

THESIS

RECKONING WITH IDENTITY: THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF TELEVISION  
REPRESENTATIONS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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## ABSTRACT

### RECKONING WITH IDENTITY: THE CHANGING DYNAMICS OF TELEVISION REPRESENTATIONS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

The American South is a continually understudied and misrepresented region of the United States. Televisual representations of the region typically rely on the Southern Imaginary, a collection of predetermined stereotypes and ideas about the South, to inform their depictions of Southerners and their identities. These representations tend to be one-dimensional and inauthentic to those who have and continued to live in the region. Recently, media depictions of the American South are attempting to challenge the Southern Imaginary and present a more nuanced and legitimate representation of Southerners. This project investigates how the nuanced representations of race, gender, and sexuality coupled with the settings of *Hart of Dixie* (CW, 2011-2015), *One Mississippi* (Amazon, 2015-2017), and *Atlanta* (FX, 2016-present) work to influence audiences' perceptions of the Southern region of the United States. Ultimately, I address the question: in what ways are modern television depictions of the South fighting against the Southern Imaginary and how does this influence the audiences' understanding of the South as both an actual regional space and a discursive construct? Investigation into the attempts to alter the Southern Imaginary can shed light on the falsities that television depictions of the region utilize to ensure that the South remains a social and political scapegoat for problems of the entire nation thus stagnating progress for all.

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## INTRODUCTION: SOUTHERN PERCEPTIONS

Of course, I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

— Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*

Racist. Misogynistic. Anti-queer. Uneducated. God-fearing. Backwater. Folks have attempted to define the South for centuries. Questions like who lives there?, what do they eat?, and why do they talk like that? continue to permeate academic and non-academic discussions alike from William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) to Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987) and Kiese Laymon’s *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018). In fact, as Benjamin Schwarz writes, “since the 1850s not five years have passed without a major work seeking to explore, explain, justify, or condemn” this region (1997). As a result, the South has become a living, changing idea in the minds of Americans rather than solely a geographic region. This project investigates how the nuanced representations of race, gender, and sexuality coupled with the settings of *Hart of Dixie* (CW, 2011-2015), *One Mississippi* (Amazon, 2015-2017), and *Atlanta* (FX, 2016-present) work to influence audiences’ perceptions of the Southern region of the United States. I discuss how United States television series, particularly focusing on the three programs listed as case studies, represent blackness and whiteness, femininity and masculinity, and queerness while creating a more inclusive, culturally nuanced depiction of the South than seen in previous generations’ television programming.

The image of the American South that the media has helped to construct can be termed the Southern Imaginary, a type of social imaginary. Social imaginaries are “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2003, p. 23). These imaginaries influence everyday actions and interactions by consistently reminding individuals what is normal and what is abnormal. Often through media like film and television, imaginaries work to draw lines between standard and alternative ways of viewing and acting in the world. Television shows tend to provide especially poignant support for imaginaries as they often rely on formulas and images that fit the standard or normal version of society advanced by social imaginaries.

Specifically, the Southern Imaginary serves as the theoretical basis for this project. The Southern Imaginary influences how individuals think of and interact with the South. The South is often framed as “an easy repository for all that is backward and hurtful in the United States, past and present” (Law, 2001, p. 3). Barker and McKee (2011) specifically define the Southern Imaginary as “an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, ideas, attitudes, practices, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographic region and time” (p. 2). The authors argue that certain elements present in media inform audiences that the film, television show, etc. is about the American South. As defined by the contributors to *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Media*, media set in or about the South typically include heavy references to religion, gender roles, heteronormativity, particular views on politics, among others (Wilson et al., 2011). This media is not only produced by outsiders, but Southerners “have been active participants in alternately rejecting and embracing, and continually reinventing, understandings of themselves [which] likewise complicates any effort to offer a fixed summary



of what it means to claim a southern identity today” (Barker & McKee, 2011, p. 3). Southerners also create and reify this media that rely on the Southern imagination to appeal to audiences by attempting to present an authentic South.

Because of this, the Southern Imaginary “is not a false representation that must be stripped away to see the real South but a multifaceted, multivalent concept that informs our understanding of U.S. culture, especially in relation to ideas about race, gender, and region” (Barker & McKee, 2011, p. 3). Rather than attempt to write it off, the Southern Imaginary should be analyzed as an integral part of Southern media. By remaining an understudied part of the U.S. subconscious, the Southern Imaginary ensures that “region will always trump nation in the ‘blame game’” which makes it “far more difficult to dislodge from the depths of the national imagination” (Graham, 2010, p. 162). Since it often includes negative stereotypes and attributes abnormal behaviors to the South, the Southern Imaginary consistently characterizes the South (and the negative aspects associated with it) as anomalous. Therefore, investigation into the attempts to alter the imaginary can shed light on the falsities that are utilized to ensure that the South remains a social and political scapegoat for problems of the entire nation.

In using three series as exemplars of the modern televisual South, with an eye to their handling of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and social class, this project ultimately addresses the question: in what ways are modern television depictions of the South presenting alternative views of the region and how does this influence the audiences’ understanding of the South as both an actual regional space and a discursive construct? In this chapter, I provide insight into the texts chosen for analysis as well as justify their selection. Following this, I review relevant literature concerning the history of media studies in the American South, three types of representational categories in media (gender, race, and sexuality), and these representations in

Southern media. In doing so, I address a significant gap in current scholarship and articulate how I intend to fill that gap with an analysis of representations in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta*. I conclude with an explanation of my critical method, my positionality, and a brief overview of the remaining chapters.

### **Identification of Texts**

The texts that I analyze are three contemporary television programs: *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta*. These shows vary greatly in content but are all set in and revolve around the South. The following descriptions proceed in chronological order. *Hart of Dixie* ran for four seasons from 2011 to 2015 on the CW network. The oldest of the three case studies, it is also the only one created by an individual who did not grow up in the South. Leila Gerstein, originally from New York, worked on series such as *Gossip Girl* (CW, 2007-2012) and *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-2007) before creating *Hart of Dixie* (Preview This!, 2013). When asked about the inspiration for the show, Gerstein stated that “the South was in the news a lot, so I felt that it would be the perfect setting for a big fish out of water story with some romance thrown in” (Preview This!, 2013). Featuring a group of eccentric townspeople, the show is more than romance; it is concerned with finding a sense of belonging and choosing your family.

*Hart of Dixie* focuses on a young New Yorker and recent doctor, Zoe Hart (Rachel Bilson), who moves to the fictional town of Bluebell, Alabama, to accept an offer for work as a general practitioner. Upon moving to Bluebell, she discovers that the late doctor who offered her a job was her biological father. In addition to this drastic lifestyle change, Zoe encounters various issues ranging from the trivial humidity changes to multiple love triangles. She quickly becomes entangled in the love life of the town’s lawyer, George Tucker (Scott Porter) and his strong-willed fiancé, Lemon Breeland (Jamie King). Throughout the series, Zoe grows to love

the town and its people. She makes friends with the former football star mayor, Lavon Hayes (Cress Williams), and quirky Southern Belle, AnnaBeth Nass (Kaitlyn Black). Zoe eventually decides to officially call Bluebell home and finds love with town ladies' man Wade Kinsella (Wilson Bethel). Transforming from an out of place, snobbish transient with virtually no family to a proud Bluebellian who cares deeply for her fellow townspeople, Zoe comes to think of Bluebell as her home and loves the Southerners who surround her. Shot mainly in North Carolina, the show's setting often focuses on the Gulf Coast and the mayor's large Old South style home, nicknamed "The Plantation." None of the main cast are native Southerners and the actors sport varying accents from believable to nonexistent. Yet, the show captures a particular Southern charm that, while sometimes bordering on the extreme, sheds light on contemporary perceptions of the South.

Similar to *Hart of Dixie*, the second case study, *One Mississippi*, follows a woman's journey to the South and her complicated love life after moving; however, *One Mississippi* is the story of a return to the South for the main character and delves deeper into her personal history than *Hart of Dixie* does for its main character. The show is a semi-autobiographical, two-season Amazon original created by and starring Tig Notaro who plays a fictionalized version of herself. It ran from 2015 to 2017 and focuses on Tig as she moves back home to Bay Saint Lucille, Mississippi after the death of her mother. After living in California for some time, Tig struggles with navigating her Southern hometown and the past she must confront. Throughout the series, Tig learn more about her mother and comes to terms with their strenuous relationship. She grows to value the relationships with her brother and stepfather more while allowing herself to be open and ask for help. In doing so, she finds love with her radio co-host, Kate (Stephanie Allynne, Tig's real-life partner). Although Tig's queerness is presented in the first episode, Kate grapples

with her attraction to Tig throughout much of the series. Depicting a more complex relationship between the South and queerness, *One Mississippi* addresses underlying issues that often support the notion that Southerners are homophobic including internalized homophobia, outright discrimination, and a lack of exposure or knowledge about queer culture. The juxtaposition between Tig and Kate's feelings toward their own queer identity sheds light on the diverse nature of queerness in the South as well as the underlying issues that feed into the anti-queer mindset associated with the region. Finally, the series works through Tig's experiences with sexual assault, another topic not often discussed in Southern media or media concerning the South. *One Mississippi* provides a refreshing look at queerness in the South while also discussing religion, familial relationships, and finding love after loss. The show was filmed in Texas and mostly features cast members not originally from the South.

As opposed to the previous two shows, the last show integral to my analysis, *Atlanta*, features male lead characters and is rooted in experiences of people of color in the South. Premiering in 2016, this is the only show of the three currently on air. Three seasons have been released while the fourth (and final) season is expected to premiere on FX in 2023. The show was created by and stars Donald Glover, an Atlanta native and popular rapper who goes by the pseudonym "Childish Gambino". The all-Black writing staff includes Glover and his brother, Stephen, while the show stars two Southerners. *Atlanta* focuses on Earnest 'Earn' Marks (Donald Glover) and his cousin Alfred 'Paper Boi' Miles (Brian Tyree Henry) as they navigate the music industry and their family lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Earn, a recent Princeton University drop out, wants to prove himself to those around him, especially his girlfriend Van (Zazie Beetz), while also providing a better life for his daughter. While new to the music management world, Earn quickly learns that managing an up-and-coming rapper takes a lot more than just determination

and smooth talking. Alfred and his right-hand man Darius (LaKeith Stanfield) consistently push Earn to do better. Alfred's overnight success as rapper "Paper Boi" presents a new and challenging environment for the group. Throughout the series, he grapples with his newfound fame and staying true to himself. Darius acts as the group's spiritual guide, getting them into outlandish situations while also provoking new ways of viewing those situations. Holistically, the show comments on multiple issues including police brutality, co-parenting, and white Americans' fetishization of Black culture.

These three programs present a more modern and holistic representation of the American South by providing a look into the lives of those who are not normally represented well in Southern media. In this representation of racial, gender, and sexuality-based difference, these shows encapsulate the changing landscape of the South and the cultural nuances that are often overlooked. *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* are examples of the South talking back to the Southern Imaginary and resisting stereotypical representations through more developed characters and more complex discussion of race, gender, and sexuality.

### **Justification**

Television is a ubiquitous influence in the every-day lives of most individuals and thus presents a unique area for analysis. Aspects such as the routine nature of the programming, the longer time allotted to cover various topics more in depth, and the direct link to audiences within their homes are unique to the medium itself and contribute to the television's influence.

Television's power lies in the fact that it utilizes those aspects specific to the medium to "not only [show] us a world around us, but [it] creates many of the parameters for our subsequent interactions with that world" (Gray, 2008, p. 156). Rather than solely reflect social norms and

occurrences, television helps create those norms as well as defines what does not fit inside them.

Julie D'Acci (2003) articulates this influence and power further by stating:

In other words, television's electronic sounds and images, its programs and its regular schedules of news, commercials, announcements, and so forth, gather viewers (often for many hours every week) and give them a sense of who and what they are, where they are, and when (morning, late-night, holiday seasons, for instance), if they are safe or in danger (from threatening weather, hostile attacks, economic recessions, and so forth), and how they ought to feel and be. Television's schedule, its information, and its stories, therefore, have active roles in shaping the ways TV viewers think about themselves as... human beings. (p. 373)

Medium-specific elements drive the influence of television as well as how audiences interact with and learn from the messages portrayed on screen.

Therefore, television "assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people . . . they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues" (hooks, 2008, p. 2). Television teaches its audience how to live and act in the world around them. In so doing, "television entertainment often holds the power to dictate—to represent—which people, ideas, and behaviors are 'normal,' and which are decidedly abnormal" (Gray, 2008, p. 157). This typically leads to the privileging of hegemonic ideas and viewpoints (i.e., heteronormativity, patriarchy, whiteness) as well as the silencing or misrepresentation of marginalized folks or those who act and/or think in other ways. Television's influence can not only marginalize individuals and ways of thinking, but its pedagogical nature can also construct identity through the representations of them. The power television has as a medium cannot be understated.

*Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* were chosen specifically because of their settings, the variety of topics discussed within the shows, and their popularity. Altogether, they span a decade of time, from 2011 to the present. The programs are also set within the time they air, providing a contemporary look at the current South rather than a reflective view of the historical South, a departure from much media concerning the region. Additionally, the shows are set in three major Deep South states, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, (only two are filmed in other Southern states, Texas, and North Carolina). Two of the series take place in small towns while one is set in a large city. The settings of the series alone allow for a more diverse representation of the geographical region of the South while supporting more in depth and widely applicable analysis about the effects of said representations.

Not only do the shows cover a wide geographical range, but they also discuss several nuanced topics within the series that closely align to the Southern Imaginary. These topics vary from religion to football, from the ethics of owning an alligator to police brutality, and from sexual violence to confederate reenactments. The depth of each of the series is an integral element of this analysis insofar as it allows for a more multifaceted view of the South and additional avenues for the series to present a more holistic representation that could alter perceptions about the region. While there are other televisual representations of the South, these series were selected because they reflect contemporary trends in television while providing insight into an alternative view of the American South. I chose contemporary fictional programs as opposed to earlier shows (like *The Andy Griffith Show* [CBS, 1960-1968] or *Designing Women* [CBS, 1986-1993]) or reality-based television (like *Southern Charm* [Bravo, 2013-present] or *Floribama Shore* [MTV, 2017-present] to provide the most up-to-date representations of the South and are representative of widespread trends in television. *Hart of Dixie*, *One*

*Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* both reflect the ideas of Southern Imaginary while also presenting insight into alternative views of the South. The polysemic nature of the texts allow for unique case studies that promote intertextual evaluation, the comparison of depictions across multiple shows. For instance, all three case studies reference and represent elements of the Confederacy but to different ends. Similarly, the programs rely on representations of the South established by previous programs like the idyllic small town in *The Andy Griffith Show* or the life of young Black adults in the South in *A Different World* (NBC, 1987-1993) that underlie the Southern Imaginary to juxtapose their depictions of more modern and complex experiences in the region.

Finally, the series are each relatively popular. While not winning many awards, *Hart of Dixie* was successful with audiences, even garnering its own fan webpage. As the oldest of the three shows as well as the longest running, it is also the more moderately rated of the three. Airing on the CW Network, a channel known for extremely popular programs like *Supernatural* (CW, 2005-2020) and *One Tree Hill* (CW, 2003-2012) helped the initial ratings of the show even if they dipped in the later seasons. *Hart of Dixie*'s top viewed episode, "Faith & Infidelity" (1.05; October 10, 2011), boasted two million total viewers (The Futon Critic, 2011). Receiving B grades from both the audience and critics on Rotten Tomatoes (87% and 81% respectively), *Hart of Dixie* is often described as a heartfelt and over-the-top show that "celebrates small town life, small town people, small town shenanigans, and small town love" (Raisler, 2018). Although the reviews are slightly less celebratory than the other series, there has been a recent push for a reunion by both old and new fans.

On the other hand, *Atlanta* has received much critical success, winning five Emmys across its two seasons. The show has captured the attention of many critics because of its unique storytelling, honest and raw depictions of Black life in Atlanta, and all-Black writing staff. When



considering how to characterize the show, one critic stated that “[s]imply ‘the best show on TV’ will have to do” (Sheffield, 2018). Donald Glover’s successful acting (*Community*, NBC, 2009-2015), comedy, and rap career (as Childish Gambino) ensured that this show had a rich built-in fan base before airing. As such, the pilot episode of *Atlanta* (“The Big Bang”; September 6, 2016) was cable’s most watched comedy series premiere since 2013 with three million total viewers (The Futon Critic, 2016). The season two premiere, “Alligator Man” (March 1, 2018), had a total of 2.7 million viewers through the first three days of broadcast (The Futon Critic, 2018). While this could be attributed to Glover’s celebrity status and the first season’s critical success, the nature of the show and its content came at a crucial time in U.S. race relations and filled a representational gap that had long dominated public discourse nationwide thus encouraging viewership.

*One Mississippi* won the Critics’ Choice Award for most exciting new series and followed Tig Notaro’s successful Grammy-nominated comedy album, *Live* (2012). Much excitement was cultivated for the series before and after the first season aired. Additionally, the show was an Amazon Prime original and received a great deal of marketing from the company. Among the three programs analyzed in the forthcoming pages, *One Mississippi* received the highest average audience score on Rotten Tomatoes (90%) with season two receiving a 100% from top critics. As one critic wrote, “[*One Mississippi* is] a romantic show as well as an angry one, sometimes successfully and sometimes less successfully absurdist, and authentically Southern in a way that is rare for television” (Nussbaum, 2017). Despite its short run, the show and its Southernness made an impact on critics and viewers alike.

It is also important to note the political context of the shows, specifically *One Mississippi* and *Atlanta*. The 2016 election undoubtedly influenced and affected these series. For instance,

characters in *One Mississippi* discuss the election and its effects on marginalized communities and *Atlanta* touches on aspects that were integral in election conversations and debates like police brutality. Glover argues that *Atlanta*'s focus was on the socioeconomic status of their characters, saying that

We knew people were going to expect us to talk about Trump... I think it started with us asking: Do poor people even care? Are poor people even being affected by this? It's not like oh, things were great for poor people under Obama, and now they're way bad. If you're poor, you're still at the bottom. (Skelton, 2018)

Additionally, while it was not on air during the election, *Hart of Dixie* sheds light on the types of Southern representation leading up to the election. These shows provide us with a glimpse at how the media landscape in the South changed with the larger cultural shift that occurred during the 2016 election and subsequent presidential administration.

### **Literature Review**

Contemporary and historical scholarship concerning Southern media representations tend to focus on the negative. These representations include harmful depictions of Black Southerners, strong reinforcement of gender roles, Christianity as the only true religion, solely heteronormative romantic relationships, and mostly conservative political and economic views. Representations in Southern media and the literature surrounding them aid in the creation of the Southern Imaginary, a specific picture of the South in the minds of cultural consumers that may or may not be inaccurate. Yet, recent Southern media have begun to shift the way that we think about the South. Using positive representation and complex discussion of identity, films and television shows are complicating and redefining the Southern Imaginary.

It is necessary to differentiate between Southern media and media representations of the South. Southern media is typically media created by and set in the South whereas media representations of the South do not necessarily fit those characteristics. Cletus, the slack-jawed yokel from *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-present), is a prime example of a media representation of the South. The show is neither set in the South nor created by someone from the region and yet, Cletus encompasses the stereotypical identity markers of a Southern hillbilly (discussed more below). These media representations of the South tend to rely more heavily on stereotypes and the Southern Imaginary while Southern media, media created by and for Southerners, often include more alternative views of the region that contrast with the Southern Imaginary. What follows is an introduction to the history of Southern film and television, a review of selected relevant literature on gender, race, and sexuality representation in Southern media, and a brief discussion of the gaps that the subsequent analysis addresses.

### **Mediated Southern History**

The rich historical background of the South as well as the various depictions of the South on screen provide unique insights into and heavily influence contemporary Southern media. As a region with a large and highly contested history, the public memory of the South and Southerners involves several historical events. The Southern Imaginary typically capitalizes on those events to perpetuate ideologies and worldviews about identity and the region as a whole. The three case studies selected, and their representations of race, gender, and sexuality, are all individually influenced by past events and ways of thinking in the South. Four major cultural events continue to shape and define the region and its media: the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Lost Cause argument. The Civil War, Tony Horowitz (1998) argues, still lingers in the minds of Southerners. While he does not find one specific reason as to why

Southerners and Americans largely continue to hold on to the Civil War, he encounters several individuals engaged in a struggle with the past (Horowitz, 1998). Horowitz (1998) found that issues of slavery and discrimination were not discussed in relation to the Civil War, only topics like states' rights and personal freedom. This battle over remembering the war and the South of that time has only been amplified by media depictions of that history. Antebellum and (post) reconstruction South were often the setting for major Golden Age Hollywood films about the region (*Judge Priest* [1934], *Jezebel* [1938], *Gone With the Wind* [1939]). In addition to the Civil War's impact on the mindsets of Southerners, Eric Foner (1990) states that the period after the war, Reconstruction, continues to impact the racialized structures of the South. He directly links movements like the Civil Rights Movement to the failure of Reconstruction to repair the institutional disenfranchisement of Black folks (Foner, 1990). The repercussions of this failure continue to surface through institutions and structures that have not been challenged or changed since that time.

