing representations of Black women in our society. In the context of the salacious stories circulating regarding Harris' personal relationships,

and propelled through the social imaginary via the Joe and the Hoe meme, Harris' persona is shaped by the figure of the Jezebel. Persisting since at least the period of Black enslavement in the US, the Jezebel stereotype hypersexualizes Black women's bodies and codes those bodies as mere objects for desire (Anderson, 2018). The Jezebel stereotype originated, "...from the sexual exploitation and victimization of African American women (by their white slave owners), often a way to justify sexual relations with enslaved women" (Thomas, Witherspoon & Speight, 2004, pg. 429). The Jezebel exploits men's weaknesses through the use of her own sexuality (West, 1995, pg. 462). She asserts sexual power and dominance over men in order to obtain what she wants. Author Patricia Hill-Collins believes that there is now a modern execution of this stereotype, "whether she 'fucks men' for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass media" (Hill-Collins, 2004, pg. 127). This adopted role by African American women influence their interactions and treatment by African American men (Hill-Collins, 2009, pg. 169; hooks, 1992, pg. 90). The sexualization of African American women traces throughout history with various levels of abuse and misrepresentation (Fontaine).

Joe and the Hoe reflects a number of larger issues with patriarchal ideologies still infused throughout politics. For Black women these, these stereotypes structure circulating narratives that both constitute real rhetorical violence and makes physical violence more justified—as the jezebel justifies notions of unrapeability (Crooms, 1995). Collectively this meme, and the circulating discourses that support its ideological valiances, reinforce not simply negative understandings of Harris, but reinscribe oppressive structures applicable to all Black women.

### *Copmala*

Following her announcement that Harris was running for President, a number of conservatizing themes in the twittersphere and other social media site emerged to denigrate her accomplishments. Central to these criticisms was the idea that Harris was overly close with law enforcement. As the exchange with Biden in one of the early Democratic primary debates demonstrated (discussed above), Harris' record as a prosecutor framed her to the right of Biden politically on issue of policing and incarceration. In a Democratic primary, especially for with younger Black audiences, and Leftists more generally, such a view was difficult to overcome (Cooper, 2017). Helping propel this narrative were a series of memes that framed Harris, less as a prosecutor, and instead as an actual instrument of the carceral state—a cop.



Figure 4.3 Copmala Meme 1



Figure 4.4 Copmala Meme 2

The meme on the left depicts Harris in a police uniform against a backdrop the Blue Lives Matter flag. A second faded image embedded in the flag displays her smiling and open-mouthed grin, as if she is mid-laugh. In the foreground, Harris is shown with a steely resolve highlighting the uniform she wears. Finally, in the lower left corner, she is depicted squatting on the ground smiling as she pulls the hands of a young Black girl into the arrest position. A purple ribbon in her hair highlights the young girls' innocence. As a meme, the visual is masterful. It activates a number of affective connections to demonstrate not only that Harris stand with law enforcement, but does so in opposition to the Black community writ large. The inclusion of the Blue Lives Matter flag is especially powerful, as the movement largely exists to ostensibly display support for law

enforcement, though in reality to simply deny the message of Black Lives Matter (Sharlet, 2018).

The second meme, emerging later in the primary season, is a more playful reminder of a similar message. Using the film promotion poster from the original Beverly Hills Cop (1984), the meme mimics the font of the original film poster, and superimposes Harris' face over the area where Eddie Murphy's face appears in the original image. In case, however, younger audiences are unable to identify the original image, the meme adds a Kamala's signature pearls and a police badge as a necklace and adorns her head with a police officer's hat. While the first meme generates a more foreboding sense of anger, the second meme relies more on nostalgia and humor to propel its circulation. Both humor and anger are affective dimensions that help propel these images across social media and into the collective imaginary (Phillips, 2015). Collectively, these memetic messages help create an affective resonance that helps craft an understanding of the world that may or may not be premised in reality (Chaput, 2017).

Together, these images depicts how substantial parts of Black communities felt concerning Harris' involvement with the carceral state, but also helped construct a notion that Harris was too conservative for leftist audiences. Harris' record, neither as a district attorney, nor as California's Attorney General should be understood as progressive (Bazon, 2019). Her inability to craft a better settlement deal with banks over unjust mortgage foreclosures, a continuation of civil liberties violations of some offenders, an over reliance on invasive familial DNA testing, a "smart on crime" approach that seemed remarkably similar to a "tough on crime" approach, and a record of charging parents for their children's truancy which disproportionately affected minority communities are just

a few of the leftist knocks against her (Marcetic, 2017). However, comparisons to Barack Obama, long a staple of media coverage of Harris, might be apt on the question of politics, as she offered a semi-progressive stance for every one of her more conservative stances, including banning the imposition of the death penalty as San Francisco's DA, her frequent criticism of the criminal justice system, accomplishing the largest fraud settlement with a company who had overcharged California and its impoverished and disabled residents (Marcetic, 2017). A few of these programs deserve further attention.

In 2005 Harris developed the "Back on Track" program to reduce recidivism by offering nonviolent, low-level defendants job training and other life skills education as an alternative to jail (Willon). Harris's program developed a national model to reduce recidivism. By having nonviolent first-time offenders pled guilty to the charge, participants had to undergo a series of what Harris refers to as "boot camps" such as GED programs, job training, community service, therapy, rehab, etc. After the program, participants would have their records expunged. By implementing Back on Track, Harris received scrutiny. Many believed a prosecutor's role was to make an arrest, not concern herself with what happens to the criminals afterward. Despite the scrutiny, Harris continued with the program showing great success within the first two years. The result of the program showed that "less than 10% of those who graduated from the program were re-offenders compared to 53% of drug offenders statewide who returned to prison or jail within two years of release" (Willon, date).

Back on Track was then adopted by the Obama administration as a national model for recidivism programs. Harris remained faithful to her campaign promises refusing to seek the death penalty even though the public recommended it for the 2004 murder of

police officer Isaac Espinoza. Public outcry sought capital punishment, with police unions and organization's calling out Harris for her refusal to "seek justice." Despite Harris's beliefs, she found herself criticized by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, while speaking at the funeral of Espinoza, said, "This is not only the definition of tragedy, but also the exceptional circumstance called for by the death penalty. "Refusing to oblige to the request, Harris was never endorsed by the San Francisco police association Harris in any of her future political runs. In November of 2010, Harris was elected as Attorney General of California after her race with Steve Cooley. Cooley was prematurely declared the winner by several local outlets; three weeks later, Harris was announced the winner. With mail-in ballots counted, the election concluded Harris won by less than a point or just over 74,000 votes out of more than 9.6 million casts. With incarceration rates at an all-time high rose from 52 percent in 2003 to 67 percent in 2006, the highest seen in a decade. Many of the convictions accounting for that increase stemmed from drug-related prosecutions, which also soared, from 56 percent in 2003 to 74 percent in 2006. As California's attorney general, Harris pushed a punitive initiative that treated truancy among elementary schoolers as a crime for which parents could be jailed (Giorgis).

In short, and according to a well-circulated analysis by Branko Marcetic of the very leftist *Jacobin*, Harris's political career is better characterized as a series of half measures, rather than either conservative or progressive. In other words, the biggest legitimate criticism of her career is she rarely engaged bold progressive action (Marcetic). The circulation of these memes, however, reduced her career to that of simply a cop—a tool of the carceral state willing to lock up all Black people regardless of their age, using truancy laws, marijuana laws, or anything at her disposal.



Copmala went viral just like numerous other Kamala memes. This one, however, wasn't gaslighted by the alt-right, but rather propelled by Black Twitter. For months, Black Twitter dragged "Copmala Harris." There are tweets of videos from A&E's *Beyond Scared Straight* captioned "Kamala Harris visiting the black and brown folk she threw in prison;" tweets imagining Harris locking black people up while bopping to "Another One Bites the Dust;" tweets casting Kamala as your evil prosecutor auntie who sends your brother to the pen; tweets envisioning Kamala as Instagram celebrity @iamperez in shades and head wrap telling black people "Y'ALL ARE GOING TO JAIL. PERIOD!" (Coleman, 2019). Reusing her words against her, "Top Cop" millennials called for an explanation of the prosecutors record and wanted to know why she thought being a cop in the day of #Blacklivesmatter was a way to gain Black voters. Critics on both sides thought the criticism were unfair and politically motivated when asked about her record Harris stated "I'm fully aware of that whole meme about 'Kamala is a cop,'" she said, an aggrieved note creeping into her tone, "and there are strategic reasons people are doing that." The meme, she suggested, was a part of a calculated effort to turn a strength—her record as a prosecutor—into a weakness (Squires, date). Harris's inability to give the public the response they hoped for continued to disappoint. The Black community desperately wanted Harris to say she was wrong, and her opponents used it at every available opportunity.

The very legitimate criticism of Harris as too conservative, coupled with the well-travelled memetic arguments framing her as a cop, help contextualize a debate performance that likely ended her Presidential campaign, and in some ways burgeoned the credentials of Biden as more left leaning than she. As the candidates moved to the



topic of education, Harris told Biden “I do not believe you are a racist and I agree with you when you commit yourself to the importance of finding common ground But,” she added, “I also believe and it’s personal and it was hurtful to hear you talk about the reputations of two United States senator who is built their reputations and career on the segregation of race in this country.” “It was not only that... there was a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public schools and she was bused to school every day,” Harris said. “That little girl was me. So, I will tell you that on this subject, it cannot be an intellectual debate among Democrats. We have to take it seriously. We have to act swiftly” (Merica, date). However, Biden took the opportunity to remind Harris of her record as prosecutor saying, “It’s a mischaracterization of my position across the board, If we want to have this litigated on who supports civil rights, I’m happy to do that,” Biden said. “I was a public defender. I was not a prosecutor. I left a good firm to become a public defender” (Merica, date).