Most notably, the repercussion resurfaced during the Civil Rights Movement (1940s-1960s). During this movement, Black folks protested, marched, and fought for equal rights across the South and were often met with violence from the region's white population and governance. With the explicit racism of the South (fueled by the failure of reconstruction and unfair Jim Crow laws) now laid bare for the rest of the country during the fight for basic civil rights, Hollywood worked to solidify this racism in the Southern Imaginary. During the early 1900s, mainstream cinema was white-focused and often "featured White [*sic*] actors in Blackface that portrayed African American in demeaning character roles" (Moody, 2016, p. 3) (*The Birth of a Nation* [1915], *The Jazz Singer* [1927], *Swing Time* [1936], *Everybody Sing* [1938]). This led to a division between Black cinema (often focusing on issues of Black identity)

and white cinema. As racial tensions began to gain more attention from (white) audiences, films of the late 1940s and early 1950s shifted focus onto the rising unrest (*Pinky* [1949], *Home of the Brave* [1949], *Intruder in the Dust* [1949]) before completely distancing from the growing movement (Graham, 2001). After the Civil Rights Movement, however, “when American filmmakers finally dared to depict the racially divided contemporary South in the 1960s, they simply dusted off the well-worn narrative strategy of the 1950s,” evading commentary on the racism of social and political institutions and, instead, positing poor whites as the culprits of racism (*To Kill a Mockingbird* [1962], *In the Heat of the Night* [1967]) (Graham, 2001, p. 14). These films helped cement the racial ideologies of the Southern Imaginary which are continuously represented in modern film and television. During this time, Black filmmakers sought to create counternarratives and present alternative worldviews of their lived realities (*A Raisin in the Sun* [1961], *The Cool World* [1963], *Nothing But a Man* [1964], *Uptight* [1968]). The Civil Rights Movement is a major part of the South’s memory (Lloyd, 2018) as well as the Southern Imaginary and continues to influence film and television to this day.

The final cultural phenomenon that characterizes the South and influences media representation of the region is the notion of the Lost Cause. As Horowitz points out, many Southerners do not recognize or are not correctly taught the events that led to the Civil War, typically avoiding the topic of slavery. According to Allen Guelzo (2021), this is the result of years of legal, economic, social, and moral persuasion that ultimately resulted in the Lost Cause myth. Coined by Edward Pollard (1841), the Lost Cause was a “cultural comfort and an ideological resource that rationalized resistance to Reconstruction and the establishment of a bleak racial landscape of segregation and denigration” (Guelzo, 2021). The Lost Cause argues that the impetus behind Southern secession and, thus, the Civil War was righteous, just, and had

absolutely nothing to do with slavery (Pollard, 1841). Effects of the Lost Cause mindset are seen today in race and gender relations in the South. Guelzo also posits that “in the case of civil wars where at least one of the original contestants goes down to defeat, the issues that created the conflict in the first place are rarely resolved, and live on to fester, sometimes for generations” (2021). Today, this is exemplified in regional and national conversations surrounding Confederate monuments and statues as well as the recent banning of teaching Critical Race Theory in Alabama (Crain, 2021). Paul Waldman argues that a new Lost Cause is integral to placing “racism safely in the past, a problem that has been resolved and we need seldom speak of again” (2021). He emphasizes that the enactment of power by those who support the Lost Cause is the only way the notion can prevail.

One of the ways that this power is enacted is through the media. Representations of the pre- and post-war as well as post-reconstruction and Civil Rights Era South found early popularity in literature, especially that of white Southern women. Ewell (1997) argues that these women writers were integral in the creation of regional identity within the South and, as such, converted “regions into national alter egos, imaginative spaces that were at once different, but still the same: places where traditional social attitudes could be affirmed, even as the traditional social structures that sustained them were being undermined by an unbridled industrialization” (p. 164). These imaginative spaces became integral to mediated Southern representation.

Historically, films and television series have served as the medium of primary concern for Southern studies scholars. From the beginning of cinema and throughout the 1970s and 80s, representations of the South in film rarely changed. This contributed to the creation of a particular image of the South that “pointed not to the industry’s concept alone, but to what the audience came to expect and believe was accurate” (Campbell, 1981, p. 19). Because of the

image created by early cultural representations, audiences held Southern film to a particular standard. These films “set in the South or ones that featured southern characters were most certainly expressions of the nation’s perception of the region and were in line with other forms of popular culture in their construction of various images of the South” (Cox, 2013, p. 82). This image was reified by early television representations of the South. Programs that aired on the television network CBS like *The Real McCoys* (ABC and CBS, 1957-1963), *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *The Dukes of Hazzard* (CBS, 1979-1985) especially played an integral part in supporting the image of the South established by film. Bullard states that:

CBS did not invent the idea of using the South as a foil for modern life, but the shows it aired streamlined the concept for television. The combination of old stereotypes and mass media created an alternative “South” that combined all of rural America into a single land of silliness, simplicity, and safety. And it put an exaggerated idea of the white working class at the center of everything. (2018)

Shows like those mentioned above utilized established stereotypes of the South to draw in non-Southern audiences who wanted to escape from the big city problems of the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, early televisual representations of the South continued to craft and disseminate a particular image of the region.

Focusing on just one stereotype perpetuated by these series, *Gomer Pyle U.S.M.C.* (CBS, 1964-1969) and *Hee Haw* (CBS, 1969-1971) both contributed to the “dumb Southerner” character. *Gomer Pyle U.S.M.C.*, a spin off from *The Andy Griffith Show*, featured a Southern fish out of water character who, because of his lack of understanding about life outside his small hometown, found himself in humorous situations. Similarly, *Hee Haw*, a Southern comedy variety show, often relied on exaggerated Southern characters and traditions for the basis of their

comedic routines. For instance, in the reoccurring skit “Colonel Daddy's Daughter,” Marianne Gordon played a Southern Belle who was spoiled by her father (Geordie Tapp). She would swing outside of a plantation home and speak (in a Southern accent) on her father’s generosity and discuss problems that typically affected wealthy people. Additionally, one of the most frequent and popular sketches, “The Moonshiners,” featured male cast members playing lazy hillbilles surrounded by women. The men would tell jokes while lying on the ground among moonshine jugs. These programs were considered funny because they relied on stupidity or ignorance to make the audience laugh. However, this stupidity was often contributed to the character’s Southernness thus ensuring that the audience correlated the two. Because of the relative popularity of Southern programs, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962-1971) and *Gomer Pyle U.S.M.C.* even reached the top ten of CBS’s ratings in 1969 (Bullard, 2018), large audiences were introduced to the South for the first time.

Recently, television series like *Duck Dynasty* (A&E, 2012-2017), *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC, 2012-2014), and *Floribama Shore* rely on the intertextual relationships between their modern representations of the South and older representations from the preceding programs to provide both credibility and familiarity. Not only do these series include outright references to older Southern programming, but they also rely on the standardized image of the American South that includes rough living conditions, hillbilly men and women, specific ways of speaking and moving, and Southern ignorance (among other elements) that have come to denote the South. Non-Southern audiences hold a particular image in their mind about the South that was created and continuously perpetuated in media; moreover, films and television programs that failed to represent the South in a way congruent with that image were deemed inauthentic or falsely representational, even if the depictions were truer to the actual South.



## Gender, Sexuality, and Race in The South

Within the South, three identity markers are highly represented and contested: gender, sexuality, and race. While other identity markers like ethnicity and social class are integral to representations of the South, these specific identities are frequently discussed because of the underlying ideologies behind their representations. Thornham and Purvis define the connection between ideology and representation, saying:

[Ideology] links a concern with social and cultural *structures* with a concern for how *individuals* both represent those structures to themselves and make sense of public representations of them. Ideology, then, is bound up with power relations and embodied in social institutions, but it operates through *representations* and, because the meanings we give our lives constitute our sense of individual identity, at the level of the individual. (2004, p. 75, emphasis original)

Ideology relies on representation to survive. Representations promote ideology often using stereotypes. Stereotypes are “a composite of the most vivid, memorable, and reductive traits of a given identity, often resulting in an unchanging character whose traits mark them as different from a cultural norm” (Massey, 2007, pp. 124-125). These reductive depictions lead to harmful interactions with others as well as to a simple understanding of difference, whether that difference be gender, sexuality, race, region, etc. Stereotypes are important to consider in media scholarship, but solely focusing on them “tends to flatten its textual objects to such an extent it almost always under-reads the complexities of even the most stereotypical texts” while also leaving “little room for the complex, and often resistant, spectatorship engendered by the sheer egregiousness of such stereotypes, or for the creative and unpredictable cultural work it does”

(Torres, 2003, pp. 1-2). Thus, representational analysis must consider both stereotypes as well as the ideologies that bolster and influence such entrenched ways of imagining “others.”

Southern media not only capitalizes on representations of gender, sexuality, and race to uphold dominant ideologies, but it also adds to negative aspects of the Southern Imaginary. Continual stereotyping of particular identities in Southern media paints a misogynist, anti-queer, and racist image of the South. This encourages and allows “America to construct identities of an internal other in an effort to consolidate a sense of national identity” (Massey, 2007, p. 126). The South acts as an internal other because non-Southerners can point to negative aspects of the region without offering help and further alienating those within the South. This internal othering feeds into stereotypes about the region itself. Stereotypes about the South “tend to denigrate the Southern poor, under-educated and rural” (Rawls, 2012). To understand how the South was constructed as the internal other, one must look at the ways Southern media represent race, gender, and sexuality in the region and thus contribute to a negative Southern Imaginary.

### ***The Racialized South***

Race is an integral part of the South and Southern media. Due to the region’s long and troubled history with race, scholarship concerning racial representations tend to focus on Blackness. As discussed previously, Black women and men frequently face negative and stereotypical representations in Southern media. These depictions tend to rely on physical essentialism or the displacement of class or economic anxieties onto the body thus citing the individual as the cause of those anxieties (Massey, 2007). A large contributing factor to this phenomenon is the construction of whiteness within the region and its media. Whiteness as a concept is an integral aspect in the development of the Southern Imaginary as bell hooks argues:

Within my family's Southern black working-class home, located in a racially segregated neighborhood, watching television was one way to develop critical spectatorship. Unless you went to work in the white world, across the tracks, you learned to look at white people by staring at them on the screen. (2008, p. 199)

Not only were these representations an essential part of white life, but marginalized individuals also learned about white folks through media.

Two representations of the South have become synonymous with whiteness and structures of racial tension: the hillbilly and the plantation. As mentioned previously, the hillbilly figure has served as the Southern root of representation concerning gender and sexuality. The stereotype also serves to establish whiteness within the region. Because of the negative reception and nature of the hillbilly, the depictions of whiteness allowed "middle-class white Americans could see [hillbillies] as a fascinating and exotic 'other' . . . while at the same time sympathize with them as poorer and less modern versions of themselves" (Harkins, 2005, p. 7). Since other white audiences could, seemingly, without consequence make fun of the hillbilly, the figure's whiteness served to hide the whiteness of the majority and act as an outlet for "highly charged political struggles over the definition of race, class, gender norms and roles, as well as the nature of mass culture" (Harkins, 2005, p. 8). The hillbilly thus serves to reify whiteness while also hiding it from audiences leading to a shallow understanding of larger social and cultural issues at play concerning race in the South.

The plantation also serves as a physical representation of the racialized South. During the Jim Crow Era (the time immediately following the end of the Civil War until the 1968 Voting Rights Act), the plantation served as a violent reflection of "midcentury fears about the unstable boundaries and meanings of white identity in the context of Jim Crow segregation and American

imperial expansion” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 134). The prolific nature of plantation films at that time exemplifies the struggle over whiteness. During the Civil Rights movement (the 1940s to the late 1960s), plantation homes were often used as settings in films and television programs without calling attention to the racialized history of those locations. These representations “repeatedly offered visions of a charmingly eccentric South, [and] many white Americans no doubt wondered if racial relations could really be as tense as the escalating news reports suggested” (Graham, 2001, p. 42). While a place of immense violence, plantations during this time served to reassert whiteness and downplay racial tensions. Recently, plantation films have become more popular (*Free State of Jones* (2016), *Antebellum* (2020), etc.). Yet these representations offer a more nuanced understanding of Southern whiteness as “elites battle it out with other white ethnic groups for control of working estates [and] . . . struggle to maintain the boundaries of Anglo-American whiteness against the contaminations of decadent Creole, European, and working-class strains” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 125). Confronted with their own identity and history, Southern whiteness has begun to search for ways to reiterate their unearned racial privilege in a more discreet manner by targeting other white individuals.

In addition to whiteness, Asian and Asian American representation in the South has recently garnered attention from scholars due to an increase of positive depictions. Like most non-white representations, Asian and Asian American characters in literature, film, and later television were vilified and portrayed as oppositional to societal norms. For example, “during the height of ‘Yellow Peril’ hysteria, Chinese and Japanese people were viewed as devious and vicious. Popular literature warned of the dangers of intermarriage with Asians and charged that Asian men purposefully sought White [*sic*] women” (Wilson et al., 2007, p. 72). Such literary warnings were translated into the media so much so that “in contemporary film and television

representation, the four stereotypes of Asian–Yellow Peril, Charlie Chan, Dragon Lady, and Lotus Blossom—are still evident” (Shah, 2003). Like many underrepresented groups, Asians and Asian American artists are creating new forms of media that “counter the long-standing stereotypes by communicating to the majority society that Asian America is diverse and has concerns aside from ‘fitting in’” (Shah, 2003). Yet, this burden should not fall on this group alone and modern depictions of Asians and Asian Americans are beginning to shift.

### ***The Gendered South***

Conceptualizations and representations of gender are prevalent in media, especially Southern media. Specifically, notions of femininity and masculinity have existed in Southern media from the beginnings of region-specific literature (Ewell, 1997). Underlying those representations of gender in the South, is the hillbilly stereotype. The hillbilly is described as a “blank canvas upon which the anxieties of an America in crisis can visually play out” as well as a “Frankenstein figure, compiled of all the parts that society rejects —degenerate, uncouth, lazy” (Massey, 2007, p. 126). More specifically, Harkins (2012) describes the hillbilly as a person who lives in the mountainous regions of the American South, particularly the Ozarks, and has a “diet rooted in scarcity..., physical appearance and clothing that denoted hard and specifically working-class laboring conditions..., an animal-like existence on the economic and physical fringes of society..., ignorance and racism, and in all cases, economic, genetic, and cultural impoverishment...” (p. 368). The reason the hillbilly lends itself well to discussions and representations of gender roles is that the caricature is defined by cultural values rather than solely regionality.

The hillbilly man fails to meet traditional gender roles. He is lazy, does not work, is often an alcoholic, and does not run his household. The hillbilly woman, on the other hand, takes on

these traditional masculine traits that the hillbilly man fails to achieve. She is harsh, large, and strong, and takes charge, often bossing the man around. This woman is “stripped of the passivity and femininity desired of Western women” (Massey, 2007, p. 130). Because the hillbilly woman stereotype is so prevalent in Southern media (*The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Southern Belles* [2005], *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*), it has become part of the Southern Imaginary. Southern women are held to the same body standards as other women, yet they are “indicted for their inability to act on them when they are constantly represented as trash, obese, or desexualized” in media (Massey, 2007, p. 128). Similarly, Southern men are also held to national standards of masculinity yet are characterized by their failure to meet them. As such, Southern men typically find that they need to assert their masculinity, which often leads to harmful behaviors (Massey, 2007). This can be seen in various television characters that rely on the hillbilly stereotype like Jiggle Belly in *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (Adult Swim, 2000-2015), a talking doll who carries a gun and moonshine jug, and Grandpa Amos McCoy in *The Real McCoys*, the aging patriarch of a large West Virginian family who have relocated to California, who both serve as hillbilly characters which results in humorous interactions with others. However, with recent national cultural shifts concerning masculinity, archetypal Southern representations of men are becoming increasingly more accepted. The hillbilly man is represented in all three case studies but is most prominent in *Hart of Dixie*. The show’s concern with heterosexual coupling and traditional gender roles highlights the hillbilly stereotype even more thus providing rich content for analysis later in this project.

Along with the hillbilly, Southern men are also commonly feminized through depictions of men as “momma’s boys.” Gentle, almost infantilized, Southern men “are rarely recognized as an archetype in the pantheon of Southern characters in American popular culture” (Smith &

Wilson, 2004, p. 189). Typically depicted in bromance films and sitcoms, these characters are often bullied for their effeminate nature and must come to realize their true masculinity at the end of their journey. Bromance, defined as “an emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males,” reiterates contemporary concerns and trends with masculinity by serving as the driving force of many male-dominated films and television shows like *Y tú mamá también* (2001), *I Love You Man* (2009), *House* (Fox, 2004-2012), and *Supernatural* (DeAngelis, 2014, p. 1). For example, the bromance situated in *House* relies heavily on notions of domesticity and caretaking (as the two often rely on each other for various forms of support and even live together for a time), roles traditionally associated with femininity.

In sitcoms specifically, these characterizations of men re-present “white, middle-class, middle-aged masculinity as an act of realization, caught in-between the ‘old’ American man and the overly-feminized, model of the ‘new’ American man” (Hanke, 1998, p. 89). This crisis of masculinity comes to define media depictions of men. While the general trend in mainstream media is to reject the effeminate man, the South accepts him. Smith and Wilson (2004) argue that to “counter the negative popular imagery of the redneck, the boosters of the modern South accentuate this kinder face of white working-class Southern tradition as more acceptable to national norms” (p. 192). This turn from traditional masculinity works as a way for the South to redefine men in the Southern Imaginary and turn from the hillbilly stereotype. Both *Atlanta* and *One Mississippi* provide examples of this shift away from the hillbilly stereotype in their more nuanced male character development.

Representations of gender should also be considered from an intersectional perspective especially with the South’s racial history and current struggle surrounding racialized depictions of Black individuals. Generally, depictions of Black men rely on stereotypical images like the

“submissive, docile Tom or the morally corrupt, conniving, sexually threatening drug dealer” (Bernardi, 2007, p. 52). The “Magical African-American Friend” or MAAF is another stereotype perpetuated within Southern media concerning Black men (and is often paired with a “Bigot with a Heart of Gold”) that demotes Black actors and characters to subordinate who are only there to support the leading white characters (Farley, 2000). Recently, these depictions have shifted and work to reify white notions of racial superiority/inferiority in more discreet ways. Scholar bell hooks (2008) states that negative representations of Black men socialize “young whites who see such ‘innocent’ images of black males eagerly affirming white males superiority [and] come to expect this behavior in real life” (p. 88). These representations not only affect white perception and treatment of Black men, but also affect how these men see themselves. hooks emphasizes that depictions like these “socialize black males to see themselves as always lacking, as always subordinated to more powerful white males whose approval they need to survive, matter in white patriarchy” (2008, p. 84). Patriarchal ideologies continue to influence race relations and depictions nationwide. Specifically, issues concerning Black masculinity in the South are often overlooked in scholarship and are “even *more* vulnerable to being excluded” (Richardson, 2007, p. 14, emphasis original). While Black men tend to be the subject of much media fascination, Southern Blackness and masculinity are undifferentiated from national discourses of masculinity.

Black women are also stereotyped in Southern media. Archetypes of Black women include the diva, the mammy, the mad Black woman, the hypersexualized tramp, and others. These stereotypes, called controlling images, are utilized “to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2000, p. 69). Despite more positive representations of white women in Southern media like Rayna James (Connie Britton) and Juliette Barnes (Hayden Panettiere) in *Nashville* (ABC &



CMT, 2012-2018) who lead the show as strong women in a male-dominated music industry, depictions of Black women are falling behind and further relying on stereotypes. For example, *Married with Medicine* (Bravo, 2013-present) is a reality-based program which follows women in the medical world of Atlanta, some of them doctors and others married to doctors. The show was met with backlash and even a petition to cancel it because the show “exploits the 6 lives of its Black female cast members, but, through its advertisements and commercials, heavily associates Black females in medicine with materialism, ‘cat fights’, and unprofessionalism” (Awosika, 2013). Other reality television programs surrounding Black women in the South (*Real Housewives of Atlanta* [Bravo, 2008-present], *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta* [VH1, 2012-present]) have been met with similar criticisms.

These depictions say that “for African-American women, the postfeminist message is that black women need to know their place within the racial and gender hierarchy” (Springer, 2007, p. 88). Black women are often not taken into consideration in conversations about representation of women because they have “emerged as theoretically invisible from inside the feminist academy through its failure to identify political allegiances based on race rather than gender” (McCabe, 2005, pp. 67-68). Black women are noticeably absent from many contemporary programs set in the South or are relegated to side characters (see *One Tree Hill* [The WB & The CW, 2003-2012], *Dallas* [TNT, 2012-2014], and *Southern Charm* [Bravo, 2014-present]). Undoubtedly influenced by the South’s racial past, representations of Black individuals work to amplify these negative stereotypes and social norms.

Despite the voluminous scholarship about traditional gender roles and the gender binary in Southern media, transgender identities and representations are often overlooked. This could be a result of the lack of representation in Southern (and all) media, but “across broadcast, cable,

and on-demand platforms, the amount of television programming featuring lead or supporting transgender characters is on the rise across all classifications” (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016, p. 215). Of the scholarship that has focused on media depictions of transgender individuals, most tend to investigate harmful and stereotypical representations. Representations of transgender individuals is not a new phenomenon. The historical representations of trans people, “from the 1950s to the end of the 1990s have in the end tended to reinforce stereotypical thinking on the subject” (Phillips, 2006, p. 165). Positive representations of transgender individuals were not a large part of mainstream media during that time. These historical “trans stories featured violent, psychotic, disturbed, deceitful, usually cross-dressing men, or, on the other end of the spectrum, comic tropes” (Stern, 2018 p. 81). Negative depictions such as these have consistently proved harmful for transgender communities.

Several dynamics are at play in transgender representation that contribute to a negative view of trans individuals including fascination, fear, disgust, fetishization, and hypersexuality (Phillips, 2006, p. 173). Even in recent programs that feature positive representations of transgender characters, “transgender people get an average of 7% of the screen time” and the narrative “voice remains that primarily of trans women, thus silencing trans men and non-binary subjectivities,” (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016, p. 224). Ultimately, scholars have found that negative stereotypes have continued to exist despite an increase of visibility surrounding transgender actors (like Laverne Cox, Elliot Page, Jamie Clayton, and Hunter Schafer). Yet, the recent increase in positive representation has provided a sense of hope for future depictions of transgender individuals on screen.

### ***The Queered South***

While scholarship concerning representations of gender in the South is broad, literature surrounding sexuality is limited. Along with the archetypal hillbilly figure, Massey also describes typical depictions of sexuality in the South that include incest, hypersexualization of women, and the demonization of homosexuality. The Southern film *Deliverance* (1972) acts as an exemplar of these themes, especially the vilification of homosexuality through depictions of rape and sodomy (Massey, 2007). In considering why representations of queerness are typically negative in media, Dixon (2003) states that the root lies in straight panic. He claims, “that the construction of being straight... cannot survive without the continual production of images to support it, work that is going on now with a renewed, desperate intensity” (Dixon, 2003, p. 160). Continual representations of heteronormativity—and the subsequent denigration of queerness—work to reify straightness.

Yet, queer representation in the South is growing and conversations of queerness and female sexuality are beginning to increase as more representations occur. An oft-overlooked element of the Southern Imaginary includes anti-queerness; however, this “stereotype of a queer-phobic South is linked to the long-standing view that the South is the nation’s backward and perverse regional Other” (Bibler, 2016, p. 201). The representations of queerness in the South have aligned closely with national trends. Further, when there are representations of queerness in the South, those depictions allow insight into cultural rifts within the region. As Bibler argues, “it is precisely where gender and sexuality are most unstable that the wider complexities of culture and society within the South become most apparent” (2016, p. 200). For example, the two-part episode of *Ellen* in which the main character comes out as a lesbian, “The Puppy Episode” (4.22 & 4.23), was banned in Birmingham, Alabama. While this ban did point out the harmful practices against queerness in the South, it also revealed the efforts of queer activists and allies

within the region (Hinrichsen et al., 2017)). Moreover, this struggle over the episode ban turned national attention to the region and showcased the reactions to the episode (both in favor of the ban and against it); thus, it made clear that the South's history continues to influence cultural politics about identity and representation. Hinrichsen et al. found that "residents of Alabama performed their perspectives and identities in response to the South's racial history and/or Alabama's political state" (2017, p. 74). While representations of queerness in the South are lacking and typically vilified, these representations are not unique to the region and audience reactions to them can provide insight into underlying social struggles.

Along with queerness, feminine sexuality is typically negatively represented in the South. Often, women are both hypersexualized and desexualized. Massey points to the many reiterations of Daisy Duke, who originated in television show *The Dukes of Hazzard* and was most recently depicted in the film *The Dukes of Hazzard: The Beginning* (2007), to exemplify the hypersexualization of the female body. She argues that depictions such as this are rooted in patriarchal narratives and objectify women rather than act as a liberating force (2007). This can be seen in the short, tight outfits that Daisy wears as well as the body type of the actresses who play her. When representations do not oversexualize women, they often portray them as asexual, unattractive beings. Typically, these are harsh matriarchal figures who take on traditionally masculine roles and duties (Massey, 2007). These representations are also rooted in patriarchal narratives concerning the reciprocal relationship between following traditional gender roles and attractiveness. And yet, as with gendered representations, feminine sexuality has recently seen a positive turn. More attention is being paid to "sexual relationships and how to achieve sexual satisfaction, not previously considered a suitable topic for television drama" (Arthurs, 2004, p.

132). Indicative of the larger cultural shift, more positive depictions of female sexuality and queerness are becoming increasingly prevalent. Southern media has begun to follow this trend.

### ***Gaps in the Literature***

While much attention has been paid to media representations in Southern media, relatively little scholarship has discussed the ways in which representation can be utilized as a tool to redefine the Southern Imaginary. Recent televisual depictions of the South have done just that. Analyzing how media is complicating the Southern Imaginary is necessary to highlight the social and political changes occurring in the South. To do so, I will utilize *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* and showcase how their use of (mostly) positive representations works to reframe perceptions of the South and actively resist characterization within the Southern Imaginary. I aim to address and fulfill a gap in the literature with hopes that future scholarship will investigate this notion further.

### **Critical Method**

I utilize a structuralist approach rooted in rhetorical textual analysis to investigate representations of gender, sexuality, and race in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta*. The structuralist approach is concerned with how media texts create meaning. Specifically, it “sees texts as coded systems of signs, but directs attention to linguistic and cultural structures, and reaches the meaning(s) of the signs through the structures” (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005, p. 174-175). Stuart Hall argues that representation in media acts as the ultimate sign, stating that media produce “representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (2002, p. 90). Thus, in looking at representations within television series through cultural structures like

regionality, one can begin to understand those frames and how individuals interpret the various meanings of the representations.

Similarly, rhetoric is concerned with power, persuasion, and meaning making. Often, power and persuasion reflect and support ideology, which “refer[s] to those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (Hall, 2002, p. 89). Speaking to the role of representation in ideology, Thornham and Purvis state that ideology “is bound up with power relations and embodied in social institutions, but it operates through *representations* and, because the meanings we give our lives constitute our sense of individual identity, at the level of the individual” (2004, p. 75). Therefore, rhetorical analysis of media texts can point out the power relations and ideologies at play while also critically analyzing the representations that imbue those ideologies with meaning. Vande Berg et al. further explains the impetus of rhetoric in media studies, saying:

The quintessential mission of rhetorical study is to come to grips with what signs do to those who consume them and how that doing gets done. The search for “what” is the exploration of the vehicles of rhetorical effect, while the search for “how” is the identification of what aspects of signs and their structures have the potential to change audiences’ ideas, actions, or perceptions of the world. (2004, p. 141)

For this project, the “vehicles of rhetorical effect” are *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* while the “aspects of signs . . . that have the potential to change” are the representations of gender, race, and sexuality.

To assess the nature of televisual depictions, Gray emphasizes the need for the comparison of representations across shows by stating that “we can only truly evaluate

depictions relatively, by comparing them to other depictions within the same program, and *intertextually*, to other depictions in other programs” (2008, p. 111, emphasis original). The three programs selected for analysis provide unique insight into these representations that analysis of one show could not produce. Additionally, since audiences have complex and varying backgrounds, it could be difficult to identify positive and negative representations as the same depiction might be based on the audience member’s cultural upbringing, previous encounters with media texts, and exposure to difference and diverse ways of life. Due to this inherent polysemic nature of media texts as well as the heavy reliance on representation to attract audiences, it is “important that we continually interrogate who television is representing and who is paying the price for its dreamworlds” (Gray, 2008, p. 127). In this case, by analyzing how these series represent gender, race, and sexuality, one can assess how the shows reflect the changing culture of the South and influence audience perception of the region.

Regarding the texts themselves, I analyze character development and relationships as well as larger conversations on race, gender, and sexuality that occur throughout the series. My analysis is rooted in the juxtaposition of these characters and discussions with the image of the South perpetuated by the Southern Imaginary. In comparing the representations in selected episodes and contrasting them with the Southern Imaginary, the analysis will yield insight into how the programs are acting as sites of resistance and altering the conceptualization of the South.

### **Positionality**

Referring to the process of learning and reading, hooks and Mesa-Bains state that academia is rooted in the formula “E + T = M, Experience plus Text equals Meaning” (2017, p. 42). This mindset argues that scholarly analysis and interpretation is consistently influenced by the identity and background of the author. My positionality as a young, white Southern woman

has undoubtedly influenced my approach to these texts and it is important to recognize that my interpretation is both strengthened and limited by my positionality. Specifically, my experiences growing up in Alabama, my continuous engagement with Southern media, and my acute awareness of the effects of Southern stereotypes led me to this project; my understanding of the region, language, and customs allowed me to select texts that align with my research question; and the interpretations of the texts are fixed in my identity and experience. My own narrative, relationships, and stories are of value when analyzing the meaning-making process within these programs; however, I am also limited by my positionality insofar as I cannot account for interpretations that are rooted in experiences other than my own. To accommodate this, I supplement my own interpretation with that of others, referring to their voices and bolstering the influence of said interpretation.

### **Overview of Chapters**

This analysis begins with Chapter One, which is an investigation into racial representations in the series and how they contribute to a nuanced post/racial view of the South. Examining representations of whiteness as well as Black and Asian American experiences in the South represented in *Hart of Dixie*, *Atlanta*, and *One Mississippi*, this chapter analyzes how these contemporary television series transform understandings of race in the Southern Imaginary. Beginning with a discussion of the influence of the Confederacy in the programs, this chapter analyzes how they address various forms of racial discrimination and prejudice in their respective settings including racial fetishization. While the Southern Imaginary characterizes the South as a region that has stagnated in relation to racial progress, this chapter argues that *Hart of Dixie*, *Atlanta*, and *One Mississippi* present an alternative view by offering voices that are often overlooked and representing a more mundane, everyday existence for non-white individuals



living in the South. The examples provided within the chapter work to highlight how the case studies decenter whiteness in conversations about race in the South. However, this chapter ends with an examination of when representation of the everyday can fail by creating a post-racial community, a society that has moved beyond or solved racism. In failing to mention or discuss racial issues in the South, Southern media can reify the perceived inactivity of the region toward racial justice. The chapter concludes with consideration of intersectional representations of Black women thus leading into a more explicated conversation of gender in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two discusses the ways *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* disrupt traditional notions of gender in the South. *Hart of Dixie* more explicitly concerns traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity in the South while *Atlanta* and *One Mississippi* include more nuanced discussions of gender including deviations from the gender norms. The Southern Imaginary often relies on the desexualization of women, strict gender roles between men and women, and the noticeable absence of nonbinary or transgender representation. Relying on these descriptions of gender in the Southern Imaginary, this chapter delves into how the shows both challenge traditional gender roles while subtly juxtaposing more complex and modern notions of gender. The chapter begins with an analysis of how female characters in the programs defy stereotypical representation. Special attention is paid to how representations of women of color deviate from the Southern Imaginary. This is followed by similar analysis of masculinity, with considerations of racial stereotypes, especially how the series tend to reverse traditional gender norms. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the (lack of) representations of transgender individuals in the case studies.

As aspects of gender are often tied with representations of sexuality, Chapter Three moves to specifically address representations of sexuality within *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*,

and *Atlanta*. Historically, the South has been de-queered and hypersexualized. The chapter begins with an examination of feminine sexuality in the three case studies with reference to how they disrupt the concept of the desexualized hillbilly woman as discussed by Massey (2007). This is followed by a discussion of the ways in which these programs, specifically *One Mississippi* attempt to queer the region while also explicating the hardships that queer folks encounter in the South. In treating queer stories as a normal part of the South, the series confront the anti-queer aspects of the Southern Imaginary and propose an alternate narrative which both affirms negative experiences and resists characterizing the entire region based on those experiences. Additionally, this chapter touches on how the series queer feminine sexuality through representations of the characters' sex lives. Not only do the series combat the desexualization of their female characters, as discussed in the previous chapter, but they also resist the hypersexualization that often occurs with representations of Southern female characters. By providing an alternative view of feminine sexuality, one that openly discusses their sexual nature while confronting or withstanding hypersexualization, *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* opposes and complicates stereotypes of Southern women.

Finally, the Conclusion discusses the implications of this analysis for Southern studies, the South itself, and communication studies, specifically representation and television. The media of the American South is understudied in communication studies and could yield important insights into the power dynamics at play in representations like the ones discussed. Historically, media about the South has created a type of self-fulfilling prophecy that allowed little room for change or progress. Now, as more Southerners are creating media about the region, stories are being told that break down and alter the Southern Imaginary; in doing so, these stories allow for a more complex view of the South, one that includes advancements in

notions of gender, racial, and sexuality rather than adhering to antiquated ideals. Therefore, the investigation of these shows can improve our understanding of American popular culture's construction of a Southern Imaginary as well as the need to create space for new voices and alternative visions. This chapter also offers areas of future research for Southern studies scholars that can continue the work of illuminating a more holistic view of the South.

In an attempt to structure the chapters more clearly, these three aspects (race, gender, and sexuality) were categorized as distinct representational phenomena. It is important to note that these concepts are deeply connected and thus are virtually impossible to completely separate. For instance, Earn in *Atlanta* not only represents transformations of masculinity but also navigates being Black in the Deep South; Tig in *One Mississippi* represents a gay experience in the South that is very tinted by her whiteness; Zoe in *Hart of Dixie* needs to negotiate the gendered dynamics in the Alabama town in which she lives while also participating in heteronormative relationships. The inherent intersectionality of the characters and representations in these programs only serves to further the forthcoming argument about the changing rhetorical landscape of the American South.

## CHAPTER ONE: SOUTHERN (POST)RACIAL REALNESS

It doesn't feel like you're in a Spike Lee directed *Eyes Wide Shut* right now?

— Earn, *Atlanta*

Van (Zazie Beetz) and her friends go out on New Year's Eve hoping for the chance to meet the rapper Drake in the second season of *Atlanta* ("Champagne Papi," 2.07). The episode, an allegory for being fake or putting on a façade, follows Van as she discovers that Drake is not actually at his party and all the social media posts are fans paying to pose with cardboard cutouts. Halfway through the episode, Darius (LaKeith Stanfield) discusses simulation theory with one of Van's friends. He says, "You're a simulation . . . There's someone controlling your every movement." Not only is this a commentary on modern social media usage, but this is also a unique experience that many people of color have in the U.S. and the South. One of the most famous literary depictions of this phenomenon is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), where an unnamed Black protagonist discovers that he has been living his entire life controlled by the white gaze. Within the South and media depictions of the region, the Southern Imaginary presents this white gaze as the dominant worldview, thus forcing marginalized folks to adhere to preset roles.

The representations of race in *Atlanta*, *One Mississippi*, and *Hart of Dixie* complicate and attempt to dislodge this white gaze as the center of the Southern Imaginary. By addressing revisionist history, utilizing Afro Surrealism, and combating racial fetishization these television series present an alternative perspective that is often shut out of the Southern Imaginary. The

following analysis proceeds in three parts: first, I discuss how the Confederacy and the Civil War continue to influence media depictions of the South; then, I investigate how the programs either fall into or call attention to the post racial trap; finally, I turn to how the case studies represent race through depictions of everyday reality representations of masculinity and the reversal of gender roles with considerations of racial stereotypes. I conclude with a discussion about the importance of more legitimate representations of race in the series and their implications on the Southern Imaginary.

### **Confederate Influences**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Civil War continues to influence the Southern Imaginary and media depictions of the South (*Drango* [1957], *The Undeclared* [1969], *Glory* [1989], *Sword of Trust* [2019]). Specifically, three aspects related to the war are prevalent in media representations of the South: battle reenactments, the Confederate flag, and the plantation. All three aspects appear in the case studies. First, Remy (Noah Harpster) in *One Mississippi* participates in reenactments of the Civil War. Often reenactments are characterized as nostalgic and attempts to defend the Confederacy (Farmer, 2005). The inclusion and regularity of these reenactments proves that the confederacy continues to linger in the region as well as the influence of the Civil War on the Southern Imaginary. In “I Want to Hold Your Hand” (2.01), Vicky (Adora Dei) corrects an individual participating in the reenactment who says that there were not any Asian people in the Civil War. She says that “there were quite a few Chinese soldiers who fought in the Civil War. The individual the proceeds to make a racist comment that is not challenged by Remy who is then called ignorant by Vicky. Yet, Remy fights for the Union in these reenactments. When they drink after the battles, the reenactors toast “to the Union.” This dichotomy is representative of a more subtle impact of the Confederacy and these

reenactments. Civil War reenactments are attempts to accurately present past battles often for public consumption. However, these events do not exist in a vacuum apart from contemporary social and political influence. These events not only replicate the Civil War, but they also reconstruct the past, including beliefs and values, or “a *simulacrum* of another time which interpenetrates ‘real time’” (Turner, 1989, p. 56). Because of this, reenactments and media representations of those reenactments must contend with both the events of the past and their influence on the present.

The conversation that Vicky and Remy have with another reenactor in “I Want to Hold Your Hand” (2.01) is an example of this tension. After discussing the reenactment, Remy’s friend questions Vicky by saying “but why are you even here? . . . Well, you know, there weren’t, like, any Chinese people in the Civil War. Are you playing like a white person, or what?” Vicky corrects the man and says that she is actually Vietnamese and there were quite few Chinese soldiers in the Civil War. The friend responds, “so our characters are probably fucking concubines.” He then laughs while walking away. Vicky is clearly offended, and Remy does not see why what his friend says is an issue. The conversation quickly delves into one about how the election of Donald Trump (though he is not explicitly named) allowed for more overt racism to occur without consequence. Remy and Vicky end the conversation when Vicky calls Remy ignorant for not believing that everyone who voted for Trump is a racist. This scene both calls attention to revisionist history as well as how that history, and the lingering racism of the Confederacy, perpetuates racists ways of thinking. By incorporating contemporary racial issues with the dress and actions associated with the Confederacy, *One Mississippi* argues that race continues to pose a large issue in the South. The Southern Imaginary, which usually paints the South as a racist region, does not typically account for races other than white and Black. Vicky

presents an alternative view of Southern history and nuances conversations about race in the region.

In the current time of social unrest, Southerners are calling more attention to the concrete ways that the Confederacy lingers in the South, from the removal of Confederate monuments (Aguilera, 2020; Pereira, 2020) to the debate over the Confederate flag flying over South Carolina's capital building (Blumenthal, 2015; Rueters, 2015; Worland, 2015). *Atlanta* also briefly comments on the material lingering of the Confederacy in "Teddy Perkins" (2.06). Darius sees a hat with a Confederate flag on it that reads "Southern Made" at a gas station checkout. He buys the hat and a sharpie at the last minute. The audience sees Darius draw on the hat, put it on, and turn to check himself in the side mirror of a truck. He has blocked out the letters of "Southern Made" so that the hat now reads "U Mad?" In a similar instance, Alfred, Darius, and Earn find themselves at a fraternity house in "North of the Border" (2.09). They sit on the couch in their pajamas in front of a very large Confederate flag. No one acknowledges the flag, but the framing of the scene ensure that it is a prominent feature. Both instances point to the tangible legacy of the Confederacy as well as the absurd nature of said legacy. The scenes are meant to be comical and bring attention to the uncomfortable tension and underlying threat of violence felt by folks of color in the South. However, they again present an alternative perspective often left out of the Southern Imaginary by depicting Darius reclaiming the flag for a satirical joke and by focusing on the awkwardness of Alfred and Earn when confronted with the flag in the home of many white men.

The final element of the Confederacy that lingers in the Southern Imaginary is the plantation. In *Hart of Dixie*, mayor Lavon Hayes (Cress Williams) lives in an old plantation home. As the only main character of color, the irony of this situation is not discussed at all.