Reminding the public that Harris was “the cop” after all, Biden helped seal what had been a floundering (at least financially) Presidential campaign. The idea of “Harris as a cop” not only reduced her political career from district attorney and later California Attorney General to that of mere foot soldier on behalf of the carceral state, but also crafted her as a traitor to the Black community. Rather than simply reducing her progressive bona fides, the memetic messages played on the stereotype of the Black Malinche—the traitor to the Black community (Coleman, 2019). The Black Malinche is “an adaptation of the matriarch and jezebel images” and functions in “response to Black feminism and public critiques of Black male sexism” (Alender-Floyd, 2008). In short, while these copmala memes and concerns over her conservatism helped end her

Presidential campaign, the images deployed are premised on stereotypical archetypes that reinscribe those harmful notions not just for Harris, but for all Black women.

### **Momala**

Acclaimed for her fierce demeanor, Harris's lack of vulnerability made it hard for the public to relate to her. Although Harris may not be a biological mother for Black woman, Mothering is a part of the gig. "Momala" introduced herself to provide a new outlook and helpful reformation of Harris' image. By reeling the public in letting them know she was human meant letting them into her personal life. In August of 2020, Harris told the world a little about her family, saying "I've had a lot of titles in my career and certainly, vice president will be great. But 'mamala' will always be the one that means the most." The term "stepmom" soon evolved into "momala" - a play on her name, and also the Yiddish term "mamaleh," meaning little mama (Independent, date) given to her by her step children. Harris's sharing of this relationship began circulating in public discourse and the improvement in public favor was quickly evident. With short interviews and multiple appearances, Harris was able to be transformed from hoe, to cop, to mother. Saturday Night Live premiered their momola and Joe skit, and further propelled the narrative of momala.

In it, the Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee (played by Maya Rudolph) took on the role of stern teacher, telling Trump to "not treat my Joe like that. He's a nice boy." "Kamala, I got this," Biden replied, to which she quipped, "Joe, let Momala go to work." After forcing Trump to apologize, Harris gave musical guest Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B's song "WAP" a whole new meaning. "I think if there's one thing we learned tonight, it's that America needs a WAP: Woman as President," she stated as the

crowd cheered. "But for now, I'll settle for HVPIC: Hot Vice President in Charge. So why don't the two of you finish this debate or whatever the hell this is with dignity? And when you're done, I've got you boys some PB and J and apple slices waiting for you," she said, walking off stage (Calvario). Momala continued to make appearances on SNL with similar scenarios, fighting the battles on behalf of Biden, and castigating Trump's bullying character.

Although the SNL skit is simply that—a brief humorous performance, it mirrors the work Harris was expected to do for Biden—protect him and clap back at his political enemies. The associated momala memes send similar messages.

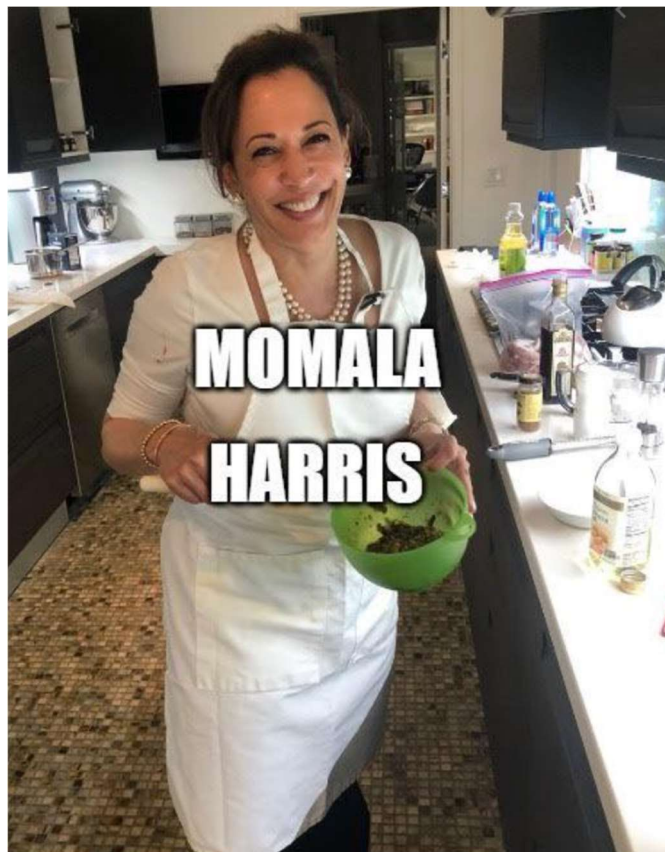


Figure 4.5 Momala Harris Meme

Here, Harris is pictured as a model of domestic bliss, joyfully preparing dinner in a well-equipped kitchen. The picture is both well framed and includes not only the stereotypical apron, but there is a small smudge of some sort on her right (viewer's left) sleeve—just enough to let the viewer know she's actually cooking, but not so much as to denote messiness. All while Harris continues to wear her near ubiquitous pearls. It is, frankly, the embodiment of upper-class motherhood. Black Femme politicians are expected to embody notions of womanhood and political expertise all at once and failure to meet those demands renders you disposable.