Several times throughout the series, the town celebrates various heritage days or events (from the Founder's Day Parade in "Parades & Pariahs" [1.02] to the Renaissance Fair in "Ring of Fire" [3.15]) but do not discuss the colonial, Confederate, or slaveholder influences on the region both geographically and culturally. While *Atlanta* and *One Mississippi* both grapple with the legacy and influence of the Confederacy on the modern-day South and present alternative worldviews of the Southern Imaginary's depiction of Confederate influences, *Hart of Dixie* does not engage with this history. In doing so and by placing its only character of color as the leader of the town who resides in an old plantation home, the series does not address the impact the Civil War has on modern race relations in the South; thus, the program falls into the post-racial trap.

### **The Post-Racial Trap**

Post-racialism is "a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic of the past with no viable place in contemporary thought" (Rossing, 2012, p. 45). Films about the South, like *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *The Blind Side* (2009), and *The Help* (2011), often feature a post-racial society insofar as they might mention racism but they either antiquate that racism or feature white characters at the center of the story rather than those affected by racism. Barack Obama is cited as a figure who began the contemporary mainstream discussion of a post-racial society as his election proved to some people that racism was a thing of the past (Okamura, 2011). This post-race society is perpetuated in film and television through concepts like colorblind casting and plastic representation (Warner, 2015, 2017). Colorblind casting, the act of casting any individual for any role regardless of race, is meant to diversify film and television but ultimately leads to flat representation and the perpetuation of a post-racial society because these roles often do not address the influence of race and racism on the characters (see *Grey's Anatomy* [ABC, 2005-present] and *Bridgerton* [Netflix, 2020-present] for



examples). Plastic representation takes colorblind casting one step further as it is “a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny” (Warner, 2017, p. 35). Both elements lead to television programs falling into the post-racial trap.

*Hart of Dixie*'s Lavon is an example of a post-racial character. As mentioned previously, he lives in a former plantation home and is the mayor of Bluebell. The influence of race on both elements is not discussed in the series. The one attempt to discuss race occurs in season three, “Family Tradition” (3.06), when Lavon’s white girlfriend’s, AnnaBeth’s (Kaitlyn Black), parents visit town. At first, AnnaBeth tried to push Lavon out of town. When this did not work and it was revealed that her parents were the reason for pushing him away, the two discuss why she did not want Lavon around:

LAVON: Is this what I think it’s about?

ANNABETH: Some people are just so set in their ways in the South. We’d like to think we’ve changed but . . .

LAVON: Football!

ANNABETH: We are not a post-rival America!

A seemingly tongue-in-cheek reference to AnnaBeth’s apprehension that her parents will not accept Lavon because he is Black, the episode puts Lavon’s past as an Alabama football player and AnnaBeth’s past as an Auburn University cheerleader at the center of the conversation rather than their races. In the end, her parents are able to look past Lavon’s time playing for Alabama and accept him. While the implied meaning of racial acceptance can be interpreted by the audience, the failure to explicitly discuss these situations and fears of racist ideologies in the

South maintain the post-racial society. Lavon's race is not mentioned in the episode, and he is mainly concerned about the football rivalry ruining his relationship with AnnaBeth's parents. This example encapsulates how the series discusses race, either completely removing it from the conversation or shrouding it in an attempt at a humorous metaphor. This trivializes the harm that people of color face in the region especially those in interracial relationships.

Another reference to a post-racial society occurs in the *Atlanta* episode "Nobody Beats the Biebs" (1.05). Alfred plays a charity basketball game against a Black Justin Bieber. This Bieber's race is never mentioned in the episode as the singer is canonically Black in the show. The real, white Bieber has been accused of appropriating Black culture on several occasions (Henderson, 2021). Each time the real Bieber is accused of or even caught doing a heinous act, he apologizes, and the world forgives him. The episode, discussed more in depth below, calls this post-racial society into question by asking if Justin Bieber would be as famous or treated in the same manner if he were Black. This explicitly connects Bieber's fame and fortune to his whiteness while also drawing attention to the inequitable treatment of people of color, especially in the music industry. In doing so, the episode negates the post-racial society (and, therefore, the Southern Imaginary's perpetuation of antiquating racism and centering white experience) by assuring that race and racism continue to affect the everyday lives of people of color.

### **Everyday Reality**

Discussing the documentary, *The Family* (1974), and Channel 4's 2008 attempt at a modern version of the same name, Siobhan Holohan found that "the process of documenting (televisually and sociologically) mundane daily routines, and even the less mundane but nevertheless everyday activities such as family arguments and wedding preparations, works to create a sense of what is normal" (2012, p. 33). Often, this normal is rooted in whiteness as

minoritized folks have not been afforded representation of the everyday in the Southern Imaginary. They frequently are forced into stereotypical or token representation and pushed to subordinate or marginalized characterizations. Because of this, “marginalized populations have more motivation to form spaces outside the dominant purview” to engage in political discourse within the South (Steele, 2017, p. 113). Social media and blog posts are spaces often utilized as subcultures as well as television and music. To engage in political discourse, marginalized folks often use these spaces to detail their everyday lives and experiences with discrimination.

Television does this in multiple ways. First, series like *Hart of Dixie* and *One Mississippi* often rely on the serial/episodic nature of television to depict conflicts minoritized identities face as well as solutions or ways of coping that are enacted over the course of a single episode. For example, in the *Hart of Dixie* episode “Baby Don’t Get Hooked on Me” (2.07), Zoe is asked to use her sexuality to the town’s advantage when the high school football star starts to perform better after he develops a crush on her. By the end of the episode, Zoe has both helped the young boy discover his self-worth outside of a relationship and detailed to the town how using a woman’s sexuality for their gain is morally wrong, wrapping up the episode’s conflict.

Unlike *Hart of Dixie* and *One Mississippi*, *Atlanta* does not rely on self-contained episodes or even follow a larger plot. The episodes are crafted more as an inside look into the life of a poor, young, Black man in the South attempting to survive and invite the audience to follow him throughout his day. The program’s “ability to capture the mundanities of everyday life in the modern world is one of its most endearing qualities” (Brown, 2018). By presenting the everyday lives of Black folks in the South, *Atlanta* is breaking away from typical televisual depictions of Southern Black people (often in the form of reality television shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* [Bravo, 2008-present]) that have “conditioned [us] to see all Black people in the south as

one way. All tea, all shade, all giant fake eyelashes and drama” (Hughes, 2016). *Atlanta* “purposefully upends all of the flashy bravado, concocted drama, and bullshit fights, and endless frustration in talking around race [and] is refreshing in its radical truth” (Hughes, 2016). The first episode of the series, “The Big Bang” (1.01), expertly depicts the everyday life of the characters from showing Van in a headwrap to including casual smoking of marijuana. All these actions are either utilized as material for jokes or criminalized when done by Black folks but not treated as such when white characters do the same (see in Susan Sarandon in *Thelma & Louise* [1991] or Seth Rogan in *Pineapple Express* [2008]). While the representation of the mundane in *Atlanta* is discussed further in the following chapter, two aspects of the show contribute to the program’s ability to showcase the everyday while continuing to present an alternative view of the South: Afro Surrealism and racial fetishization.

### **Afro Surrealism**

One way that this everyday reality is depicted which subtly presents an alternative view of the South is through Afro Surrealism. Popularized by Amiri Baraka and D. Scot Miller (2009), Afro Surrealism is the act of “creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one . . . [and] stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear” (Baraka, 1988, p. 164). While Baraka (1988) applied the term “Afro-Surreal Expressionism” to literature, the term has spread to reference art, music, film, and television. Films like *Get Out* (2017), *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), and *The Burial of Kojó* (2018), which all rely on the peculiar to represent racial discrimination, struggle, or life, have been heralded as the inciting for the resurgence of Afro Surrealism (The Shadow League, 2018; Smith, 2020). While there are many characteristics that define Afro Surrealist art including reliance on the whimsical and excessive, most notably, “the Afro-Surrealist seeks

definition in the absurdity of a ‘post-racial’ world” (Miller, 2009). As discussed earlier, the post-racial trap is prevalent in contemporary media about the South and is perpetuated within the Southern Imaginary. To combat this, television series like *Atlanta* are utilizing Afro Surrealism.

*Atlanta*, and creator Donald Glover, is known for its striking cinematography and excellent writing. However, both Glover and his show are best known for being a bit weird and unusual (Glover’s comedy special is even called *Weirdo* [2012]). While this weirdness is not necessarily a trait that makes excellent television, Afro Surrealism thrives on such a characteristic. Afro Surrealist “artist[s] have chosen to use this genre to express their feelings of worry, liberty, and injustice, giving them the room to be as weird and free as they’d like” (Alexis, 2019). Several critics of the show discuss how *Atlanta*’s weirdness presents a fresh view of Black Southern life (Welk, 2018; Flight, 2022; Sparks, 2022; Venable, 2022). While this weirdness was not directly associated with Afro Surrealism in the first seasons on *Atlanta*, the show embraced the genre fully for the third season. Evan Brown (2022) discusses how the artist commissioned for the season three promotional materials, Alim Smith, explicitly identifies as an Afro Surrealist artist. The promotional posters and banners feature stylistic elements that are integral to the surrealist style.



Figure 1: *Atlanta* Season Three Promotional Banner

Now, almost every episode of the show's three seasons has been utilized in a discussion of Afro Surrealism in *Atlanta*. From episodes in season one like "Nobody Beats the Biebs" (1.05), where Earn is mistaken for another Black manager and Justin Bieber is actually a young Black man, to the last episode of season three, "Tarrare" (3.10), where Van takes on a French persona while in Paris, Afro Surrealism is rife within the series. Some have even compared the show to other surrealist shows like *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991 & Showtime, 2017) and *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) (Flight, 2022). Yet, *Atlanta* is unique because it is both unapologetically Black and Southern. Therefore, its use of Afro Surrealism is also rooted in the Southernness of the show and its characters. The surrealist moments that occur explain life for Black folks specifically in the South as those challenges and discriminations differ based upon region. Ultimately, *Atlanta* utilizes discomfort and the mundane to emphasize that reality is inherently surreal for marginalized individuals in the South.

Several episodes throughout the three seasons of *Atlanta* utilize Afro Surrealism to this end. In the episode "Nobody Beats the Biebs" (1.05), Earn and Alfred attend a charity basketball game. Before the game, "Justin Bieber" walks in. While the real Bieber is white, this Bieber is played by a young, Black actor (Austin Crute), a difference that is never acknowledged in the episode. Bieber often uses the n-word, gets into a fight on the basketball court, and even sings during his apology press conference. His actions, paired with the lack of acknowledgement of his race, present a surreal discomfort. The character is visibly Black, but the audience cannot disassociate him from the real-life white Bieber. The jokes within the episode are funny because of this dissonance between the two characters. The white Bieber consistently appropriates Black culture and is forgiven for his obnoxious actions because of his whiteness. In *Atlanta*, the Black Bieber invites the audience to wonder if the singer would be treated differently if he were Black.

An example of this comes late in the episode. After fighting with Alfred during the basketball game, Bieber apologizes in a press conference. He says that “I guess I been trying to be so cool lately that I became something I’m not.” He changes his hat from a backwards sideways position to a straightforward one which is met with dramatic gasps from the audience. To this he responds “Wait, it’s cool. This is me. This is the real Justin. I’m not a bad guy. I actually love Christ. I guess I’ve been hanging with the wrong people,” before breaking out into a song from his latest album. The absurdness of the apology and the audience’s reactions to his words and song is apparent and laughable because of the direct connection to the real Bieber’s actions. Additionally, individuals continuously reference Alfred shooting another person earlier that year throughout the episode.

While Alfred cannot escape this event because of his gangster rapper persona, this Bieber can because of his proximity and popularity within whiteness. This juxtaposition adds to the surrealist nature of the episode. Through this representation, *Atlanta* calls attention to the double standard set for Black folks in the music industry, in the South, and in America writ large. When they express their culture or make a mistake and apologize, it is not readily accepted or excused by the larger public; however, when a white individual appropriates Black culture and/or apologizes for their wrongdoings, they are more likely to be forgiven or their transgressions overlooked because of their whiteness. By representing 2Bieber as Black and utilizing Afro Surrealism, *Atlanta* points out this irony.



Figure 2: Afro Surrealism in *Atlanta* Season One (“Nobody Beats the Biebs,” 2.05)

Perhaps the most well-known and well awarded episode of *Atlanta*, “Teddy Perkins” (2.06), is also an example of Afro Surrealism at work. The episode follows Darius’s attempt to pick up a piano that he bought from a mysterious older musician. The musician, called Teddy Perkins and played by Donald Glover in whiteface, invites Darius in and proceeds to both show and tell him increasingly strange aspects of his life. From the moment he enters the mansion, Darius has symbolically entered another world. Aesthetically, the episode is very dark contrasting the darkness within the house with Teddy’s bright white skin. The mise en scene features highly ornate decorations and furniture, a striking difference from the sparsely decorated living spaces featured in other episodes. Teddy himself seems to be an allegory of Michael Jackson. His pale skin, dark black hair, high-pitched voice, and connection to the music industry all support this connection.

Throughout the episode, we discover that Teddy has a brother who lives in the basement. This brother apparently received serious injuries in an accident and covers himself completely and uses a wheelchair. In the end, the brother kills Teddy and himself because he believed that



Teddy was planning on killing him. While there are several ways to read this surreal encounter, one interpretation is that Teddy's brother is a reference to his Black self that he needed to lock away and try to kill to become a more palatable musician for white audiences. To do so, Teddy needed to hide his Black self and take on more traditionally white characteristics like straight hair, lighter skin, and a higher voice. This entire episode is shot to build suspense and confusion to mimic Darius's emotions and heighten the surreal nature. By utilizing Afro Surrealism in this nature, *Atlanta* represents W.E.B. du Bois's (1903) concept of Double Consciousness in which people of color have two versions of themselves conflicting with one another: their true self and what white folks think they should be. This again complicates the Southern Imaginary's myopic representation of people of color while also presenting a more nuanced conversation concerning racism within the region. This interpretation of Teddy Perkins and his brother also serves as a warning for Darius and, by extension, the audience. It points out the harm that is perpetuated by continual explicit and implicit racism as well as the dangers of centering the white gaze.



Figure 3: Afro Surrealism in *Atlanta* Season Two ("Teddy Perkins," 2.06).

### **Racial Fetishization**

Fetishization, or the act of giving an unusual/unreasonable amount of interest in something, is a term that has become popular in discussions of racialized media. For instance, Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder discuss how advertisements and other “consumer culture imagery should be recognized as a component of the body that creates, informs, and makes visible relationships and identity, exemplifies concerns of bodily integrity and materiality, and animates processes of fetishization” (2018, p. 104). The authors argue that capitalism is one of the root causes of fetishization as it views race, culture, and skin as marketable products. Racial fetishization is further linked to the construction and proliferation of whiteness as it is typically defined “through the production, circulation, and consumption of images of the not-white” (Farley, 1997, p. 463). These cultural reproductions of whiteness are seen throughout film and television especially through the casting of white actors for roles of people of color (Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* [1961], Angelina Jolie in *A Mighty Heart* [2007], Johnny Depp in *Lone Ranger* [2013]) and the tokenization of characters of color (*Silver Spoons* [NBC, 1982-1987], *Full House* [ABC, 1987-1995], *Saved by the Bell* [NBC, 1989-1992], *House* [Fox, 2004-2012]).

In the Southern Imaginary more specifically, whiteness plays a large role in the establishment of cultural norms and taboo. The Southern Imaginary glorifies aspects that are supposedly special to the region like soul food as well as gospel and blues music (among others) which originated with and are culturally significant to Black folks. Greg Tate argues that this is a problem for American writ large, saying that

For much of the last century the burden of being Black in America was the burden of a systemic denial of human and constitutional rights and equal economic opportunity. It was also a century in which much of what America sold to the world as uniquely

American in character—music, dance, fashion, humor, spirituality, grassroots politics, slang, literature, and sports—was uniquely African-American in origin, conception, and inspiration. (2005, p. 3)

While the same can be said for the Southern Imaginary, this is largely due to a combination of regional pride and one-dimensional representations of people of color within the region. In addition to establishing whiteness as the default for Southernness, the Southern Imaginary appropriates and fetishizes other cultures and peoples to reframe the South as a positive and contributing region of the United States and veer focus away from the negative history and backwater ideologies often associated with the region. This strange double bind of reifying negative understandings of the region while also attempting to laud positives is a theme of contradiction that runs throughout the Southern Imaginary because of this fetishization and appropriation.

*Atlanta* deals with racial fetishization most explicitly in “Juneteenth” (1.09). In this episode, Van and Earn attend a Juneteenth party (a holiday which celebrates the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865) at the home of a wealthy, interracial couple. The white husband quickly latches onto Earn when he learns that Earn is a rap manager. He shows Earn his study wherein Earn learns that the husband was in a Black fraternity in college, visited Africa, and solely listens to and reads Black artists. The episode embodies the notion that “the Black body, and subsequently Black culture, has become a hungered-after taboo item and a nightmarish bugbear in the badlands of the American racial imagination” (Tate, 2006, p. 4). The husband consistently references the discrimination and violence that Black folks endure (the methods vary from an excruciating slam poem/rap to a painting of a Black man suffering) while also telling Earn that he needs to understand his culture more. He explains to Earn both the nightmares that

Black folks encounter daily as well as the influence of hip-hop on Black culture. This is often how the Southern Imaginary treats Black culture and people, as passive objects and consumable products. Through the Afro Surrealist lens, *Atlanta* highlights how absurd and foolish this fetishization is to people of color. Affording agency back to individuals of color, this episode both highlights the illogical nature of racial fetishization within the Southern Imaginary while also reclaiming aspects of Black culture as uniquely Black rather than solely Southern or, on a larger scale, American.

Racial fetishization is not inherently sexual, but people of color are also subjected to concepts like dating “preferences” and oversexualization by white individuals. Caren Holmes argues that “black female bodies continue to experience disproportionate rates of sexual exploitation and abuse” because of the America’s history of colonialism and slavery (Holmes, 2016, p. 1). As mentioned previously, these histories are integral in the Southern Imaginary. While Van in *Atlanta* verbally refuses to be solely an object of affection for men in “Value” (1.06), she also fully understands the fetishization that occurs with Black women. In the episode, “Juneteenth,” Van talks with the wife of the man who fetishizes Black culture. The wife, discussing why she got married, says “can’t eat if you don’t open your mouth. I get this big ass house, and he gets the Black wife he always wanted.” Van understands why this woman made the choices that she did and recognizes the wife’s reclamation of authority and freedom from the racial fetishist.

Other individuals are also culturally and sexually fetishized, including Asian Americans. This fetishization, sometimes known as “yellow fever,” results in the depersonalization, homogenization, and othering of Asian folks (Zheng, 2016). In *One Mississippi*, the one Asian character, Vicky, serves as a romantic partner for one Remy. Although she is only in three

episodes, Vicky resists a one-dimensional representation and rejects fetishization. When her character is first introduced, in “Let the Good Times Roll” (1.04), Remy immediately comments on her body, discussing how it was shaped like “keg” in high school. In the next episode, “How ‘bout Now, How ‘bout Right Now” (1.05), Remy attempts to flirt with her. Vicky is quick to say that “she does not need looking out for,” references her old nickname (“Vicky the Keg”), and rejects Remy’s kiss. Finally, as mentioned above, she points out Remy’s racist behavior. While she does not explicitly reference fetishization, Vicky insists that Remy focuses on addressing his personal problems before pursuing a relationship with her while also ensuring that his intentions are honest and not a form of fetishization. Additionally, when Vicky confronts Remy’s racist behavior and he does not respond well, she ends the relationship.

These representations of people of color recognizing when they are being fetishized but are unable to address said fetishization challenge the Southern Imaginary in two ways. First, the representations call attention to similar occurrences within the Southern Imaginary of racial fetishization and point out the harmful effects it has on people of color. These representations also give agency back to those who are fetishized to an extent. While they cannot change the fetishization, the wife in *Atlanta* and Vicky in *One Mississippi* call attention to it in different ways. The wife recognized that her husband appropriates Black culture and utilized that to gain financial freedom and power which she wanted more than love. Vicky, as an Asian American woman “must always contend—at least initially and often long after—with the possibility that attraction might be due to racial fetish” (Zheng, 2016, p. 408). She points out her partner’s racist behaviors and informs him of the historical role that Asian folks played in the South. Thus, these women take back power that fetishists and the Southern Imaginary steals from them through one

dimensional and stereotypical/fetishized depictions. This intersection of race and gender is discussed more in the next chapter.

### **Intersectional Considerations**

Through their representations of race, *Atlanta*, *One Mississippi*, and *Hart of Dixie* present alternative perspectives of the South that are shut out from the Southern Imaginary. While they do not necessarily negate the racist image of the region that is put forth by the Southern Imaginary, they attempt to decenter whiteness from conversations of racism in the South. The programs represent the everyday, mundane lives of Southerners of color as well as the surreal experiences they encounter. While race is a large part of the Southern Imaginary, other identities are also contested like gender and sexuality. Additionally, characters like Van, Vicky, and Ruby Jeffries (Golden Brooks) are met with the double bind of racism and sexism in the Southern Imaginary.

In the next chapter, I discuss how gender is represented in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta*. I turn to a more intersectional lens as I discuss representations of femininity and masculinity in general as well as racialized gender representations. Utilizing various stereotypes perpetuated by the Southern Imaginary, I discuss how the series present a more nuanced and complex understanding of gender representation in the South that is at odds with gender in the Southern Imaginary. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of transgender representation within these programs.

## CHAPTER TWO: DISTRUPTING SOUTHERN GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

I am a Southern woman. My methods of warfare are purely psychological.

— Lemon, *Hart of Dixie*

In the opening scene of the season one *Hart of Dixie* episode “Gumbo & Glory” (1.03), Zoe (Rachel Bilson) and Wade (Wilson Bethel) argue over who blew a fuse and who will repair the fuse box. Wade states that Zoe’s “girl stuff” is the issue. Zoe retorts: “Yeah, that’s me, with my girly Wi-Fi connection and my silly cell phone that I only use to look at pictures of ponies.” Negotiations of gender roles and norms such as this appear frequently in contemporary United States television programming. In recent years, the creators of *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* have utilized traditional notions of gender representation, as embodied in these shows’ characters and evidenced through their displays of emotions, to subvert common characterizations of gender in the Deep South.

The characters in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* represent gender differently and resist falling into the stereotypical depictions of culturally constructed manhood and womanhood so central to the Southern Imaginary. In the previous chapter, I examined the depiction of characters with attention paid to race. Concepts like post-racial ideologies, Afro Surrealism, and racial fetishization are all present in the case studies and work to reimagine the Southern Imaginary. Undoubtedly, race plays a large part in the representation and the implications of the representation of gendered characters. In this chapter, I look more specifically at the characters and their relationships with one another to discuss how their portrayals of gender conflict with the Southern Imaginary. The following analysis proceeds in three parts:

first, I discuss how the programs represent female sexuality and femininity; then, I investigate representations of masculinity and the reversal of gender roles with considerations of racial stereotypes; finally, I briefly analyze the representations of transgender individuals in the shows. I conclude with remarks about the significance of more legitimate representations of gender in the series and their implications on the Southern Imaginary.

### **Femininity in the South**

Many stereotypical representations of women are perpetuated through the Southern Imaginary including the hillbilly woman (Massey, 2007), the Southern Belle (Spears, 2011), the pageant queen (Roberts, 2014), the trailer trash (Kipnis, 1997; Harry, 2004), or GRITS (Girls Raised In The South) (Ford, 2004). This section details how the female characters of the case studies complicate typical definitions of femininity through a nuancing of these stereotypes.

Zoe in *Hart of Dixie* struggles with the Southern Belle stereotype. To gain support from the townspeople, Zoe first tries to embrace the Southern Belle image before ultimately rejecting it. In “Hell’s Belles” (1.11), Zoe attempts to earn a place in the Bluebell Belle’s, an elite group of young women in the town who are seemingly perfect Southern Belles. After enduring grueling initiation rules and events (like wearing a traditional hoop skirt dress and heels for several days), Zoe decides that she does not need to fit into the Southern Belle stereotype to fit in the South. Throughout the series, Zoe often compares herself to the Southern Belle figure by positioning herself as the opposite of the stereotype which is emphasized by her less modest clothing, her openness about sex and dating, and her blunt, often confrontational language. Zoe’s explicit rejection of the Southern Belle label paired with the growing acceptance of her in the town illustrates that the stereotype is not the sole image of women in the South. Additionally, Zoe’s



inability and refusal to adhere to the stereotype further argues for the inclusion of other types of women in the South.

*Hart of Dixie* also presents characters that seemingly adhere to the Southern Belle archetype. The Southern Belle archetype, a stereotypically hospitable and flirtatious (but pure) woman, is personified in the characters who belong to the Bluebell Belles, specifically Lemon Breeland (Jamie King). In the beginning of the series, Lemon wears clothing typical of a modern Southern Belle (modest dresses often adorned with flowers or lace) and is the leader of the Belles. However, after Lemon is left at the altar at the end of season one, she begins to redefine her Southern Belle-ness. One clear example of this is her change in wardrobe. While she continues to wear mostly modest clothing, she incorporates more pants and button-down shirts as well as shorter dresses with less coverage. Since the Southern Belle stereotype is heavily reliant on style and clothing (hoops skirts, gloves, hats, and parasols mainly signify this stereotype), Lemon's style changes are indicative of her changing relationship to the Belle label as well as her evolving ideas about Southern womanhood.



Figure 4: Lemon in more modest dress in “Gumbo & Glory” (1.03)



Figure 5: A shift away from the Southern Belle in “The Very Good Bagel” (4.03)

Throughout the second and third seasons, Lemon is struggling with her newfound independence after the end of her ten-plus years relationship. While her family wants to support her financially, Lemon is determined to survive independently. She finds her own apartment, tries (and fails) to become a waitress at the Rammer Jammer, and eventually becomes a successful restaurant owner. Lemon’s strive towards independence defies the traditional Southern Belle journey wherein these individuals typically live with their families until marriage and do not actively seek out paying jobs. Additionally, Lemon fails at many jobs that are traditionally ascribed to women: waitressing and secretarial work. Only after she breaks out of gendered career expectations is she able to successfully become financially independent. Lemon’s Southern Belle arc climaxes in the episode “Take This Job and Shove It” (3.03) when she finally leaves the Belles. Lemon is being punished by the group for trying to overthrow the current Head Belle and is forced to do menial tasks including cleaning parts of the town square. Lemon eventually revolts and decides to leave the Belles for good. Forfeiting her membership in a group she once regarded as the highest social club in Bluebell, Lemon rejects their notion of

femininity and the Southern Belle label as it is characterized by the group. She redefines and embraces her brand of Southern femininity.

While other female characters, especially the Belles, seem to closely adhere to the Southern Belle stereotype, AnnaBeth Nass (Kaitlyn Black) presents a more subtle disruption of the stereotype. In “Disaster Drills & Departures” (1.21), AnnaBeth becomes a divorcee. Divorce has a complex history in the South, but it is certain that the traditional Southern Belle is not a divorcee (Censer, 1981). To preserve her image, AnnaBeth pretends that her and her husband are still together for three months until Zoe convinces her that telling everyone would be better for her emotionally and physically. However, after she tells everyone, AnnaBeth quickly moves on from her divorce. In the next episode, “The Big Day” (1.22), AnnaBeth has her eyes set on mayor Lavon Hayes (Cress Williams). Additionally, her image as a Southern Belle is not tarnished as she eventually becomes co-leader of the Bluebell Belles thus expanding and reshaping what it means to be a Southern Belle.

Zoe, Lemon, and AnnaBeth redefine the Southern Belle through either an outright rejection of the Southern Belle or the expansion of the archetype to include other Southern women. Another stereotype dismantled in *Hart of Dixie* is the “trailer trash” image. Tansy Truitt (Mircea Monroe) is Wade’s ex-wife and eventually George’s longtime girlfriend. Tansy has been known to date strange men and lives in a trailer on the edge of town. The trailer trash stereotype often evokes an image of “low-class white people” (Harry, 2004, p. 214) and “the smell, the filth, the inbreeding, the stupidity, the lack of teeth, the abject poverty...needless fist fights, infidelity, unwanted children, deadbeat dads, jalopies, or the fact that they cannot for the life of them find actual homes” (Harry, 2004, p. 218, quoting *Daily Californian*, 2001). More specifically, trailer trash women are often depicted as “tawdry sex objects...[and] as fast-talking,

flaming red-lipped, big-bosomed, bleach-haired plastic dolls” (Harry, 2004, p. 220). Tansy, however, does not adhere to these descriptions of a Southern woman who lives in a trailer. She works as a hairdresser and actively chooses to live in her trailer because of the convenience associated with mobile home life, not because she does not have the means to live in a better home.

Additionally, she is intelligent and passionate about her convictions. In “I Walk the Line” (2.06), Wade and George attempt to convince Tansy to vote in the Bluebell mayoral election even though her trailer is a few feet into the next town. Tansy disagrees because it would not be a legal vote and she would prefer that Lavon win through legal means. After this brief argument, Tansy invites George into her home for a haircut where she gives him advice that ultimately leads to George understanding what he wants in his relationships moving forward. In this way, Tansy defies the trailer trash stereotype; but she also does not disown the stereotype entirely. Throughout the series, she consistently references her upbringing in trailer parks and reclaims her identification as a hillbilly, trailer-park woman. In doing so, she both expands and accepts the stereotype. By not disparaging the label but openly contradicting perceptions of what it means to be trailer trash, Tansy convolutes the low-class white person image associated with the stereotype.

Much like *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi* presents another character who complicates Southern femininity as represented in the Southern Imaginary. Tig’s (Tig Notaro) mother, Caroline (Rya Kihlstedt), is also the antithesis of the Southern Belle stereotype perpetuated in the Southern Imaginary. Before her death, Tig’s mother intentionally defied the Southern Belle stereotype in favor of a more promiscuous and livelier lifestyle. She did not take on traditional notions of femininity like housework or cooking nor did she adhere to the stereotypical Southern

mother (Williams, 2015; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017). She was rarely at home to take care of her children and when she was, she often yelled. The most striking separation from the Southern Belle stereotype were her moments of infidelity which resulted in a child outside of her marriage. Though the show begins with her death and the audience only learns of her life through flashbacks and Tig's own investigation, Caroline is admired by her friends and accepted (eventually) by her family, an attitude that continues after her death. For instance, in the episode "Effects" (1.03), Tig discovers that her mother was looked upon as a kind and loving friend by those who interacted with her, something Tig initially finds hard to believe. Thus, the show, while explicating Caroline's flaws as a woman, does not demonize her for deviating from those gendered norms and expectations. Caroline's character highlights the complexities of Southern femininity while defying the stereotypes that strive to situate these women into archetypal roles (as nurturer, as caretaker, as domestic laborer, etc.).

### **Racialized Femininity**

As mentioned in the previous chapters, identities are impossible to separate especially when considering marginalized individuals; therefore, women of color are met with an intersection of minoritized identities that present unique forms of barriers and discriminations (Crenshaw, 1991). When women of color are included in the Southern Imaginary, they are often characterized by archetypes like the Asian seductress, the mammy, the mad Black woman, or the sultry Latina. Although they are included in the Southern Imaginary, women of color are often overlooked and not included in conversations of gender representations of the region (McCabe, 2005). Because of this, it is necessary to consider the intersections of race and gender to shed light on this aspect of the Southern Imaginary and understand the social and political implications of representing Southern women of color.

In the three main case studies, only one—*Atlanta*—features a consistent woman of color character while the others regulate them to supporting or background roles as discussed in the previous chapter. Specifically, Van (Zazie Beetz), from *Atlanta*, defies stereotypical representations of Black women like the jezebel or mammy figure (West, 1995). A schoolteacher and mother, Van also does not hide her sexual self as she attends parties and strip club events. This suggests that she is not confined to or limited by any one characteristic or identity. For example, in the episode “Value” (1.06), Van has a conversation with her friend, Jayde (Aubin Wise), about her relationship to Earn (Donald Glover). The friend says that “women have to be valuable. *Black* women have to be valuable,” to which Van replies with nonverbal expressions of disagreement. Van openly disagrees with a male-centered view of Black Southern femininity. Throughout the series Van easily navigates between times when she wants to express her sexual nature and times when she does not, thus presenting another dual female character who does not fit traditional Southern femininity.

Similarly, in *Hart of Dixie*, three women of color have recurring roles in different seasons. In season one, Didi Ruano (Nadine Velazquez) is the Latina secretary of the medical clinic who becomes involved in a relationship with Lavon until she eventually leaves for a job in a law office. Didi often speaks her mind, supports her friends with advice, and stands her ground in her relationship. In season two, Ruby Jeffries (Golden Brooks) is introduced as a former Bluebell resident and ex-girlfriend of Lavon. She runs opposite Lavon on the mayoral ticket, loses to him, and eventually reignites their relationship. Throughout the season, Ruby is characterized as a strong and successful Black woman but does not sacrifice her femininity. She is often seen wearing traditionally feminine clothing and owns her own cosmetics line. Ruby eventually declines Lavon’s marriage proposal to pursue a high paying job outside of Bluebell.

Finally, season three includes Lynly Hayes (Antoinette Robertson), younger cousin of Lavon who is romantically involved with George (Scott Porter). Although Lynly is first characterized as self-absorbed and emotionally immature, she becomes more open and self-aware. Eventually, she can stand up for herself and leave George (and Bluebell) when she realizes that he is still in love with his ex-girlfriend.

These women leave the show as empowered and career-driven individuals; however, only once their heterosexual relationships have ended are they written off. The showrunner's choice to write off these strong female characters is more than likely indicative of the feminist movement at the time (early 2010s) which saw a push for career-driven women who often had to sacrifice their personal and romantic lives especially concerning women of color. However, these female characters represent an early attempt to demonstrate a liberated Southern woman of color, opposing the Southern Imaginary which often relies on controlling images of women of color (Collins, 2000). By including these women, albeit in a reduced sense, *Hart of Dixie* argues for the inclusion of women of color in conversations of Southern femininity. Rather than positioning their racial identities through the lens of the white characters, as was often the case in filmic depictions of the South (McPherson, 2003), the women of color in *Atlanta* and *Hart of Dixie* have their own stories, motivations, and feelings. As such, these shows fight for more intricate representations of women of color in the South beyond the stereotypes mentioned earlier. Including Southern women of color who excel in the region in television programs not only contradicts the Southern Imaginary, but it reflects a more legitimate representation of life in the South without diminishing the characters' intersecting identities.

### **Masculinity in the South**

Along with femininity, masculinity occupies a central position in onscreen representations of the Deep South. Historically, the Southern imaginary has relied on and reified traditional gender roles; yet *Hart of Dixie* and *One Mississippi* depict male characters who take on more feminine roles or adopt traditionally feminine characteristics. In reversing traditional gender roles and subverting notions of gender established by the Southern Imaginary, these programs present a more modern, complex, and comprehensive understanding of gender in the South. This, in turn, resists the typification and essentialization of the region into one with backwards conceptualizations of gender roles. This reversal of gender roles is most prominent in the heterosexual relationships depicted in *Hart of Dixie*.

In the numerous relationships that occur throughout the series, the women of *Hart of Dixie* exert considerable control over the progress of the relationship and when they end while the men are more emotional and open with what they feel. The male characters are constantly declaring their love for various female characters or discussing how much they care for each other. The female characters tend to be more competitive in their relationships and actively seek out physical relationships as discussed above. One character exemplifies the subversion of gender roles more acutely than the rest: Wade. While he is the traditional ladies' man, often flirting and wooing women in the town even when he is in a relationship, at the end of the series Wade becomes more in tune with his emotions and puts a stop to his reckless behavior with women.

Attempting to reverse the "mamma's boy" narrative arc prevalent in Southern media representations of effeminate men, Wade embraces more traditionally feminine characteristics and leaves toxic masculinity behind. The episode "The Butterstick Tab" (4.07) is the pinnacle of Wade's transformation. In this episode, Wade gathers most of the women in his life whom he has



consistently flirted with and thanks them for being there to help him with various tasks like receiving fresh ingredients for his restaurant and not collecting on his large tab at the local coffee shop. He then asks them to stop showing him preferential treatment because he is in a committed relationship and wants to set a better example for his son on the way. While speaking with these women, Wade expresses his love for Zoe, their unborn child, and apologizes for his past actions that hurt the women. Wade embodies a traditionally feminine connection with emotions but characterizes the impetus for his apology as wanting to be a better man. In doing so, he alters perceptions of performed masculinity to include aspects of traditional femininity and attempt to alter the Southern Imaginary.

Other male characters in *Hart of Dixie* challenges gender norms in various ways. For example, George is often overly emotional and flighty (descriptors that, within critical discourse, are more typically attached to female characters). In the episode, “Destiny & Denial” (1.19) George breaks off his engagement with Lemon and drives to New Orleans. When Zoe finds him, he is drinking excessively and exhibiting careless behavior, clearly experiencing an emotional break. Later, in “Who Says You Can’t Go Home” (3.01), George is in a depressive state after the stalling of his music career. Lemon must convince him to reenter society and face his failure. In both moments of deep emotional expression which include sobbing and disengagement, George is comforted and convinced to return to town by women who act as the voice of reason and rationality to George’s impulsive and clouded judgement. While expressions of emotion for Southern men are often limited to anger and brief moments of sadness, George displays a wide range of complex feelings (including sadness, depression, retaliation, anger, and out of character denial of reality) which is often reserved for female characters. His ability to exhibit and discuss

his emotions relatively openly while maintaining his confidence as a man defies both the hyper-masculine and effeminate male character archetypes in the Southern Imaginary.

Likewise, in *One Mississippi*, Tig's stepfather and mother follow reversed notions of gender roles. Tig's stepfather, Bill (John Rothman), is obsessed with cleanliness and is consistently cleaning the house, even in flashbacks to Tig's childhood. He expresses deep concern for his children's safety and encourages them to be together, hosting dinners for the family on various occasions. As an expression of his concern, Bill investigates multiple treatments of Tig's illness and pushes her to take better care of herself in "Effects" (1.02). Similarly, he has various outbursts of emotion related to the wellbeing of Tig and to the passing of her mother. Though Bill is slow to show emotion, when he finally does, they are often strong instances of paternal care or empathetic sadness. For instance, in "The Cat's Out" (1.03), Bill's cat mysteriously disappears. He is extremely distressed and worried about the cat, even going so far as blaming Tig for its escape. Instances like this occur throughout the series and underscore Bill's more feminine traits.

On the other hand, Tig's mother is depicted as a nontraditional mother. Though Caroline died before the start of the series, she is shown in flashbacks as a laid back, often absent figure of Tig's childhood. She was often tough with Tig and allowed her to do a variety of dangerous activities. Before her passing, she dressed in more masculine clothes and was often away from the house until late hours of the night. In the aforementioned "The Cat's Out," Tig discovers the reason for her mother's aloofness: she had another secret family. These traits—not being a present parent, providing tough love, infidelity—are often associated with men and fathers rather than mothers, who are often shown as being caring and devoted to their families in mainstream U.S. media. As such, Caroline's character complicates the stereotypical mother character through

depictions of negative actions and fractures the image of the mother waiting at home and doting on her children found in the Southern Imaginary. Caroline was not all bad, and the show makes a point of showing her good qualities in addition to her not so favorable ones, yet her mistakes and imperfections resisted a one-sided characterization and convoluted Southern gender roles. This reversal of those roles is not only explicative of changes in social norms and gendered expectations on a national level but is also a reflection of these ideas in the South. Often, the region is often represented as a cultural milieu defined by slowness and a resistance to change. Yet, these characters, their emotions, and relationships particularly, resist that image.

### **Black Masculinity**

Intersections of race and gender are prevalent in media concerning the South, especially in representations of Black masculinity. Often, Black men are characterized by stereotypes and archetypes rather than represented as fully detailed and complex. Although Black media has been understudied in the past and treated as a self-serving genre, “the recent relative profusion of black [*sic*] images on screen and across the internet...suggests...that, rather, black moving images and black film criticism remain, as they have been since the turn of the last century, vital forums for critique of white hegemony and violence” (Reich, 2015). While many Black filmmakers and directors are attempting to disrupt this narrative and provide critique of white hegemony, “what black [*sic*] cinema does not have is the privilege of hundreds of years of academic scholarship and journalism that seeks to guide its storytelling” thus exemplifying how difficult a task this proves to be (Ntrel, 2019). *Atlanta* and *Hart of Dixie* prominently feature Black male characters in ways that paint two different images of Black masculinity to critique white hegemony inherent in the Southern Imaginary. These representations present a more nuanced discussion of race and gender in relation to the South than previously included in the

Southern Imaginary. By showing fully articulated characters with flaws like Lavon and Alfred, *Hart of Dixie* and *Atlanta* move beyond stereotypical depictions of Black men and thus complicate the one-sided characterizations (like the docile Tom or the violent drug dealer) prevalent in other representations of the South such as *Song of the South* (1946), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *Forrest Gump* (1994), and *Medea's Big Happy Family* (2011). The focus on Black experiences in the South shifts the narrative away from and decentralizes white perspectives of the region. However, unlike many modern productions that attempt to center Black experiences, these shows do not capitalize on Black pain and oppression; though they acknowledge the harm being done, they do not essentialize their characters in relation to said events, thus portraying a more complex South.