Republican propaganda of women who could serve their country and their families motivated the Democratic Party to invest in similar tactics. At the DNC, Harris accompanied other women of the party to reinforce images of traditional family values with a new depiction of Harris. No longer a threat to Biden's patriarchal power, she had been transformed into Momala. In their campaign videos, Warren, Gillibrand, and Klobuchar all spoke to the public from inside their living rooms or from a kitchen counter, including photos of themselves with their families. By contrast, in Harris' presidential campaign video, she was shown in front of an American flag with photos of her speaking to audiences at rallies or from behind a podium. At the DNC, however, audiences got a closer look into Harris' story as her speech centered on themes of family, motherhood and generations of women supporting women. Harris took viewers through her life, beginning with the activism of her immigrant parents (who met at a Civil Rights protest in the 1960s) through to her South Indian mother being the primary provider for her sister and she. Harris stated that her mother raised them to be 'proud, strong Black women,' and described how her mother taught her the importance of putting 'family first'

– the one you are born into and the family you choose (Belknap). For middle class Black women, having it all must look flawless, and when it doesn't, your position becomes quickly undermined.

Many wondered why Biden chose Harris when he and Susan Rice were so close. Picking former US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, who saw her fortunes soar in the final days of the veepstakes, undoubtedly appealed to Biden, since he had the closest personal relationship with her and believed she could help him heal the wounds, internationally, that Trump has created. But Rice's ties to the attacks in Benghazi, Libya - - not to mention her presence in a January 20, 2017, meeting on Michael Flynn -- created clear attack lines for Trump's campaign to turn the spotlight from his flailing bid to Biden and Rice (Cillizia). Harris and Biden together were undeniably a similar recreation of the Obama-Biden duo with Momala taking Obama's role as the Black, cool politic.

Momala comforts white imaginations and gives Black Twitter the joy for which they are looking. Copmala doesn't frequent the media as much a Momala, and affords the public an understanding of care and compassion stepping away from the cold hard prosecutor. the media took advantage of moments of Harris dancing on beat, touring HBCU's and hugging little Black girls when she kicked off the Biden/Harris campaign. Wearing a pair of lace-up black Converse to disembark from the campaign plane—she titled the shot on Instagram 'laced-up and ready to win.' In 2018 she had told The Cut "I have a whole collection of Chuck Taylors: a black leather pair, a white pair, I have the kind that don't lace, the kind that do lace, the kind I wear in the hot weather, the kind I wear in the cold weather, and the platform kind for when I'm wearing a pantsuit" (O'Neill). After premiering with Biden, it was time for Harris to walk for the nation. By

debating against former Vice-President Mike Pence, she did just that. Only softening the perception of Harris would allow for the public to look beyond her record. For Harris, the stereotypes and myths accompanied with being a Black Femme politician create limitations to her performances. Harris is forced to move with strategy and precision, as every move she makes draws hyper attention. During the Vice-Presidential debates Harris displayed how political clapback as a Black femme politician functions as a survival strategy that helped her navigate the VP debate against Mike Pence.

### *The Debate*

On November 26th, 2020, Kamala Harris and Mike Pence took center stage, as millions of Americans tuned into what many consider the most important debate of the 2020 Presidential race. The unprecedented, chaotic debate between the presidential candidates that had taken place just weeks before had left the country in a state of disbelief. Recall the shouting, interruptions, and incoherent cross-talk which filled the air as President Trump purposefully and repeatedly heckled and blurted over both his rival and moderator alike in a 90-minute melee (Lahut). The desires of democracy were rendered speculative as voters shrank in worried fear for the at-stake soul of America. The debate was hosted at the University of Utah and moderated by USA Today's Susan Page, who was determined to give "a chance to take a look at these two candidates and see both what they think of them and what they think about their policy ideas" (Page, 2020). Page chose the topics of the debate, determined she would "cover nine issues, each to be discussed for approximately 10 minutes" (2020). Accounting for the disruptive nature of the Trump administration, Page prepared for interruptions, later explaining "I tried to really think through what would be an approach that would work to keep the

debate on track.” Even with Page’s preparation, Harris still faced the inevitable misogyny of Pence.

The VP debate, therefore, serves as a reminder of all the obstacles Black women like Kamala Harris face in the public sphere when challenged by egotistic sexists like Pence or negligent White women like Susan Page. For Harris, this meant remaining calm despite the lies, slander, and hostility she endured – including when Page asked "Pence to stop speaking 41 times because his time was up," whereas "she asked Harris 13 times" – or when "Pence interrupted Harris 18 times, while Harris interrupted Pence eight times" (Zarrcanes and Petras, 2020). Time and again, Pence demonstrated his blatant refusal to follow the rules or the format, causing Page to remind him, "your campaigns agreed to rules for tonight's debate with the Commission on Presidential Debates. I'm here to enforce them" (Page, 2020). This, coupled with her pleas of "saying variations of ‘thank you’ or ‘thank you, Mr. Vice President’ 22 times throughout the evening, to no effect” is startling (Seligman, 2020). Many watched in dismay as "Mike Pence used his time to evade, to lie, to attack and talk over Kamala Harris and Susan Page. He didn't just mansplain. He man-dodged" (Sanders, 2020).

However, Pence was not the only opponent that Harris had on stage that night. Many noticed the biased behavior of Page when it came to interruptions – i.e. when Page showed Pence the respect of his credentials by addressing him as "Mr. Vice President," whereas Page referred to Harris as "Kamala Harris," rather than "Senator Harris," before apologizing (Seligman, 2020). Examples like these can be found throughout the debate, even when Page stopped Harris from interrupting Pence. Conversely, when Harris interrupted Pence, Page admonished her. “Thank you, Senator Harris,” Page said. “Let's

give Vice President Pence a chance to respond” (Seligman, 2020). Here, Page demanded Harris's civility while Pence performed a distasteful tirade, reinforcing the dominant narrative of civility that is forced upon Black women but not expected from their white counterparts. Pence can interrupt vigorously, but Harris must "respect" the Vice President. As a Black woman who has been negatively labeled by insecure folks as “ambitious,” Harris – as my grandmother would say – has gotten "too big for her britches." In other words, she has failed to be deterred by the fact that she is “the first woman and first woman of color to hold the office” of Vice President (Lerer and Ember, 2020). Harris’s failure to check her ambitions has made her a major topic of national conversation, invoking fear in President Trump, who after the debate tweeted Harris is a "monster" (Trump, 2020).

Trump’s “monster” tweet demonstrates how terrifying she can be constructed to become to the white psyche. On a literal reading of Trump’s tweet, even the President of the United States trembles in fear when she speaks truth to power. In a more figurative way, though, the notion of Harris as monster plays into age old racist tropes. The figure of Blackness as monstrosity has long been a staple of America media. Perhaps most famously were the depictions of Black men as hulking beasts in Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (Alexander, 2010). Likewise, Black women have long been constructed through the media as monstrous, especially when they threaten the existing social order (Callafel, 2012). Trump’s tweet embodies the tropological function of this framing to a T. The media coverage surrounding her Vice-Presidential candidacy supports and assists these tropes and displayed an overwhelming bias against Harris, as "one-quarter of coverage of



Harris included racist or sexist tropes, such as describing the senator as too 'uncooperative' or 'ambitious' (Morin, 2020).

In the face of these constraints, Harris displayed a model of Black femme clapback necessary for survival. One thing I've learned about being a Black Woman is "haters gone hate." And without fail, Harris took the hate she received and made some lemonade with all those lemons – which is why many applauded her for her commitment to a Black feminist politics that can provide Black women with the necessary tools to move forward in a world built in active opposition to them. Harris embodies a mode of collective resistance as necessary to the preservation not only of her own political career, but to future generations of Black people. She explained this during her campaign-trail days prior the 2020 election, when she impactfully spoke to a crowd filled with primarily Black Women. Harris explained the difficulties she regularly experiences, elaborating, "yes, sister, sometimes we may be the only one that looks like us walking in that room...But the thing we all know is we never walk in those rooms alone — we are all in that room together" (Harris, 2019). For Black women, we understand our efforts are part of a larger, collective resistance to end the struggles that oppressed people face.

The debate began with both candidates 12-feet apart – behind plexiglass and before a socially distanced audience required to wear face masks – just days "after President Donald Trump, first lady Melania Trump and several White House staffers and allies have tested positive for COVID-19" (Morin and Garrson, 2020). Page's opening question was fitting, with a lengthy three-part question that allowed for Harris to heavily zone-in on a specific, devastating portion: "What would a Biden administration do in January and February that a Trump administration wouldn't do?" (Page, 2020). Harris

refused to hold back, answering with a well-prepared and factual statement. Harris said, "The American people have witnessed what is the greatest failure of any presidential administration in the history of our country. And here are the facts. 210,000 dead people in our country in just the last several months. Over 7 million people have contracted this disease" (Harris, 2020). Immediately, Pence realized that Harris did not come to play! He retreated within his white maleness, beginning the series of interruptions at just 8:53 into the debate. Harris likely understood the cultural constraints demanding she remain calm, and her responses were well considered. She spoke with purpose and intent, concentrating on her tone, using phrases like, "I'm speaking," or "I will not be lectured," or "can I please finish," to name only a few.

As the attacks continued, Harris had to remind Pence, her argumentative opponent, of her credentials as a prosecutor: "I'm the only one on this stage who has personally prosecuted everything from child sexual assaults to homicide. I'm the only one on the stage who has prosecuted the big banks for taking advantage of American families. I am the only one on this stage who prosecuted for-profit colleges for taking advantage of our veterans" (Harris, 2020). She fractured the ego of whiteness by declaring that Black Women are more experienced and knowledgeable than unchecked, overly-assured white men, causing Pence to attack her record as a prosecutor, who responded by saying "when you were DA in San Francisco, when you held that office, African Americans were 19 times more likely to be prosecuted for minor drug offenses than whites and Hispanics. When you were Attorney General of California, you increased the disproportionate incarceration of Blacks in California. You did nothing on criminal justice reform in California. You didn't lift a finger to pass the first step back on Capitol Hill. The reality

is, you're representing yourself" (Pence). Pence's response is fatalistic because he attempts to blame Harris for the criminal justice system's anti-blackness towards Black people – even though mass-incarceration represents a larger system of oppression made untouchable by the limited power of Harris. Pence would attempt to strip her of all credibility, all while holding her accountable for systems of anti-blackness that he and all white men benefit from.