First, one of the main characters in *Hart of Dixie* is the former pro-footballer turned mayor, Lavon Hayes. While there are other Black male characters in the show, Lavon plays a major role in the town and the audience is given more insight into his life than the other characters. In media, and the Southern Imaginary that centralize whiteness, life is lived primarily by white folks, with Black males mostly in the background (Bogle, 2001). Lavon's main character status itself and his ample screentime in the series already conflict with the traditionally secondary position Black men hold in the Southern Imaginary. As the best friend of the main character, Lavon presents an image of masculinity devoid of toxic male behavior while resisting many, if not all, stereotypes about Black men.

While Lavon does fit into some media stereotypes about Black men (e.g., he is a former football player and wears fedoras precariously angled on his head), he does not fit into Daniel Bernardi's description of stereotypes that are often utilized in characterizations of Black men like the "docile Tom," who does not question white individuals and does their bidding, or the

“threatening drug dealer,” who is morally corrupt (2007, p. 52). As mayor, he is a constant source of advice yet is not afraid to tell individuals the truth and challenge their viewpoints. This is a necessary shift away from stereotypical depictions of Southern Black men toward more legitimate representations. By portraying Lavon as both an integral part of the town as well as a distinct individual separated from (most) stereotyping, *Hart of Dixie* resists the Southern Imaginary’s understanding and portrayal of Black men. In doing so, the show presents an alternative representation that conflicts with the image of Southern Black men perpetuated by the Southern Imaginary and offers a new understanding of those men’s lives, one that is more authentic to the contemporary South.

In addition to challenging the stereotypical depictions of Black men in the South, *Hart of Dixie* also reifies other stereotypes. Serving as the role model for the town, Lavon often finds himself acting as the moral compass for many of his friends. For example, in the episode “Old Alabama” (2.11), Lavon gives Zoe relationship advice by telling her that she is doing more harm than good. He calls her “crazy” for following the advice from a journal of an 1800s colonial woman and following the gendered expectations written within. While this works to solidify Lavon’s place in the town as well as the power that he holds, this representation also finds itself in the territory of the “Magical African American Friend” (MAAF) whose only role is to support the white main characters (Farley, 2000). Historically, this stereotype has been well studied under a different and outdated name (Gonzalez, 2001; Glenn & Cunningham, 2009; Hughey, 2009, 2012; Parker, 2019; Reid, 2019; Tembo, 2019). To reflect a more widely accepted and community preferred terminology, I will utilize Farley’s (2000) term to refer to this stereotypical representation.

While Lavon's character has more depth than characters like Bagger Vance (Will Smith, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, 2000) or John Coffey (Clark Michael Duncan, *The Green Mile*, 1999) insofar as he has relationships and goals of his own, sharing his wisdom and advice with the (majorly white) townspeople seems to be his top mayoral duty. Almost every episode features a character receiving Lavon's wisdom which ultimately helps them achieve their goal or overcome the obstacle in their way. Yet, *Hart of Dixie* also complicates this stereotype by positioning Lavon as the receiver of advice on multiple occasions. Zoe and Lavon's white male friends often give him advice about his love life or tell him not to plan an outlandish town event. For instance, in "The Kiss" (2.19), Lavon seeks mental health advice from Dr. Brick Breeland (Tim Matheson) to overcome his stage fright. Lavon more often gives advice than receives it, thus evoking the Magical African American Friend; yet his unique character depth and development as well as his reliance on his group of mostly white friends presents a subtle challenge to that stereotype as well as the Southern Imaginary that holds and supports that representation.

More broadly, Lavon's character rejects notions of toxic masculinity and embraces traditionally feminine emotions and activities. In the episode "Act Naturally" (3.13), Lavon is suffering from a broken heart after a breakup and only eats Rocky Road ice cream, does not want to leave the house, and becomes emotional about almost anything embodying a more traditionally female post-breakup attitude. Additionally, he actively seeks out support from his friends immediately following the breakup. Like Wade and Bill, Lavon's character works to reverse traditional gender roles by reflecting the turn to represent more effeminate men. He is in tune with his emotions and relies on others to help him through tough times. Despite this, his characterization avoids supporting the hillbilly narrative concerning Southern men as well.

Lavon does not sacrifice his masculinity for more feminine traits as the hillbilly male does; instead, he embraces and relies on them. Far from the “mamma’s boy” stereotype, his masculinity does not need to be reasserted at the end of the series as he claims his emotions make him a better mayor and overall man. Through the character of Lavon, *Hart of Dixie* resists the conceptualization of the South as a place of harmful masculinity and negative stereotypes about Black men. In doing so, *Hart of Dixie* disrupts the ingrained image of Black Southern men that has dominated media about the South and posits a new, more holistic, and more genuine, image of the Black Southern man thus arguing for a revision of the Southern Imaginary.

*Atlanta* takes that a step further and depicts the everyday life of a friend group of Black men. The show’s focus on depictions of Black friendship and masculinity contradicts the flat characterizations of Black male friend groups in other Southern representations. When male friendship is an integral part of a mainstream film set in the Deep South, it is often between white men or white men and one black man (see *The Defiant Ones* [1958], *Forrest Gump* [1994], *The Bucket List* [2007]); while films focusing on groups of Black men, both within and outside of the South, often characterize them as gang members or “hoodlums” (see *Juice* [1992], *Fresh* [1994], *Belly* [1998], *Hustle & Flow* [2005]). Additionally, buddy cop films often feature one Black police officer paired with a white police officer and often do not feature in depth conversation about racial differences or inequalities (Guerrero, 1993). These representations might reflect the real-life experiences of a select few groups of Black men, but for much of the population, they serve to further harmful stereotypes while erasing the day-to-day experiences of Black male friend groups. *Atlanta* attempts to rectify the image of Black male friend groups perpetuated by the Southern Imaginary by focusing on those day-to-day experiences of a group of three men: Alfred (Brian Tyree Henry), Darius (LaKeith Stanfield), and Earn.

Each man represents a different experience that cannot be simplified to a one-dimensional stereotype. Alfred is often the tough guy of the group, but he also tends to express emotions readily. Earn is “the brains” of the group yet consistently finds himself in tight spots because of his ignorance or lack of self-discipline. The final member of the group, Darius, is the weird, flaky, stoner character who is fiercely loyal and a deep thinker. Just the characters themselves resist stereotyping through their actions and the emotions they convey, together, these men interact with each other and their environment in a counter-stereotypical manner. Often, when Black folks are represented in media in a sympathetic light, they are often not represented as relatable and audience identification with the characters is not promoted (they are not named or do not have families) (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). *Atlanta* attempts to contradict this by representing the characters as relatable in everyday situations. For instance, several times throughout the series, the men are shown sitting on a couch in the middle of a field outside of their house. Here, they discuss their lives, future, and theoretical aspects of life like how a rat would provide affordable cellphones to everyone (“The Big Bang” [1.01]) and what Darius thinks Black people’s number one problem: “they don’t know how to have fun” (“The Jacket” [1.10]). These couch scenes provide an intimate look at everyday conversations that these characters have while also exposing their worldviews and outlooks on life, something that is noticeably missing in many representations of Black folks in Southern media like the MAAF.

Similarly, in the previously mentioned episode “The Jacket,” Earn loses his titular clothing, and, after retracing their steps, Earn, Alfred, and Darius discover that their Uber driver from the night before has the jacket. They go to the driver’s house only to witness the police then shoot the man several times. Representative of “racial battle fatigue” often felt by people of color in relation to racial justice activists (Gorski, 2018), the trio do not seem phased at the shooting,



almost like it is a common occurrence in their lives, an unfortunate reality they are met with every day. They even go so far as to call it “crazy” but also “cool.” Commenting on the need for money to survive, Earn is more worried about finding his jacket than the shooting.

Foregrounding Earn’s disappointment over losing the jacket rather than the horror of the police shooting points to the fact that money is the driving force for many of the characters in addition to dangers they encounter just by being Black men in the American South. The jacket serves as a symbol of success and status as Earn’s desperation to find it only proves that he cannot afford another one. This episode points out the various driving forces in the lives of Black folks in the South (economic wellbeing, physical wellbeing, materiality, safety, etc.).

It also exposes that the trope most frequently used in media about Black men in the South (shootings and violence) are both instigated by police on multiple occasions and are necessarily minimized by those who are faced with other life threatening issues like a lack of money.

Discussing Black athletes, John Hoberman argues that white America’s tendency to merge various Black archetypes, including rappers and criminals, into a single image of Black masculinity leads to a stereotypical understanding of all Black men as dangerous and frightening (1997, pp. xvii-xix). The last tool utilized to upend stereotypical depictions of Black experiences in the South in this episode is the display of a range of emotions other than anger and violence which is often associated with Black folks. The car ride back from the shooting is noticeably somber and Earn is visually upset about the jacket. Additionally, the joy and fun exhibited by the video memories of the night before paired with Earn’s frantic search for the jacket prove that Black characters are complicated, deeply feeling individuals who are not often represented that way in mainstream cultural productions.

The individual character representations in *Atlanta* also challenge the Southern Imaginary in two specific ways: Alfred defies several stereotypes about Black men (as discussed above) and Earn's character forefronts issues faced by *Southern* Black men and works against their absorption into general concepts of masculinity. A newly famous rapper, Alfred is not the stereotypically aggressively violent, hypermasculine musician (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Instead, Alfred presents a more child-like interiority despite his strong external persona. He is emotional at times and cares deeply for his cousin Earn. He feels pressure to fit into a particular image but is uncomfortable with who that person could become. For example, in "Woods" (2.08), Alfred is attacked and robbed after being recognized by his rapper pseudonym "Paper Boi" and then becomes lost in the woods after running away from his attackers. In the woods, Alfred experiences a wide range of emotions not typically associated with strong, male rappers including fear and sadness. As a result of this encounter, Alfred's struggle with donning a rapper persona comes to the forefront and, ultimately, he accepts his newfound fame while attempting to remain true to his real self.

This internal turmoil depicted on screen typically does not occur for many male characters, let alone Black rappers; moreover, it provides commentary about the rapper façade, complicating the stereotype as the persona does not always relate to the person behind the rapper. Typically, films and television programs attempt to "ameliorate White anxieties about Black men by turning them into comics or criminals" (Guerrero, 1993, p. 163). Thus, these stereotypical images "ease White America's discomfort and make it easy to sidestep its responsibility to acknowledge and to address persistent racial inequalities and conflicts" (Tucker, 2007, p. 102). Alfred's character both exposes the falsehood of the Southern Imaginary in this regard and offers a better method of representing Southern Black men: presenting a more genuine and complex

individual that has emotions and exists outside of the stereotypes that often bind him. Because of this, Alfred's character works as a method of disruption aimed at stereotypes because he invites audiences to rethink the validity of the Southern Imaginary's representations without allowing white audiences to justify or reconcile racial inequalities with his characterization.

As opposed to his cousin, Earn often faces more external conflicts and obstacles in his way to achieve greatness thus presenting his character as an exemplar of a uniquely Southern Black experience. While his main goal throughout the series is to make money and provide for his family, much like Carissa Massey's (2007) and Anthony Harkins's (2012) hillbilly man, Earn is often called a lazy freeloader and is not the head of his household (of which he is often kicked out). Yet, Earn's constant attempts to overcome that narrative are often thwarted by external forces rooted in racist and classist notions. For instance, when he finally makes enough money to treat his girlfriend Van to an expensive night out, he is unable to spend his money because he is constantly stereotyped as broke. In the episode "Money Bag Shawty" (2.03), Earn is stopped from buying movie tickets because he wants to pay with a one-hundred-dollar bill. When he attempts to pay with his debit card, the cashier requests his driver's license and states that they need to make copies of both. Earn decides against this and, as they are leaving, they see the same cashier readily accept a one-hundred-dollar bill from a white man. Instances like this occur throughout the episode where Earn is denied access to experiences even though he can pay for them or is profiled and accused of paying with counterfeit bills. These instances are often framed as racially motivated to the point where Van agrees that Earn is being targeted. After a series of increasingly surreal denials of entry to "high status" places, Earn and Van eventually meet up with Alfred and Darius at strip club where it is socially acceptable for a Black man to have and

spend large amounts of money (Stallings, 2013). Earn's actions and his movements through spaces are constrained by the Southern Imaginary and Black men's place in it.

Not only is Earn stereotyped because of his race, but he also must negotiate his identity with the hillbilly stereotype often associated with Southern men. Because of his intersection of identities and since he does not fit stereotypical representations of Black men (like the MAAF, docile Tom, or sexually threatening pimp [Bell-Jordan, 2008]), Earn is faced with a doubled effort to stereotype him. In a particularly poignant example of a use of intersecting stereotypes, Earn interacts with a white DJ at a radio station in the episode "The Big Bang." The two seem to know each other already and the white man proceeds to tell Earn a story about another DJ at a party. In the story, he utilizes a racial slur several times. Later in the episode, Earn asks the man to tell the story again in front of Alfred and Darius and the man omits the slurs in their presence. Earn's interactions with this man are tinged with a sense that the white man views Earn as inferior and Earn despises him for that reason. The man's use of a racial slur in the presence of Earn and not his friends solidifies this sense while also illuminating how Earn is viewed through the hillbilly stereotype lens. In this case, Earn is perceived as the passive and unintelligent hillbilly who will not confront people who speak ill of him thus the man uses racial slurs because he believes Earn will not retaliate. However, once the white man is in the presence of other Black men (specifically Alfred) who fit into other Black stereotypes more than Earn, the man does not use the slur.

Earn's unique positionality as a Black Southern man who left the region to pursue education at a predominantly white institution but ultimately failed situates him in the cross-section between stereotypes about Black men and those about hillbilly men. Earn's situation emphasizes the notion that external forces are attempting to keep the hillbilly man (especially the

Black Southern man) in a subordinate place by constantly denying him the ability to shuck off stereotypical behavior. This intersection often experienced by Southern Black men further emphasizes Riché Richardson's (2007) notion that they face unique forms of stereotyping that is often overlooked because of its complex relationship to regionality. As with Alfred's internal struggles, the various external attempts to categorize and stereotype Earn present a complex character who faces more than one act of stereotyping. Additionally, Earn's character helps expose the hillbilly stereotype and its applicability to more than just white people while also emphasizing the importance of focusing on issues that folks with intersecting identities confront in the South.

### **Southern Transgender Representation**

Unfortunately, these shows follow current trends with transgender and non-binary representation insofar as there is very little. None of the series include reoccurring trans characters or actors and trans individuals are virtually nonexistent in both *One Mississippi* and *Hart of Dixie*. For instance, in season two of *One Mississippi*, Tig forms a relationship with a singer who guest stars on her radio show. In the episode "Who Do You Think You Are?" (2.04), Tig and the musician attend a pop-up party that is "always gorgeous and always gay." Despite the overt queerness of the space, Tig only interacts with cisgender lesbians. Trans individuals are a large part of the queer community and yet are noticeably absent from this gathering.

*Atlanta*, however, specifically references trans individuals in varying ways. In the episode "Streets on Lock" (1.02), Earn is arrested for participating in a shooting with his cousin. While waiting to be processed, Earn sits between two other detained individuals, Johnny (Luke Forbes) and Lisa (Jason Jamal Ligon). While it is not explicitly stated, Lisa is coded as a transwoman. She wears a long wig, high heels, and makeup. It is revealed that Lisa and Tommy previously

dated, and they begin to have a conversation. Tommy does not understand Lisa's identity fully until another detainee calls her a man and asks "Why you think she in jail with the men? She'd be on the other side." The conversation then turns to Tommy's sexuality when he argues that he is not gay even though he had a relationship with Lisa. The comments about Lisa are openly transphobic and yet reflect the honest reality that many trans individuals face in the South: Lisa is forced to house with the men, she is repeatedly misgendered, and is scorned by past lovers because of her identity. This interaction between the detainees also reflects the ignorance about trans individuals that is prevalent in the South.

While *Atlanta* falls into these negative tropes and reifies the anti-queer notions of the Southern Imaginary, it complicates that message in a later episode. In the episode "B.A.N" (1.07), Alfred is on a talk show to discuss recent negative comments he made about Caitlyn Jenner, another transwoman. The episode is direct commentary on issues of transphobia in the rap and hip-hop communities and well as in Black communities (Williams, 2017). Another guest on the show, Dr. Deborah Holt, berates Alfred for his comments. Alfred attempts to explain himself by saying he "just found out" transwomen exist. Coming from a low-income family in the South, Alfred's experiences did not include trans individuals. While certainly not excusing his comments, Alfred's ignorance is the source of his actions. While Alfred asserts that he does not care about Caitlyn Jenner and she has nothing to do with him, Dr. Holt shares her theories about transphobia in the Black community and accuses Alfred of falling into that characterization without attempting to understand his background or the root of his ignorance.

*Atlanta's* commentary on trans individuals represents larger trends in media specifically reflecting the negative experiences trans folks face. Yet, the show also provides insight into why these perceptions and representations continue to prevail in the South: a lack of education paired

with being barred from conversations of progress. In the Southern Imaginary, the South is anti-trans and this image is consistently re-presented to audiences in media. Labeling the South as malicious allows the region to serve as an internal other; thus, the root of the issue, ignorance not malice, is not typically addressed. The constant barrage of anti-trans rhetoric in relation to the South cuts the region out of the conversation and stalls progress while ignoring the advancements for which Southern trans individuals have fought. This does not disregard the real harm that occurs every day to Southern trans folks, as evidenced in “Streets on Lock,” but it shrouds the harm done in other regions while promoting the continued ignorance of the South. In a form of resistance to that notion, *Atlanta* argues that the South is a region often left in the dark on issues related to contemporary social justice and should not only be held accountable but, the region should also be part of the conversation rather than just the scapegoat. By resisting regional othering in relation to transgender individuals, *Atlanta* points back at the rest of the United States and the duality of the anti-trans characterization of the South. Paired with the representations of femininity and masculinity, the trend in Southern television representations is to present a more modern understanding of gender that is at odds with the Southern Imaginary.

### **Defying Stereotypes**

Ultimately, the Southern Imaginary paints femininity and masculinity with a broad brush of stereotypical archetypes and strict adherences to gender roles. Programs like *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* are disrupting that construction of gender by including more nuanced representations of gender that include people of color and transgender folks. Characters like Lemon and Lavon, Caroline and Bill, and Earn and Van present a distinct view of gender in the South. In understanding how these characters are depicted and why their representations present a unique view of gender in the South, we can attempt to complicate the Southern

Imaginary and traditional representations of gender in the region. In doing so, we call into question the hegemonic powers that continually disseminate these stereotypical images which continuously degrade minoritized gender identities like women, men of color, and transgender individuals. The images are replicated time and time again to solidify the South as a socially and politically backwards region that strictly adheres to gender roles and does not accept or promote delineation from those norms. By illuminating ways that television depictions of the South and Southerners are moving away from traditional and stereotypical representations, we can present an alternative narrative to the Southern Imaginary which reflects a more legitimate representation of the region.

In the next chapter, I discuss how *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* queer the South in representations of both feminine sexuality and same-sex relationships and, thus, disrupt the Southern Imaginary's erasure of Southern queerness and anti-queer ideology. Building on the unsettling of gender stereotypes and norms established in this chapter, I further this argument by first defining queerness in relation to the South and then analyzing how these series consider the hypersexualization and desexualization of Southern women as well as discuss and include queer folks.



### CHAPTER THREE: QUEERING SOUTHERN BODIES

What if I want to pray the gay to stay?

— Tig from *One Mississippi*

Tig (Tig Notaro), the openly gay protagonist of *One Mississippi*, hosts a radio show in her hometown of Saint Bay Lucille, Mississippi. In the episode “Into the Light” (2.02), the radio show’s sound technician, Kate (Stephanie Allynne), and Tig discuss her queerness:

KATE: So, was there a moment that you knew for sure you were gay?

TIG: When did you know for sure you were not gay?

KATE: Yeah, I guess I never really had to have that moment since everyone just assumed I’m straight. I mean, the world assumes everyone’s straight.

Often queer folks are marginalized because of their deviance from the presumed social norm of heterosexuality. Because of their departure from that constructed norm, they are met with hostility, ostracization, and violence, all of which is especially visible in the American South. As Tig and Kate discuss, straightness is considered the default sexuality, a notion which is often upheld by mainstream media. Early “television virtually denied the existence of homosexuality” and established “the dominance of heterosexuality . . . at homosexuality’s expense” (Becker, 2006, pp. 3, 7). This is no exception in media representations of the American South as same-sex desire and queerness is often vilified or absent completely (*Son of Dracula* [1943], *A Streetcar Named Desire* [1951], *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* [1958], *Deliverance* [1972], *Dexter* [Showtime, 2006-2013], *American Horror Story: Roanoke* [FX, 2016]). Since “we believe that the media are important sites where a society’s values and visions of reality are formed, reinforced, and

circulated, understanding how and why gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities are or aren't depicted becomes an important mission" (Becker, 2006, p. 6). As of 2014, the South is home to 35% of the United States' queer population (Hasenbush et al., 2014); thus, it is essential to understand how these representations either affirm or deny identification within the region and/or support the Southern Imaginary.

There is a long and rich history of gay and queer folks in the South (Howard, 1997, 2001; Thompson, 2010; Morris, 2009; Johnson, 2011; Whitlock, 2013; Bibler, 2016). However, this history is overlooked and erased in favor of the default heterosexuality and anti-queerness integral to the Southern Imaginary. Southern folks are attempting to uncover queer history and represent the experiences of queer Southern individuals more accurately (see <https://invisiblehistory.org/> and <https://www.glaad.org/southernstories/life>). The inclusion of queer characters or simply the discussion of queerness in media representations of the American South signify a cultural shift within the region itself as well as an objection to the anti-queer sentiments expressed and disseminated within the Southern Imaginary.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the portrayal of gender in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta*. I specifically analyzed how the characters and their relationships defied gender norms and stereotypes with consideration of the intersections of race. Conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual desire are often tied with gender roles and norms (and are thus further complicated by notions of race). Albeit a less physically apparent identity, queerness is still interconnected with other identities and holds a large space in the Southern Imaginary. In this chapter, the following analysis is twofold. First, I discuss how the female characters in the shows queer the ideas of female sexuality in the Southern Imaginary. Then, I specifically analyze two episodes of each case study which deal explicitly with aspects of queerness. While I mainly

focus on the selected episodes, I reference others while gesturing toward the main characters' overarching development. The episodes present an alternative, counter-hegemonic, and queer representation of the South which is at odds with the Southern Imaginary of decades past. I begin by first defining the term "queer" in relation to sexuality and region before moving into the analysis.

### **Defining Queer**

"Queer" is often a complicated word to define and utilize in scholarship due to its once derogatory usage. In the 1980s and 1990s, "activists and community groups were reclaiming the word 'Queer,' and in popular culture the term was becoming increasingly more commonplace" (Clarke, 2021). Now, the definition of the term has expanded beyond a mere label to a more active approach to identification. Eve Sedgwick argues that "queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (1993, p. 8, emphasis original). Queerness is no longer solely associated with sexual orientation but is now a verb which one can utilize against ideologies and to disrupt hegemony. Michael Bibler states that queer is "an active denaturalization of identity categories and an unsettling of the power structures that support them" (2016, p. 200). The term is especially useful in discussions of sexuality, including heterosexual relationships, as it is an act of defiance against binaries ascribed to sexuality. Therefore, queering is not solely resisting stereotypes, but it is an attempt to alter the very foundations of identity categories like gender and sexuality. For the purposes of this analysis, I utilize "queer" to reference the active challenging of monolithic representations of sexuality and sexual orientation, both of which are understudied in relation to the American South.

While this lack of scholarship about Southern queerness is due to various reasons like the relative newness of queer studies and growing prejudice against the field, “many queer scholars have neglected the South largely out of their prejudices against nonmetropolitan, regional, and rural cultures and spaces” (Bibler, 2016, p. 201). Despite the long history of queerness in the South as discussed earlier, the Southern Imaginary’s inclusion of an anti-queer South has discouraged scholars and community members alike. This is challenged by queer folks in the South who discuss what queerness means to them in relation to regionality, saying

I suppose a region cannot be sexed or gendered, but if we apply [Sedgwick’s] definition of queer to the South’s character, I think it fits the dissonances that are so prevalent in dear (?) [*sic*] Dixie. The American South, to me, is similar to what South Africa’s constitution says of that ‘rainbow nation’: South Africa is ‘united in [its] diversity.’ We think of diversity as that which highlights individuals as different, but when difference is the rule, difference (strangely) becomes the bond. That’s been my experience for my entire life lived in the South. (Ray, 2014, p. 13-14)

Since the region itself complicates identity categories and challenges typical American (read not Southern) ideologies because of this difference, the South is inherently queered. Southern queer individuals, therefore, are met with an intersection of queer identities and “[i]n any discursive opposition between regional queerness and national normalcy, the southerner who deviates from both sets of cultural expectations becomes doubly queered” (Bibler, 2016, p. 203). Queer folks and women are often characterized in media depictions of the South as those who deviate from both sets of norms. As described by Carissa Massey, the hillbilly woman is often hypersexualized to the point of fetishization or desexualized completely (2007). The women of *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* talk openly about their attraction to other people and

their sexual histories. Resisting both hypersexualization and desexualization, the female characters of the series offer a new narrative which promotes a more accepting and natural representation of Southern women. In doing so, the programs work to queer feminine sexuality in the South.

### **Female Sexuality in the South**

Female sexuality is a highly discussed and debated concept within the Southern Imaginary. Figures like the busty “trailer trash” or the provocative Daisy Duke are hypersexualized while others like the ever-virginal Southern Belle or the matronly Paula Deen are desexualized. Additionally, social norms often stifle discussion of female sexuality thus limiting women’s ability to express their sexuality. These representations of female sexuality are ingrained in the Southern Imaginary and are often replicated in media depictions of the region (*The Dukes of Hazzard* [CBS, 1979-1985], *The Golden Girls* [NBC, 1985-1992], *Steel Magnolias* [1989], *Sweet Home Alabama* [2002], *The Princess and the Frog* [2009]). This section details how the female characters of the case studies queer typical definitions of Southern female sexuality through resistance of hypersexualization and desexualization. In doing so, the representations of Southern female sexuality attempt to restructure social norms and unsettle the identity categories imposed upon them.

### **Hypersexualization**

Zoe Hart (Rachel Bilson), the main protagonist of *Hart of Dixie*, is the object of several male characters’ attraction. Her petite figure, long dark hair, and symmetrical facial features are reminiscent of Daisy Duke, Massey’s epitome of the hypersexualization of Southern women (2007). The many comments are made about her short skirts or high heels eventually subside as Zoe defies the simple hypersexualized characteristics afforded to her. Arguably the most

hypersexualized of the characters in the case studies, Zoe is neither ashamed of nor secretive about her sex life. In “Kablang” (4.01), after breaking up, Zoe attempts to use her sexual attraction to get Wade Kinsella (Wilson Bethel) back. She presents herself in sexually appealing situations, like exiting a body of water in a bikini and wearing more makeup than usual. This succeeds insofar as the pair have sex, but do not get back together, much to Zoe’s chagrin.

However, she is not solely defined by her sexual endeavors, serving as one of Bluebell’s doctors and consistently providing advice and assistance to various townspeople. Additionally, Zoe rebuffs the affections of many male characters and ends relationships that cannot and should not continue. In “Bachelorettes & Bullets” (1.18), Zoe and Jesse Kinsella (Justin Hartley) meet and eat lunch together. Zoe discovers that Jesse is Wade’s brother. She quickly stymies the growing attraction, saying, “I can’t always stay out of people’s business, but when I can I probably should.” Rather than solely serving as the town doctor or an object of male affection, Zoe’s dualistic nature alludes essentialization along traditional representations of Southern female sexuality in the Southern Imaginary.

While Zoe actively controls her delineation from the Southern Imaginary’s conceptualization of female sexuality, Tig in *One Mississippi* does not have a choice in her deviation from typical depictions. Throughout the series, Tig openly discusses her experiences with sexual assault at a young age perpetuated by a family member. This is especially impactful as “LGBT people [are] nearly four times more likely than non-LGBT people to be victims of violent crime,” which includes rape and sexual assault (The Williams Institute, 2020). In the first season finale, “New Contact” (1.06), Tig visits her mother’s grave. In a surreal moment, a light fog rolls in and Caroline (Rya Kihlstedt) appears to Tig. They discuss their experiences of sexual assault while wearing brightly colored pajamas as if at a middle-school sleepover. Several other

women (and some men) appear above their own graves and discuss their experiences with assault. A particularly jarring comment is uttered by the first woman to appear. She tells Tig and Caroline that “mine was a whole group of boys. I got so much attention. That’s how I ended up here [in a grave].” Tig smiles and Caroline characterizes the woman’s experience as exciting, furthering the surreal nature of the scene as these are responses uncharacteristic of the two women. This scene highlights the prevalence of sexual assault among women in the South, which is not often included in contemporary media representations of the region. When included in early representations of Southern femininity, the assault was often utilized as a plot device and perpetuated by Black men (like *The Birth of a Nation* [1915]).

On multiple occasions, Tig even helps others come to terms with their assault. For instance, in “I Want To Hold Your Hand” (2.01), Kate lists several events where she was groped or touched by male authority figures as times she was “almost molested.” Tig asserts that she, in fact, was molested. The conversation continues with Tig validating and supporting Kate as she recognizes the severity of the occurrences. Not fitting into the hypersexualized or desexualized characterizations of Southern women, sexual assault does not match Southern conceptualizations of female sexuality. The honest depiction of sexual assault in *One Mississippi* complicates the hypersexualization narrative associated with Southern women by highlighting the notion that not all sexual advances are welcome and explicates the negative repercussions of hypersexualization.

### **Desexualization**

On the other end of the spectrum, Massey argues that the Southern woman is often desexualized either through the importance given to her virginal status or her adoption of masculine gender norms (2007). In these cases, “only ‘bad’ straight girls and women embrace their sexuality” (Dixon, 2003, p. 9). Especially when considering gendered stereotypes like the

Southern Belle and trailer trash discussed in the previous chapter, female characters are often constrained by those stereotypes. For instance, the stereotypical Southern Belle is often sexually inexperienced. Lemon Breeland (Jamie King) in *Hart of Dixie* is characterized as a Southern Belle yet openly discusses her sexual endeavors with her fellow Belles.

Lemon is repeatedly depicted as a sexual being, even during her engagement to George Tucker (Scott Porter). The major conflict in their relationship in season one is that Lemon cheats on George with mayor Lavon Hayes (Cress Williams). After discovering this, George retreats from Lemon both emotionally and sexually. In “Disaster Drills & Departures” (1.21), Lemon consults with fellow Bluebell Belles on how to reignite the spark in her relationship. After planning a romantic night with George and before they are physically intimate, Lemon’s head becomes stuck in the footboard of the bed. In season two, Lemon’s sexual advances are again denied by outside forces. In “Lovesick Blues” (2.13), Lemon again consults another Belle on how to seduce her boyfriend. Despite her meticulous planning, Lemon contracts influenza and cannot continue with the night (but not for lack of trying). Clearly, in the early seasons of *Hart of Dixie*, Lemon attempts to exert her sexuality but cannot because of various obstacles. Her ongoing appeals to her sexuality conflict with her Southern Belle persona and defy desexualization. Her inability to successfully complete sexual acts without the interference of outside hurdles and her seemingly naïve understanding of sex are negative repercussions of the continual perpetuation of the desexualized Southern Belle stereotype in the Southern Imaginary. Because of their desexualization, these women are unable to express or understand their own sexuality. Lemon represents this repressed and undereducated individual who wants to explore herself as a sexual person but is limited because of characteristics that have been prescribed to



her. Thus, this characterization highlights the need to queer normative ideas of female sexuality to prevent the cycle of repression and ignorance.

While desexualization tends to occur with overtly feminine characters, Tig from *One Mississippi* also represents an androgynous feminine body and sexuality. She wears traditionally masculine clothes, has short hair, and had a double mastectomy and sheds physical attributes usually connotated as feminine. Androgyny presents an alternative view of gender and sexuality thus queering it (Chattopadhyay, 2020). Because androgynous individuals cannot be codified into one gender, they are typically desexualized to avoid confusion about sexual orientation. Tig still maintains various relationships throughout the series and discusses her struggle with being sexually intimate after her surgery. In “How ‘bout Now, How ‘bout Right Now” (1.05), Tig is nervous about sexual advances from her partner, saying “I’m sorry, I’m just not comfortable with my body yet.” However, when her sexual partner sees Tig’s chest for the first time, she says “oh my god, you are so . . . sexy.” Even without one of the most hypersexualized female body parts, Tig resists desexualization and disrupts the categories of Southern female sexuality. Tig’s androgyny is not accounted for in the Southern Imaginary, as female characters are either completely feminized to be hypersexualized or masculinized to be desexualized, and thus necessitates a more nuanced understanding of female sexuality in the South.

The body presents several avenues of queering the Southern Imaginary’s perpetuation of desexualized women. For instance, fat women are also frequently subject to desexualization (MacLeod, 2012). In *One Mississippi*, Tig’s brother, Remy (Noah Harpster), begins a relationship with Desiree (Carly Jibson), a mother of a newborn who he meets at church. Desiree quickly moves in with Remy, into the attic of Tig’s childhood home. Both Remy and Desiree are visibly plus size yet are repeatedly and passionately intimate. Desiree often wears tight-fitting

and low-cut clothing and is not ashamed of her body or desires, often reveling in comments about her desirability (“Into the Light” [2.02]). Defying Wheeler Dixon’s (2003) notion that bad women embrace their sexuality, Desiree also resists the desexualization of fat Southern women (see *Drop Dead Diva* [Lifetime, 2009-2014] for a similar representation). She recognizes her attractiveness and sees her fatness as part of her appeal. In doing so, she complicates the Southern Imaginary’s conceptualization of female sexuality insofar as her characterization argues for the inclusion of fat women as worthy of romantic and sexual attention.



Figure 6: Remy and Desiree in “I’m Alive” (2.06).

Along with physical appearance, age also affects the sexualization of female characters as older women are also desexualized in media (Öberg, 2003). Within the Southern Imaginary, older women often take on a matronly or grandmotherly role (Aunt Bee in *The Andy Griffith Show* [CBS, 1960-1968], Daisy in *Driving Miss Daisy* [1989], Grandma Saracen in *Friday Night Lights* [NBC, 2006-2008; The 101 Network, 2008-2011]). Despite this trend, older women’s sexuality and sexual drive does not completely dissipate (Öberg, 2003). Felicia (Sheryl Lee Ralph) in *One Mississippi* is a representation of an older woman who actively resists

desexualization. The love interest of Tig's stepfather, Bill (John Rothman), and in her late fifties, Felicia is depicted as a sexual being. She expresses an attraction to Bill soon after meeting him and, in "Can't Fight This Feeling" (2.05), her and Bill passionately embrace while kissing. In the following episode, "I'm Alive" (2.06), Tig and Kate find Felicia's bag and shawl at the bottom of the stairs. After a moment of confusion, they realize what happened and attribute it to "passion." The scene cuts to Bill and Felicia in bed. Bill is propped up on the headboard and shirtless while Felicia is wrapped in a sheet clearly indicating that the two had consummated their feelings. The couple is framed and positioned much like a typical post-intercourse shot of a younger couple in television or film.



Figure 7: Felicia and Bill embrace in "Can't Fight This Feeling" (2.05).



Figure 8: Bill and Felicia in bed in "I'm Alive" (2.06).

This sequence of events is particularly striking in its deviance from the Southern Imaginary insofar as the pair are ideal characters for desexualization. Bill, a man in his late fifties or early sixties, is socially awkward and obsessed with order (characteristics that are not typically desirable). Additionally, he is a recent widower. Felicia, also a widow, is blunt and rigid. Despite these traits that lend themselves well to desexualization, the couple passionately express their attraction to one another. This explicitly defies the monolithic representation of older Southern women and, consequently, affords them more agency over their own sexual desires and encounters.

While these shows successfully navigate the space between hypersexualization and desexualization of their female characters, they also tend to privilege heterosexual sexual relationships over same-sex or queer ones. In both *Hart of Dixie* and *Atlanta*, the major cast of characters are only depicted in heterosexual relationships (apart from the final season of *Hart of Dixie*). Falling into Ron Becker's (2006) notion that the over-representation of heterosexual relationships comes at the expense of queer relationships, these television series reinscribe the

erasure of queer folks from the Southern Imaginary. Yet, programs like *One Mississippi*, which feature several queer characters and couples, are beginning to challenge the Southern Imaginary by providing alternative narratives of queer life in the South. *Hart of Dixie* and *Atlanta* do present queer characters in a much less prominent position but, nonetheless, deserve further consideration for the conversations they prompt. The following section analyzes two episodes of each show that feature queer characters to highlight how the inclusion of queer folks actively conflicts with the Southern Imaginary.

### **Queerness in the South**

Much like the representations of race and gender in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* discussed in previous chapters, queerness is represented in these shows as a historically complex but integral aspect of the South. In representing both the harm that is perpetuated against queer folk in the region and their ingrained belonging in the region, the case studies shed light on the place that queer individuals embody in the South. They refuse to overlook or erase queerness from the region altogether. This section details how the queer characters of the case studies present an alternative and, arguably, more legitimate representation of Southern queer folks without negating the discrimination that they face in the region. Beginning with a discussion of lesbian representation, I move into how religion impacts Southern queerness and how race intersects with sexuality and gender in consideration of Southern Black gay men.

#### **Rural Lesbians**

In film and television, and especially media depictions of the South, lesbians are the more frequently represented queer identity because they are perceived as a more acceptable version of queerness (Irvine, 2013). Several reasons exist for this perception including the notion that men are more fascinated and less threatened by lesbians and that people are less likely to question

public displays of affection or a close relationship between two women because of social stigmas surrounding the same behavior in men and other genders (Irvine, 2013). This does not mean that lesbians are free from discrimination as they continue to face backlash against their sexual orientation including fetishization from this abundant representation.

This is also true in the South. Within the region, “queerness is ‘Dixified’ by the presence and subjectivity of lesbians counterpoised against the mythic rural idyll of a small Southern town” often perpetuated by the Southern Imaginary (Whitlock, 2009, p. 102). Often, the Southern Imaginary does not account for queer folks, but, when it does, lesbians are often the most represented (*The Color Purple* [1985], *Fried Green Tomatoes* [1991], *Mississippi Damned* [2009]). These representations are often of traumatic events that the characters must endure because they are queer and live in the South. Very little positive representation of Southern lesbians exists within the Southern Imaginary leading to their erasure from the image associated with the region. Following a larger national trend (Lopez, 2016; Huber, 2017; Cryer, 2022), media depictions of the South and Southern queerness are pushing for more positive and more accurate representations of queer life to foster a sense of belonging and solidify their place within the region.

While Tig in *One Mississippi* and a same-sex couple in *Atlanta* are important representations of Southern lesbians, Crickett Watts (Brandi Burkhardt) in *Hart of Dixie* is the only character across the three programs who is presumed to be straight for most of the series but eventually comes out as queer to the townspeople of Bluebell in “Second Chances” (3.22). This section focuses on Crickett’s character as the coming-out process is often the moment where queer folks are met with the most backlash and where they are most at risk of self-destructive behaviors (Koehler, 2019). Additionally, Crickett learns how to navigate the South as a queer

woman in the final season of *Hart of Dixie* where the lesbians in the other shows are already more established in their Southern queerness.

In the season three finale, “Second Chances” (3.22), Crickett and the townspeople are preparing for her outlandish vow renewal ceremony with her husband, Stanley (Tony Cavalero). Crickett has stress-induced hiccups for which Zoe prescribes “getting whatever you have to say off your chest.” While everyone speculates that Crickett’s husband is gay and this is causing her stress, when Crickett stops the ceremony she says “It’s 2014, nobody has to pretend to be something they’re not anymore. It’s time you knew the truth. I am gay!” This is met by mixed responses from the ceremony goers ranging from shocked gasps to a thumbs up from Zoe. The episode moves onto other storylines and concludes without returning to Crickett’s public coming out.

We return to Crickett’s story during the premiere of the final season, “Kablang” (4.01). She has been hiding at Annabeth’s (Kaitlyn Black) house and watching *The L-Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009), which “is somewhat of a rite-of-passage for any recently out lesbian” (Bullock, 2013). Annabeth attempts to convince Crickett to reenter society and tells her that her “coming out was the most courageous thing any of us have ever done.” After this encouragement, Crickett returns to town and the Belles. At first, the Belles ask several unintentionally homophobic questions based on stereotypes and limited exposure to queer folks. However, once Crickett explains how she knew she was queer, they all accept her for who she is, even trying to set her up with other people they think are lesbians. The episode then shifts from Crickett’s apprehension to discuss her identity with anyone else to her lamentation that she cannot find a romantic partner. She complains that she is “the only lesbian in the state under the age of 40.” Eventually, a firefighter who has volunteered to help train members of the town in case of

emergencies shows interest in Crickett and asks her out on a date. Crickett and the firefighter, Jaysene Charles (Erica Piccininni), date for the remainder of the series.