"Hypocrisy" is a proper way to say it, but in the Black Feminist Tradition of keeping it real, he "got her fucked up." Undeterred by Pence's attacks, Harris told Page "Listen, he attacked my record. I would like the opportunity to respond" (Harris, 2020). This refusal to allow Pence to throw dirt on her name by clarifying any and all misconceptions of her unflinching work to challenge injustices within the criminal justice system are part of countless examples throughout the debate where Harris activated the strategies passed down to her by an intergenerational network of Black Feminists.

What stands out from the debate, and what was immediately memed, was Harris' "I'm speaking" line. Delivered with a smile and civility, Harris' "I'm speaking" line was quickly thrown on so much campaign paraphernalia one might be forgiven if they thought it was being sold by the owner of Mar-a-Lago. Shirts, stickers, hoodies, facemasks, all emblazoned with "I'm speaking." Variations included Harris at a podium with the quote above her head as she points to it, and some versions included "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking." It was a pitch perfect embodiment of eloquent rage, and displays once again what a mode of clap back in a Black femme style might look like.

### *Conclusion*

Polling results of the debate tended to show a victory for Harris, with "about 6 in 10 (59%) said Harris won, while 38% said Vice President Mike Pence had the better night" (CNN, 2020). By continuing her advocacy for marginalized communities, Harris used her framing of facts to expose the injustices that the Trump administration participated in regarding matters of racism, abortion, healthcare, climate change, the economy, and the important question of a peaceful transition of power (CNN, 2020). Performances like Harris's are prime examples of the many services that Black Women provide for democracy. However, while Harris was, and continues to be, praised for her performance, she found herself being attacked by Trump. Like most sore losers, Trump called the winner names, tweeting Harris was a "Monster," a rhetorical artifact that displays just how fragile the white imagination is when it comes to controlling and dominating Black Women. Through the tweeting of Harris as a "Monster," white supremacist fears were at once identified and reaffirmed: she's a monster, a Black Woman capable of speaking in a world that has never intended to include her perspective, and thus grotesque and dangerous. Even though Pence showed his ass, Harris was still able to repurpose the soon-to-be former Vice President's speaking time during the debate, as "Pence spoke for 33 minutes, 9 seconds, while Harris spoke for 34 minutes, 5 seconds" (CNN, 2020). Not only did Harris successfully steal the show from Pence, but viewers found themselves focused on the house fly that landed on Pence's head for 2 minutes (CNN, 2020). Today Harris continues to make history showing that hoes can be anything, remaining trumpet despite the narrative the media has conjured Harris clapback's inspire Black girls around the world.

Harris's political presence is about more than mere representation, she is a legal expert providing essential knowledge regarding the criminal justice system. A double-edged sword unavoidable to Black femme politicians, Harris must navigate the tightrope between using the law to protect its citizens, while ensuring the law doesn't overly police the Black populace. Harris' political clapbacks are constrained in ways that no white male politicians would ever be. Immersed within the digital world, she is forced to exist against the force of sexualized, racialized oppression that code her as overly sexual, corrupt, overly conservative, too Black, not Black enough, traitorous to the Black community while also being forced to mother both President Biden and American democracy. While her viral "I'm speaking" was likely the clap back take away most audiences understood from the debate, her debate performance as a whole—measured, determined, evidence based, pointed, businesslike, all while smiling and joyful—is perhaps the best representation of a Black femme style of clapback she could offer.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Black Femme

#### *Conclusion*

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

--Maya Angelou

Words written decades ago still ring relevantly today as misinformation portraying Ilhan Omar, Maxine Waters and Kamala Harris litters the internet. Black femme politicians everywhere risk having their images thrown down rabbit holes of 4chan and reddit with racialized and sexualized violence motivating baseless accusations. Gaslighting alternative realities. By mystifying Black women until they are unrecognizable as people, distorting their images to shape our reality, Black femme politicians serve democracy at an incalculable cost. Sometimes, like Carol Moseley-Braun, you can lose it all, or like Anita Hill, you can be accused of it all. Media formulations craft agency for Black femme politicians, demanding the credible or incredible; a general narrative of them carries permanent damage.

*I Question. And I'm Not the Only One.*

“Does she intend to arrest little Black girls who break the law?” No matter how dedicated I believe Ilhan Omar is, might she be putting on a façade? Is she maybe a terrorist? Why I’m I so comfortable calling this stranger my auntie? In the face of all that

Kamala Harris does #copmala haunts my aspirations for her political potential. After I ask myself all of those questions, I follow up with, “Why do I want to know?”

Anti-Blackness drives forces of distrust by relying on white supremacy to paint these women as untrustworthy. Gaslighted by former president Donald Trump and millions of social media trolls. Trump’s insidious relationship with Black femme politicians mirrored and encouraged the alt-rights opinions and thoughts toward Black women. The alt-right exists as both movement and discourse which is why memes get circulated throughout alt-right channels, through the Intellectual Dark Web, through mainstream conservative sites and back (Varda and Hahner, 2020). Donald Trump’s attacks against Black femme politicians are important rhetorical artifacts because they inform us of how the political rhetoric has shifted and how new mechanisms tincture Black women’s images as disposable.