Crickett's dating troubles and eventual successes depict a larger struggle for queer folks in the South which is largely due to the Southern Imaginary. In depicting the South as an anti-queer region and erasing the queer population, the Southern Imaginary perpetuates the "privileging of urban places over rural ones; cities remain sophisticated spaces where bright, young, middle-class White [*sic*] men can make their fortunes. After all, it is figured, what kind of life can be had in the crude, uncultured, slow backwoods?" (Whitlock, 2009, p. 104-105). The Southern Imaginary perpetuates the thought that no queer folks live in the South, and, if they do, they are continually met with harassment until they leave the region. Characters like Crickett, however, represent a different image. Crickett was accepted by her peers and found a romantic partner in her age range. While her friends ask offensive questions, they are not malicious in intent but rather misguided due to a lack of education and exposure to queer identities. Thus, Crickett and *Hart of Dixie* reminds audiences that queer folks do not have to leave the South or rural areas to find happiness or a sense of belonging. Her character fights for a place for queer folks in the region and the Southern Imaginary.

One cannot overlook the serious discrimination and violence that occurs in the region toward queer folks. One could argue that "the South is a harsher place for sexual minorities than other regions of the United States" (Swank et al., 2012, p. 237). Yet, this does not negate the existence of queer folks in the region and their efforts to remain and work for progress in the South. This monolithic representation of Southern queerness is not a fully accurate image of the South. Rita Whitlock argues that



Rural queerness is as multiple and varied as there are rural queers, yet prevailing images of rural queer lives distort and discount lived experiences by focusing almost exclusively on oppressive, graphic violence perpetuated against rural queers (Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard, for example). Such objectifications are not accurate portrayals of queer lives, yet they are often reinforced by popular culture, public attitudes, and behaviors . . . The stories of those of us who live, sometimes quietly—sometimes not, sometimes comfortably—sometimes not, are situated in place. Thus, from the stories that tell the lives, we gain better understanding of the lives. In addition, we may gain better understanding of the place: a place that both nurtures these lives as it nurtures those who would seek to end them with violence. (2009, p. 104)

Representation like Crickett in *Hart of Dixie* proves that queer folks can live in the South and encourages others to recognize that they belong in the region. These representations are important because they show a more accurate image of the South while also encouraging young queer Southerners to feel comfortable with who they are while also exposing other Southerners to queer life.

### **Hovering Religion**

Despite the growing number of Southern queer representation, discrimination and intolerance are still prevalent throughout the region. Often, Southern Christianity and religion are cited as the source of this discrimination. Kamden Strunk posits that “especially in the Deep South, religiousness has been weaponized against queer people and queer identities” (2019, p. viii). The recent passing of the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida (Laviertes, 2022) and other anti-LGBTQ legislation in the region (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022) are often rooted in religious doctrine concerning queerness. Because of this, queer people in the South often do not

feel welcome in traditional Christian churches as “religion shape[s] the daily lives of queer Americans, but more so in different fashions in the South” (Thompson, 2011, p. 11). These discriminatory practices contribute to the anti-queer ideology in the Southern Imaginary; however, modern representations of Southern queerness feature characters who both encounter religious-backed discrimination and navigate their own understanding of religion and the omnipresence of Christianity in the South. Thus, while “Southern construction of gender and sexual rules and the dictates of normative Christianity are powerful influences on rural formations of queerness in the South, formations that are both personal and political” (Whitlock, 2019, p. 105), queer Southerners are fighting for their own space in the Southern Imaginary.

No character exemplifies this more than Tig in *One Mississippi*. Tig is openly queer in the show and consistently comments on her queerness on her radio show. In the episode, “How ‘bout Now, How ‘bout Right Now” (1.05), Tig is in a highly physical relationship with another woman. In this relationship, Tig’s partner encourages her to embrace the moment and avoid self-doubt. While this is a seemingly easy and carefree way to move about life, Tig quickly realizes that it is not sustainable. After a fight with her stepfather about moving on from her mother’s death and the impact that the past continues to have on her life, Tig reaches out to her partner who does not answer or provide support. Not finding peace in her familial or romantic relationships and feeling disconnected from traditional religion because of her identity, Tig creates her own religious experience and seeks peace.

To do this, Tig on her own attends a concert featuring the lesbian Canadian singer-songwriter Ferron. For some, concerts can serve as religious experiences (Mattig, 2006) insofar as they provide a space for emotional respite and release as well as the promotion of internal peace. At this concert, Tig is surrounded by women (presumably other queer women, given the

artist) with shared interests. Ferron sings softly and the lights are dimmed. Tig sings along to Ferron's song "Ain't Life a Brook" which details the process of moving on after parting of two loved ones. All these aspects contribute to the religiosity of the moment. In the final shots of the episode, the camera pans to a closer view of Tig as she sings along. She expresses various emotions ranging from a reluctant identification with the song to a bittersweet acceptance of the message: it is okay to not be okay; but, that is life, and we eventually must move on. This realization and ultimate acceptance of the song's message is a form of spiritual release that Tig desperately needed as she was not receiving the release through expressing her emotions or seeking physical comfort with others. The audience can see a weight lifted from Tig's shoulders; a phrase often used to describe religious experiences. As a queer woman, Tig is often denied access to religious spaces. As a Southern woman, Tig's identity formation was heavily influenced by religion. This paradoxical relationship Tig and other queer Southerners face forces her to actively seek out and create these religious-like experiences.

Not only can queer folks create these experiences to cope with their personal life problems, but the experiences are also useful in dealing with discrimination. In the episode "Into the Light" (2.02), Tig is on a date when she discovers that Bill has been hospitalized. Upon arriving at the hospital with her date, the receptionist (Rachel Winfree) refuses to help Tig because "this is a private Christian hospital" and she has the right to refuse service to anyone. The pair continue to argue:

TIG: Excuse me?

RECEPTIONIST: That is my right.

TIG: What is your right? . . .

RECEPTIONIST: If y'all have a problem with it, then y'all can take it up with the great

state of Mississippi but, in the meantime, I'm asking y'all to leave.

TIG: Oh my God. Is this because I'm gay?

RECEPTIONIST: Yes, it most certainly is.

TIG: How do you know I'm gay?

RECEPTIONIST: You sure shove it in my face.

Although Tig gains access to her stepfather after this argument and seems to be glad that she “tricked them,” the blatant act of discrimination is not mentioned in depth moving forward. This is one of the only scenes from the three main case studies in which explicit discrimination occurs against a queer person. The scene works to remind audiences that violence and prejudice against queer folks still occur in the South. Additionally, it reifies the connection between Southern religion and said discrimination. Yet, this scene also points out the poor logic in such arguments prevalent in the Southern Imaginary. In response to the receptionist's repeated pleading to leave, Tig argues that, if being gay is a choice, then she decided to be straight right then and, therefore, should be allowed into the hospital. Illuminating the illogical reasoning behind many religious anti-queer ideologies in the South and the Southern Imaginary, Tig is proving that queer individuals are fighting back.

Later in the episode, Tig discusses when she first realized she was queer. As discussed above, Tig complicated the notion that straightness is the default in the telling of her story. She also prefaces the story with comments about how she is comfortable in her sexuality. Tig's recounting of her coming to terms with her sexuality is both humanizing and reminiscent of two religious acts – confession and testimony. The first, an act often associated with the Catholic Church, is most apparent in Tig's discussion of her therapy session. She states that she told the therapist the entire story of her infatuation with another woman in the hopes to receive some

guidance or insight into if she was, in fact, queer. This unburdening is an essential element of religious contrition and a way for Tig to queer such a religious practice. The entire story is also reminiscent of the disclosure of a testimony. Religious testimonies are often stories told by individuals about their religious walk and how they accepted God. In Tig's case, she is detailing how she came to accept herself rather than a supreme religious figure and, thus, presents queerness as a form of divinity. Both implicit ties to religion explicate Tig's deeply rooted (probably subconscious) connection to Christianity and her attempts to carve out a queer space in that religion and, in turn, the Southern Imaginary's conceptualization of Southern religion.

### **Humor and Black Queer Identity**

Homophobia among Black communities is also often associated with the strong ties these communities have with the Church's condemnation of queerness (Ward, 2005; Hill, 2013; Stanford, 2013). However, Black Protestants overwhelmingly (73%) oppose discrimination based on sexual orientation (Cox & Jones, 2017). Still, discrimination persists, especially in the American South (Mays, et al., 1993; Lax & Phillips, 2009; Johnson, 2011; Tilcsik, 2011; Wade & Harper, 2019). Discrimination appears frequently in interpersonal and informal interactions like anti-queer jokes. Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas argue that "although portrayals of Gay male and Lesbian characters have become more positive over time they are still being ridiculed on TV" (2006, p. 32). This ridicule occurs for various reasons ranging from the need "to alleviate anxiety and offer symbolic protection" (Rich, 2007, p. 45) to "an attempt to protect and reaffirm [men's] masculinity" (O'Connor, et al., 2017, p. 568). Humor and homophobic jokes are tools utilized to gain power over others and can be especially useful for those who are minoritized to reclaim small amounts of power, often at the extent of other marginalized groups. Especially

when multiple aspects of identity appear to be in crisis (i.e., race and gender), these jokes can work to protect individuals from further marginalization.

Within the Southern Imaginary, as discussed in previous chapters, Black men are often stereotyped and represented as one-dimensional characters. Very few media depictions of the South include Black queer individuals. *Atlanta* is an exception; yet the show's brief inclusion of queer characters of color is rife with homophobic comments and jokes. In the episode "Streets on Lock" (1.02) mentioned in the previous chapter, Earn finds himself in jail after an altercation. Another person in the holding area is a transgender woman who had an implied sexual relationship in the past with a man in the jail. Those around this couple are quick to label them gay in a clearly demeaning manner. In this instance gay is utilized as an insult meant to incur violence. This interaction, on the surface, seemingly upholds the Southern Imaginary's anti-queer characterization of the South.

However, two minor comments in this scene present a more complicated understanding of Black Southern queerness. First, mixed into assertions that the man is gay, Earn comments that "sexuality is a spectrum. You can really do whatever you want." This is the only comment made that is not intended as an insult and comes from the main protagonist with whom the audience is meant to identify and trust. Thus, we are invited to read Earn's comments as the correct response to the situation. In this brief response, Earn explicates the cultural shift occurring in the South toward a more acceptance-based region. The mere recognition of a sexuality spectrum subverts the heterosexual-focused, anti-queer picture of the South perpetuated by the Southern Imaginary and opens a conversation about sexual orientation that should continue further.

Another comment made during this scene exemplifies the need for further conversation surrounding Black queer identities. After enduring multiple assertions that he is gay, the other man in the holding area retorts that men in jail often have sex, making them gay as well. “That ain’t gay; that’s just jail” is the quick response. This joke could fall under Ruby Rich’s (2007) symbolic protection reasoning as “among incarcerated sexual minority men, 27.0% are Black gay or bisexual persons” (Baćak, 2018, p. 996) who endure violence because of their identity. Within prison, incarcerated men “often blur the boundaries between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, illustrating the flexibility and volatility of traditional binary gendered and sexualized social categories” (Hefner, 2017, p. 233). Thus, this rejection of identification with queerness or the gay label is not an omission of queer acts, but rather an attempt to queer normative representations of same-sex sexual interactions. Yet, outside of prison, these men are met with the strict gender and sexuality binary and anti-queer stigma associated with the South. The exploration of identity is then shut down by the Southern Imaginary. This interaction in *Atlanta* positions prison as a deviant space which can result in a queering of sexuality and gender. Thus, there is a need for more spaces of placemaking where Black Southern queerness can be articulated, explored, and complicated without the oppressive looming of the Southern Imaginary.

Queer representation is also a major plot point in the first episode of the newest season of *Atlanta*. In “Three Slaps” (3.01), a young Black boy, Loquareeous (Christopher Farrar), is taken from his family and sent to live with a white lesbian couple who are also fostering several other Black children. The couple force the children to eat undercooked food and work in the garden they tend. Eventually, after a progression of surreal events, the women attempt to drive off a bridge with the children. Loquareeous saves all the children who escape unharmed. The

inclusion of a lesbian couple in the episode itself conflicts with the Southern Imaginary. While the episode does position queerness as abject horror through the outlandish behavior of the couple, the horror is mainly a result of their whiteness. The allusion to slavery by having the children work the garden (the produce is then sold at the farmers market and the profit goes to the couple) paired with the racist undertones of the couple's unwillingness to pronounce Loquareeous's name and their attempt to cook fried chicken because that is what the kids "like" all point to the couple's whiteness as the driving force of their ignorance and disregard for the lives of the children rather than their queerness. The episode recognizes that marginalized groups, like queer folks, are not exempt from aspects of whiteness. This representation of Southern queerness amplifies its intersection with race, an avenue that is poorly discussed (if at all) in the Southern Imaginary (Thompson, 2010; Johnson, 2011; Cuts, 2013; Eaves, 2017). Thus, this episode both concretizes a queer presence in the South and complicates that position by preventing a myopic view of Southern queerness.

### **Regional Queering and Belonging**

In the pilot episode of *One Mississippi*, Tig says, "I feel like I need to be here [Bay Saint Lucille, Mississippi]. I don't know why." In an interview, Emmett (a queer Southern Black man) expresses a similar sentiment saying that "I feel it's comfortable here [Russell County, Alabama] because . . . sometimes the freshness can be so nice and so loving and peaceful that there's just nowhere else to be" (Beam, 2001, p. 13). Queer individuals have existed in the South for a long time and, despite what the Southern Imaginary might perpetuate, queer folks exist and belong in the region. Because of the anti-queer ideologies reinscribed by the Southern Imaginary, queer folks and other marginalized individuals are attempting to create a sense of belonging. The queer characters in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* and the women who queer typical



notions of female sexuality are investing in that process. Through the queering of sexuality, coming out and staying in the region, creating their own religious experiences when the Church fails them, and reclaiming places to explore their sexuality, the characters in these television series present a more accurate representation of queer life in the South while also laying groundwork for future (and more complex and/or legitimate) representations.

In the last chapter, I discuss the implications of the representations within *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta*. I argue that the Southern Imaginary as it stands is contributing to the erasure of more complex stories and people in favor of a myopic view of the region. In doing so, the Southern Imaginary promotes and encourages the stigmatization of the region thus slowing social and political progress. The chapter concludes with consideration of how the representations of race, gender, and sexuality in the case studies revise the Southern Imaginary and begin a conversation about the true nature of the region and its people.

## CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING THE SOUTHERN IMAGINARY

Southern themes will range from generous and luscious love to cruel and bitter hate, but no one can ever claim that the South is petty or indifferent.

— Maya Angelou, *Letter to My Daughter*

Throughout the course of this project, I attempted to “hold up a mirror to my Southern homeland” (Wilson, 2000, p. 157). I not only wanted to see how the outside views the region through analysis of *Hart of Dixie*, but I also utilized *Atlanta* and *One Mississippi* to highlight how the South views itself. While heritage and geography are essential to determining what constitutes the South, identity remains at the core of the region. The Southern Imaginary is an attempt to define, categorize, and simplify the identities of Southerners and, because of this, often either completely erases or reduces those identities.

While not entirely bad or incorrect, the Southern Imaginary is a gross simplification that centers whiteness and leaves out the perspectives and experiences of marginalized people in the South. This project investigated the ways in which modern television depictions of the South present alternative views of the region. In the introduction of this project, I argued that the Southern Imaginary characterizes the South as anomalous. The three case studies worked to shed light on the falsities that are utilized by the Southern Imaginary to ensure that the South remains a social and political scapegoat for problems of the entire nation while also lending credence to the discriminatory and violent practices occurring within the South. Ultimately, what I have showcased in the project is that the South is much more complex and should not be defined solely by its faults. To do so would disservice not only those who are working for change within

the region, but also those who live within the South as a marginalized person. Only representing hardships retraumatizes individuals and devalues the lives that they have built. Representations like those in *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* do not negate the adversity faced by marginalized folks, but rather they offer characters who are not solely defined by that adversity. These fully developed and complex individuals help Southern audiences see themselves represented on television as well as supply a more accurate representation of those who live within the region to those who do not.

As discussed in chapter one, media representations of race in the South are often centered around whiteness from white savior films to casting white actors in roles of people of color. Television programs like *Atlanta* and *One Mississippi* attempt to decenter that whiteness by featuring a majority Black cast (in the case of the former) or challenging revisionist history and racist ideologies head on (as is the case in the latter). These shows also grapple with the legacy of the Confederacy in the Southern Imaginary. An example of recognizing the negative but not nullifying real experiences, both *Atlanta* and *One Mississippi* acknowledge the influence of the Confederacy and offer different perspectives on how that influence is negotiated by people of color in the region. Chapter one also detailed how, in an attempt to showcase the true diversity of the region, television series concerning the South can fall into the post-racial trap by representing characters of color without fully expressing how historical and current racism affect their lives. I also pointed out the tools that programs like *Atlanta* utilize to complicate the Southern Imaginary like Afro Surrealism and racial fetishization. By calling attention to the surreal nature of being both Black and Southern as well as the act of racial fetishization that occurs on a national level, *Atlanta* elucidates the struggles of people of color within the region while also resisting a one-dimensional characterization by representing the mundane, day-to-day lives of its characters.

Chapter two provided a more intersectional lens while analyzing representations of gender in the case studies. Representations of femininity and masculinity are the source many stereotypes especially concerning the South including the Southern Belle, the hillbilly, and the “Magical African-American Friend.” This chapter discussed how the case studies present a reversal in gendered norms as defined by the Southern Imaginary and defy stereotypes like those mentioned previously. Television series like *Hart of Dixie* give More agency to male and female characters as males are more able to express their emotions and females can take charge in relationships and careers without sacrificing their femininity. Race and gender are also intertwined in various ways as argued in this chapter. All three case studies present unique representations of racialized femininity and masculinity that contribute a more nuanced understanding of gender in the Southern Imaginary. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the lack of transgender representation in media depictions of the South. Transgender folks actively live in the South and deserve to be represented as such. A lack of transgender characters, though representative of a similar issue on a national scale, erases their voice from the Southern Imaginary thus perpetuating an anti-queer and anti-difference characterization of the region.

The final chapter, chapter three, grapples with the Southern Imaginary’s characterization of the South as anti-queer. In defining queerness as a rejection of traditional ways of being, this chapter discusses how the case study series queer feminine sexuality. The female characters of *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta* all resist hypersexualization and desexualization, two characterizations that are utilized against women within the Southern Imaginary. Women in the programs openly discuss their sex lives but are not defined by them, they navigate issues like sexual assault, and they defy racialized stereotypes concerning their sexual behaviors. Not only do these shows queer feminine sexuality, but they also offer alternative perspectives on queer life

in the South. Focusing on rural lesbians, the omnipresence of religion in the region, and the utilization of humor to understand Black queer experiences, the case studies amplify Southern queer voices and lives. These programs argue for a sense of queer belonging in the South and emphasize the need for more queer spaces and inclusivity. While not completely favoring the Southern Imaginary, the case studies validate anti-queer behaviors in the region but also represent those behaviors from a queer perspective this decentering straightness as the norm and nuancing the anti-queer characterization of the region within the Southern Imaginary.

In exemplifying the ways that the Southern Imaginary fails to detail the complex and intersectional lives of Southerners, I point out how this leads to a perception of the South that is not completely accurate. To prevent this from continuing, we need more television series that offer more nuanced representations of marginalized identities in the South like *Hart of Dixie*, *One Mississippi*, and *Atlanta*. These programs, though flawed in their own ways, are attempts to redefine what it means to be a Southerner. Through their representations of race, gender, and sexuality, the programs amplify voices that are often unheard in discussions of the South and stories are being told that break down and alter the Southern Imaginary; in doing so, these stories allow for a more complex view of the South, one that includes advancements in notions of gender, racial, and sexuality rather than adhering to antiquated ideals. Therefore, the investigation of these series can improve our understanding of American popular culture's construction of a Southern Imaginary as well as the need to create space for new voices and alternative visions.

This project has laid the groundwork for future scholarship of this kind. Moving forward, more television series and films should be analyzed to create a more holistic understanding of how these alternative views are presented and in what other ways the Southern Imaginary is

challenged. Representations of other identities, especially class and religion, should be investigated as they are large parts of the Southern Imaginary. Southern studies is a rich and growing field which proves that scholars, journalists, writers, and citizens are critically analyzing the South itself and perceptions of the region. This work must be continued as the South is an oft-untapped resource which can provide insight into larger political, social, and cultural shifts. As such, the voices of Southerners should be incorporated into project like this to better comprehend how those within the region view the identities represented in television series and/or form their own identity through those representations. Finally, as more and more scholarly work focuses on how representations are failing, it is important to draw attention to those who are getting it right. This is not to diminish the work criticizing representations as it is extremely essential to understanding power dynamics and social change; however, understanding what more accurate representation looks like and how it provides revolutionary perspectives and worldviews can help us both provide alternatives to those failing representations and give space to those who are trying to be heard.

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