With the Trump presidency being deemed the meme election, analyzing the power of memetic arguments and their ability to shape how the public understands Black women remains vital. Its centrality is important for the study of culture, and political communication, and constructions of identity, and so much more. Memes are a large part of the communication of culture and have shown no sense of slowing. Black Twitter users in particular circulate memes to build community (Lu and Steele, 2019). Black Twitter’s utilization of hashtags and memes must be analyzed given its significance as cultural, political, and communicative forms. Black Twitter users don’t just *use* the platform, they *work* the platform—to criticize, to build support, to bring joy, to survive.

By incorporating current political interactions and their various formats, this thesis has sought to expand the scope of communication theory, both in method but also



in topic. By expanding on the work of Woods and Hahner's "Make American Meme Again," I have investigated the rhetorical power of memes and their circulation to construct and constitute public understandings. By examining memes, and the associated cultural forms, tropes, and figures which they reinscribe, bolster, or even challenge, we can better apprehend how community knowledge is crafted, used, appropriated, or framed. Moreover, these kinds of analyses can help drive our comprehension of how age-old oppressive tropes remain potent today. At root, many of these tropes exist merely to offer comfort and smooth the continued flow of white supremacist ideologies. The digital era offers a new mode of constructing this comfort from the privacy of your home, to participate in the spread of white supremacist ideologies.

Black Twitter remains an underexplored realm of Black thought exchange. Catherine Steele's work demonstrates well that Twitter's live updating capabilities through hashtags provides networking opportunities at a capacity and speed never before seen. With users circulating memes and hashtags to generate real communal discussions, Black Twitter becomes a motivating force for how Black femme politicians are viewed with the Black community. Though much of this thesis discusses modes of communication found across social media, many of the ideas, and links to the racist and sexist content discussed in this thesis, were brought to my attention, as well as the attention of larger populations, through Black Twitter. As such, even when the social media under consideration moved beyond Black Twitter, that community had the pulse of the happenings.

A Black feminist pedagogy is an appropriate and productive approach to the study of digital and visual communication. Building from Crenshaw's notion of

intersectionality, this thesis made extensive use of Black scholars and scholars focused on Black communicative practices to expand the boundaries of the field. By taking note of the lived experiences of the subjects under discussion, this thesis was able to better apprehend both the rhetorical construction of identity, as well as consider the underlying communicative motivations of many of the Black femme politicians discussed. By examining the intersections of attack these Black femme politicians face, as well as the intersections of identity these women inhabit, we can better understand how class, religion, age, race, and sex are mobilized collaboratively to smooth the flow of white supremacist ideologies. Painted as mammy's, sapphires, jezebels, or Black Malinches, the reliance on tropological figures helps drive these ideologies and reinforce mystification.

What I found, more than anything in this thesis, is how myths about the identities of Black femme politicians are constructed, and how responses to those myths are possible. Illusory understandings of Black femme politicians are not simply constituted out of thin air, but are premised in half-truths, misdirection, hyperbole, overstatement, and yes, sometimes complete invention. Omar and Waters, like Moseley-Braun before them, are coded through the sapphire caricature. Harris is coded as jezebel, as race traitor, as cop. While Maxine Waters becomes auntie Maxine, who is invincible and viral, and quick to throw shade, her framing also appropriates her labor, and in the early part of the Trump administration, she was seemingly relied upon more than the next ten Democratic men. All of these women speak truth to power, but in so doing, make themselves targets personally for mockery, derision, and threats. While this truth to power speaking makes them targets, it is also the model and embodiment of Black femme resistance—an

rejection of previous approaches as well as the white supremacist ideologies against which they labor. In so doing, each has attempted to work or abandon the politics of respectability, instead favoring their own modes of resistance, designed to usher in a new decorum of political engagement, where clapping back navigates you through the ocean of opposition.

By showing up and standing out, these politicians transcend limits which attempt to bind their agency by remaining swift and diligent to their communities. By clapping back, these women defied the rules of white supremacy and opened space for a new political imagination. Beyond mere representation, these women function as soldiers, saviors, and models, offering a mode of resistance. Through political clapback Black Femme Politicians are capable of facilitating an inclusive politics conducive to the needs of the Black community holistically by correcting past mistakes of shame where Black women would internalize anti-blackness and blame the race for their condition. Abandoning the strategies of dissemblance where black women were told to lower their voices, dress, talk and act in a way that wouldn't hold back the race. Holding back the race meant resisting assimilating into whiteness, for a mere chance at replicating status quo politics.

We stand today at a tremendous crossroad. Our planet is on fire, millions in this country are undernourished, underserved, and underappreciated. The receding floodwaters of the pandemic are slowly draining away, but they are revealing tremendous problems that existed well before we had ever heard of social distancing. In addition, the receding waters have uncovered new problems and these demands new approaches. Gender rights, voting rights, reproductive control, the pay gap, child birth mortality and

countless others issues gender minorities experience can be combatted productively almost exclusively through political action. The very survival of queer, trans, immigrant, and disabled people in the US likely depends on political solutions and alterations in cultural formations. Those solutions require power to be brought to heel, and as the last few years have demonstrated, it will likely be the Black women that do the necessary work. What the women studied in this thesis illustrate, and the model of clap back they offer is that vocal sisterhood can be resilient and function to open space for an inclusive politics for Black futures to come.

Perfection is the ultimate tool of whiteness, especially as the demands of perfection are leveraged inequitably. The historical demands of perfection for Black women when interacting with the public are numerous. As this thesis demonstrated, Black women politicians are intentionally misunderstood from both the left and the right, and are forced to navigate a tightrope between competing demands almost always. Ilhan Omar's Twitter remains an important artifact to understand how misrepresentation creates impossible standards for Black women to engage in the public sphere. Omar's words are frequently taken out of context to serve a larger purpose of the attacker's goal. She, and many like her, experiences this hatred because she remains resilient, continues the work, and stands as a threat to existing order. Representative Waters' words have also been circulated by alt-right and alt-right adjacent groups for years—misconstruing words, and attempting to undermine her at every chance. Vice-President Harris remains a controversial figure owing to her contributions as a prosecutor, status as an ambitious woman, and possessor of a talented mind. Regardless of their actual contributions, the framing of their personas, and the consequent representations of Black

women more generally, will never be enough as long as white supremacist logics continues to demand perfection and Black communities keep indulging in search for respectability and moral purity.

Each one of these Black women has addressed the conditions of Black communities and identified white supremacy as a determining factor for why democracy remains flawed for Black people placing their lives in danger. Through the representational logics rhetorically enunciated through various medium, constructions of identity are formed that daily function as attacks not simply on them, but on all Black women. As I finish the edits to this thesis, I consider not simply how have these particular women been rhetorically constructed as less than, but how those constructions implicate me. But then I am reminded of the joy, resilience, and power they model through their everyday resistance to those structural logics. And then I get up, and go back to doing the work.

As a Black woman in communication during the Trump administration, I did not feel obligated to write about these women, I felt inspired. Given my introduction to field coinciding with the emergence of #commsowhite, I knew I was going to be entering another area of study, like this world, that is inherently anti-black. In attending a university with no Black faculty in my graduate department, my work became instrumental to my experience at a predominately white university. Despite my awareness of these experiences, I still found myself baffled by how little research truly existed regarding Black women in communication. The field is riddled with traditions of feminism yet still remains problematically bereft of Black feminism. When considering conferences, publications, faculty, and editors and their assistants, the situation

sometimes feels even more dire. Communication as a field of study remains in desperate need of an intervention of knowledge validation, a homegirl intervention. For Black feminist theorists like myself, a conscious production of knowledge about and from the perspective of Black feminist scholarship remains an essential praxis to transforming the classroom and discipline. If we can better include the lives and thoughts of Black women in our everyday lives, we can transform a culture reliant on toxicity. After researching these lives of various Black women, the way they are rhetorically constructed, how they are represented in the media (mainstream and social), I remain convinced work in the vein of this thesis is both necessary and productive to improve not simply the inclusivity of the field, but the epistemic mode of knowledge the discipline produces. In short, analyzing Black femme political clap backs hopefully can function as another weapon in a Black feminist toolbox.

Black femme politicians who participate in political clapback defy the demands of supremacy and instead make their own demands for their survival. Black feminist survival strategies help Black women make it from one moment to the next, and in so doing bolster the strength of the community write large. We have been forced to find a politics of the time that help the We survive, and our survival is predicated on our ability to strategize against white supremacist ideologies. Political clapback in this mode can shift the roles Black women were expected to fill, highlighting the knowledge and expertise of Black women, and their ability to turn the system on its head. Each one of these Black women is a political expert and uses their expertise to defend their political character. Clapping back in a Black femme style aint just about talking shit, it's about being about your shit and these women have more than proven they can back it up!

## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

### Islamophobic Tweets

- *@IlhanMN I stand with Israel and denounce Mohammad as a false prophet and Islam the work of Satan*
- *They're turning Minnesota into MinneSTAN! This is an ISLAM EXTREMIST Standing Against Israel & FOR SHARIA in America! Standing Against Israel IN OUR BACKYARD! Minnesota Patriots! Are you going to let her do this?45*
- *@IlhanMN So, muzzrat, where is Palestine? Do tell us where the majority of the land named as Palestine is...*
- *@IlhanMN is a Jew hating, anti- America sack of Mohammad sh!t. Islam is the enemy of America. Mohammad is Satan.*
- *This one is running for office BTW. #ISland- WithIsrael #VoteRed2018 #Midterms2018 #StopTheInvasion @IlhanMN The @DNC @CNN*
- *@MSNBC support this antisemitic. She married her brother, which has been verified, hates gays, Jews, and wants to castrate little girls, then marry them them off to old men. Sharia law coming to Minnesota, if she wins.*



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